

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MEARA PLATT



D
R
A
G
O
N
B
L
A
D
E

THE
MOONSTONE
DUKE

moonstone landing series

The Moonstone Duke
Moonstone Landing Series
Book 1

by
Meara Platt



OceanofPDF.com

The Moonstone Duke
Moonstone Landing Series
Book 1

by
Meara Platt



OceanofPDF.com

© Copyright 2023 by Myra Platt

Text by Meara Platt

Cover by Dar Albert

Dragonblade Publishing, Inc. is an imprint of Kathryn Le Veque Novels, Inc.

P.O. Box 23

Moreno Valley, CA 92556

ceo@dragonbladepublishing.com

Produced in the United States of America

First Edition May 2023

Kindle Edition

Reproduction of any kind except where it pertains to short quotes in relation to advertisement promotion is strictly prohibited.

All Rights Reserved.

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons dead, is purely coincidental and not intended by the author.

License Notes:

This eBook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This eBook, once purchased, may be sold. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it or borrow it, or it was not given to you and given as a gift for your use only, then please return it and purchase your own copy. If a book was purchased on an unauthorized platform, then it is a pirated and/or unauthorized copy. Violators will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. Do not purchase or accept pirated copies. Thank you for respecting the author's hard work. For subsidiary rights, contact Dragonblade Publishing, Inc.

OceanofPDF.com

© Copyright 2023 by Myra Platt

Text by Meara Platt

Cover by Dar Albert

Dragonblade Publishing, Inc. is an imprint of Kathryn Le Veque Novels, Inc.

P.O. Box 23

Moreno Valley, CA 92556

ceo@dragonbladepublishing.com

Produced in the United States of America

First Edition May 2023

Kindle Edition

Reproduction of any kind except where it pertains to short quotes in relation to advertising or promotion is strictly prohibited.

All Rights Reserved.

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental and not intended by the author.

License Notes:

This eBook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This eBook, once purchased, may not be resold. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it or borrow it, or it was not purchased for you and given as a gift for your use only, then please return it and purchase your own copy. If this book was purchased on an unauthorized platform, then it is a pirated and/or unauthorized copy and violators will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. Do not purchase or accept pirated copies. Thank you for respecting the author's hard work. For subsidiary rights, contact Dragonblade Publishing, Inc.

OceanofPDF.com



ARE YOU SIGNED UP FOR DRAGONBLADE'S BLOG?

You'll get the latest news and information on exclusive giveaways, excerpts, coming releases, sales, free books, cover reveals and more!

Check out our complete list of authors, too!

No spam, no junk. That's a promise!

[Sign Up Here](#)



Dearest Reader;

Thank you for your support of a small press. At Dragonblade Publishing we strive to bring you the highest quality Historical Romance from some of the best authors in the business. Without your support, there is no 'us'. We sincerely hope you adore these stories and find some new favorites along the way.

Happy Reading!

CEO, Dragonblade Publishing

OceanofPDF.com



ARE YOU SIGNED UP FOR DRAGONBLADE'S BLOG?

You'll get the latest news and information on exclusive giveaways, exclusive excerpts, coming releases, sales, free books, cover reveals and more.

Check out our complete list of authors, too!

No spam, no junk. That's a promise!

[Sign Up Here](#)



Dearest Reader;

Thank you for your support of a small press. At Dragonblade Publishing, we strive to bring you the highest quality Historical Romance from some of the best authors in the business. Without your support, there is no 'us', so we sincerely hope you adore these stories and find some new favorite authors along the way.

Happy Reading!

CEO, Dragonblade Publishing

OceanofPDF.com

Additional Dragonblade books by Author Meara J

The Moonstone Landing Series

[Moonstone Landing \(novella\)](#)

[Moonstone Angel \(novella\)](#)

[The Moonstone Duke](#)

[The Moonstone Marquess](#)

[The Moonstone Major](#)

The Book of Love Series

[The Look of Love](#)

[The Touch of Love](#)

[The Taste of Love](#)

[The Song of Love](#)

[The Scent of Love](#)

[The Kiss of Love](#)

[The Chance of Love](#)

[The Gift of Love](#)

[The Heart of Love](#)

[The Hope of Love \(novella\)](#)

[The Promise of Love](#)

[The Wonder of Love](#)

[The Journey of Love](#)

[The Dream of Love \(novella\)](#)

[The Treasure of Love](#)

[The Dance of Love](#)

[The Miracle of Love](#)

[The Remembrance of Love \(novella\)](#)

Dark Gardens Series

[Garden of Shadows](#)

[Garden of Light](#)

[Garden of Dragons](#)

[Garden of Destiny](#)

Platt

[Garden of Angels](#)

The Farthingale Series

[If You Wished For Me \(A Novella\)](#)

The Lyon's Den Series

[Kiss of the Lyon](#)

[The Lyon's Surprise](#)

[Lyon in the Rough](#)

Pirates of Britannia Series

[Pearls of Fire](#)

De Wolfe Pack: The Series

[Nobody's Angel](#)

[Kiss an Angel](#)

[Bhrodi's Angel](#)

Also from Meara Platt

Aislin

[All I Want for Christmas](#)

[OceanofPDF.com](#)

[Garden of Angels](#)

The Farthingale Series

[If You Wished For Me \(A Novella\)](#)

The Lyon's Den Series

[Kiss of the Lyon](#)

[The Lyon's Surprise](#)

[Lyon in the Rough](#)

Pirates of Britannia Series

[Pearls of Fire](#)

De Wolfe Pack: The Series

[Nobody's Angel](#)

[Kiss an Angel](#)

[Bhrodi's Angel](#)

Also from Meara Platt

Aislin

[All I Want for Christmas](#)

[OceanofPDF.com](#)

Table of Contents

Title Page

Copyright Page

Publisher's Note

Additional Dragonblade books by Author Meara Platt

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Epilogue

Excerpt from *The Moonstone Marquess*

Also by Meara Platt
About the Author

OceanofPDF.com

Also by Meara Platt
About the Author

OceanofPDF.com



Chapter One

*Moonstone Landing
Cornwall, England
July 1815*

“BLAST IT, WESTON. Another one has gotten through,” Cain St. Austel of Malvern, growled, his muscles straining and body plastered with sweat as he drew back on the reins of a team of oxen. He’d been guiding them as he and his workers hauled away a fallen oak. “Who is that woman and did she get past my gates?”

“What woman, Your Grace?” his estate manager replied, squinting the distance as he followed Cain’s gaze. “Oh, her.”

“Yes, her. Who is she?” He had fled London to avoid the Marriages but it seemed these young ladies were not held off by iron gates. They had scaled his townhouse walls in London as well, some of them with surprising agility, and all with a reckless determination to be compromised by him.

The flighty fools were mistaken if they believed he could ever be persuaded into doing the supposedly honorable thing and marrying them.

No one could ever force him to do something he was not willing to do. Cain shook his head in frustration.

He would have to marry someday, of course.

Not yet, however. He certainly was not going to be tricked or coerced into it. Nor was he fit company for any woman at the moment, and he was not so mean because of his lack of proper attire. The war years had taken their toll on him. How could he be merry or even think of marriage when he had lost so many friends in battle?

Attending balls or idling the hours away in the comfort of a gentleman’s club was no relief for him and merely added to his anguish.

For this reason, while the *ton* elite were still celebrating Napoleon’s demise at Waterloo, Cain had chosen to retreat to St. Austell Gran

summer home his father had built almost a decade ago on the outskirts of a quiet seacoast village of Moonstone Landing.

The Grange was finer than any homes in the area, but parts had fallen in disrepair as his father's health failed. The work required to restore the grounds and structure to their original grandeur was turning out to be a blessing in disguise for him, giving him purpose and a chance to escape the hectic whirl of London.

A soft look came over Weston's face as he continued to squint in the distance at the young woman. "Weston? Stop mooning over her and tell me who she is."

"She isn't a trespasser, Your Grace." "That's Lady Hen," one of his workers by the name of Mr. Jenkins remarked, and the comment met with nods of approval from the other hands working alongside him to haul the felled timber.

"Is that supposed to mean something to me? Lady or not, she doesn't belong here. What sort of name is Hen?"

"Lady Henley Killigrew," Weston clarified with a grin. "Her parents did not name her after a chicken."

"She's a good sort," Mr. Jenkins chimed in, which was met with nods of approval from the other workers.

Was everyone besotted with this woman?

Even Cain's longtime retainer appeared quite taken with the surprising feat, since Charles Weston was almost fifty and usually as good-natured as disposition as he was.

"Get rid of her, Weston." He was in no humor to set his work aside to invite this young woman to tea. She must have heard he was here and spent no time in surmounting his barricades in the hope of making an acquaintance.

Weston's eyes rounded in dismay as he stared down at himself. "Grace, look at me. I am hardly fit to approach her. You ought to do it. She is your neighbor. She and her sisters reside at Moonstone Cottage."

Cain supposed it was not good form to chase away one's neighbor. "Am I more fit than you to greet her?"

The two of them, along with a team of workers and the oxen, had been clearing the old footpath to the beach, their shirts off and bodies sweating as they labored under the heat of the sun.

s of the Cain enjoyed the grueling work, needing to exhaust himself daily i
to chase the demons from his soul. Indeed, he probably looked posse
len into demons, since he had not shaved in over two weeks, nor had he allow
ore the valet to trim his hair. Added to the fact that he was a big man and had
o be a disposition, he must appear like a heathen out of her worst nightmares.
ape the Weston stared at the young woman and frowned. “We had bette
her. Am I seeing right? She looks unsteady on her feet. Do you th
into the might be hurt?”

tell me Cain took a closer look at the girl as she approached and realized s
clutching her hand. “Blast,” he muttered, tossing on his shirt. “Someon
Galahad for me.”

Jenkins Weston started toward her. “I’ll go with you.”

er hired “No, stay here. I’ll deal with her.” Perhaps he ought to have a
Weston along, but something drew Cain to this young woman. As he
oes not closer, he noticed blood spilling down her fingers.

He shook his head to fight off a sudden feeling of suffocation.

ents did The sight of that crimson trail on her hand reminded him of the
spilled on the battlefields. It stained her muslin gown, a pretty confec
h more pale green with embroidered pink roses that was now irrevocably ruine

He shook his head again and forced his breaths to steady.

Who cares what she is wearing?

her—a He quickly did up the ties of his work shirt as he strode towa
sour in although it would do little to make him more presentable. She
unexpectedly pretty thing, he realized as he reached her side a
ide and momentarily taken aback by the gentle beauty of her face.

wasted Weston had mentioned the Killigrew sisters to him days ago, b
ng his had assumed they were a trio of old biddies.

He ought to have paid closer attention when the man spoke of them

. “Your Yes, this one was exceptionally pretty.

t, since “May I help you, Lady Henley? Mr. Weston told me who you ar
” seem to be in some distress. Let me see your hand.”

. “How She blushed as her gaze met his, and she backed off a step.

Well, he really was not fit company, with his work clothes da
ad been foul-smelling. But he’d quickly learned a duke would be forgiven an
ating as so he hoped not to offend her too badly by his appearance.

“I won’t hurt you, but you are bleeding and it needs to be tended.

in order the men has gone to fetch my horse. I'll give you a ride to the main house as soon as he retrieves it."

He said his "Oh, yes. Thank you." She cast him a hesitant, but genuinely kind smile and then turned to point in a southerly direction. "I was walking along the sand beach, got lost in my thoughts, and walked too far. By the time I realized what was happening, the tide had come in. I was not aware it had almost swallowed up the Grange's part of the beach entirely. I found myself trapped between the advancing waves and barely managed to escape up some old, stone steps that led me here."

He said "She glanced down at her hand. "I cut myself on the splintered wood. It bled a little and feel a bit lightheaded. Please do not trouble the duke, I am obviously not fit company, nor would I ever presume to appear at your door unannounced. But I would greatly appreciate something to drink." She strode

He took gentle hold of her hand to inspect it and then did a better job of tying the binding tight to stem the flow of blood. She had used a red blood handkerchief on it, hardly much of a binding, although he was pleased to see that the bleeding had slowed to a trickle and was beginning to cake on her hand. "You need immediate tending."

Odd, she felt so soft and delicate to his touch. Well, he had not touched a woman in a while.

He said to her, "I shall see to it when I get home," she said, now staring with trepidation at Galahad, his enormous black Friesian stallion being led toward them. "I would appreciate the loan of a horse, too. A gentle mare, please. I am not much of a horsewoman and could never handle one such as you. But my brother, the groundskeeper, Mr. Hawke, will return the borrowed horse within the week. I just don't think I can make it home on my own two legs."

Cain studied her as she spoke. Her voice wrapped around him like a warm summer breeze. It was a cultured voice, not in the least high-pitched or whining.

Her hair was a vibrant tawny shade, not quite brown and not quite blonde, but full and lustrous as the sun shone down upon her head.

Her eyes were a pale green that matched the color of her gown. They had a crystalline quality to them that gave her an ethereal appearance, as if stars shone in them.

One of them. Indeed, her eyes were spectacular. Her lips—

ouse as Those were irrelevant, he reminded himself.
But he liked the slight, sexy droop of her mouth at the corners.

l smile, “I’ll escort you home after we’ve taken care of the nasty cut,” he said.
ong the “But I—”
time I “Will do as I say. You are in no condition to do anything on your
t wouldI’ll have refreshments brought to us while I tend you.” He took her
oped byarm and led her to Galahad, who could be a temperamental beast at times.
ricketydid not look pleased to have been brought here from the shady hedge
had been tethered to and where he was contentedly munching on leaves.
od. I’ve snorted at Cain to mark his displeasure.

as I am “Behave, you devil.”
on his He dismissed Mr. Jenkins with a word of gratitude and told him to
ink.” men back to work. The man nodded and immediately left to do
bidding.

r job of Lady Henley gaped at his horse. “Um...are you sure I ought to be
a lacyhim?”
to note “He’s well trained. He won’t toss you off.”
er skin. She met his gaze, her lips puckering in uncertainty—which was
ironic, for in this moment he was quite certain he was going to kiss her
they parted company.

“I’ll walk. But would you mind escorting me? Will the duke be
indicationthat I am taking you away from your work? I will explain it to him—”
1. “Um, “The duke?” He realized she still had no idea who he was. Of
am notwhy should she? Although a horse of Galahad’s quality should have
rs. Myher a clue. However, Cain looked like a barbarian and was out here to
hour. Ithe fields like a common laborer. Nor did he have a gentleman’s hair
his had been roughened in battle and worsened from farm work.

e a soft “No, the duke won’t be put out,” he replied.
shed or He took a moment to enjoy the unexpected anonymity.
te gold,was staring at them, and Cain expected he would join them at any moment.
Until then, it felt odd—in a good way—to be spoken to as a person instead
ere wasbeing fawned over or eyed as prey for the parson’s trap.

though “Mr. Weston and I were about to take a break from our work
continued. “You are not interfering at all. We happened to be clearing
to the beach. Fixing those stairs was next on our list of repairs. I am so

did not get to it sooner. Nor do I have a clean handkerchief to offer for your hand.”

aid. He saw Weston now striding toward them, his limp immediately recognizable. Cain knew he would have little more time with the girl on her own. She was formally introduced to him and turned into a fluttering by the “Forgive my attire. We weren’t dressed for company.”

ness and She cast him a surprisingly engaging smile. “I am the interloper. A formal apology necessary, Mr.... Um...are you Mr. Weston’s assistant?” Weston shook her head almost immediately. “No, that does not seem right. It appears to be awaiting your orders.”

Blast.

put the Had she guessed already?

Cain’s “You say you are repairing the path and stairs to the duke’s beach? You an architect, by any chance?”

is riding “Something like that.”

Weston was almost upon them now.

Despite his desire to be left alone, Cain had not lost all sense of propriety. He is quite and did not feel right in having the man show him up to be a liar. “In the moment before he said with a sigh, “nothing like that, Lady Henley. I happen to be Mr. Weston himself.”

put out She regarded him doubtfully. “You are the duke?”

He nodded.

course, “The Duke of Malvern?” She shook her head and laughed. “Well, if the given is true and you are not having me on, then may I say it is most refreshing to meet you. Your father was a lovely man and always so kind to us. The rumors, for gossip rags have made you out to be this paragon of elite society, and certainly you would be an insufferable clot.”

He could not help but grin.

“Well, it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

horse, He waited for the calculating look to appear in her eyes, but her expression never altered. Either that, or he was slipping in his ability to stand instead of greed and deceit.

His estate manager now reached them. “Lady Henley, what happens next?” he asked. “Are you all right?”

g a path “She will be, Weston. I am taking her back to the house and will see you soon. I’m sorry if I require assistance. You may return to your duties. There’s still time.”

for your to be done in the fields.”

The old man frowned at him. “Jenkins and his boys can finish the t
mediately Cain arched an eyebrow in warning. “They will finish unde
before supervision. Lady Henley does not need a nursemaid.”

goose. In truth, Cain liked his estate manager, who had been with the St.
family for decades and was as honest and faithful as anyone he’d ev
Please, But he did not want him underfoot while he dealt with this young v
:?” She Nor did he need the man jumping in to protect her at every turn.

ght. He “As ever, I am at your command, Your Grace.” Weston shot
warning glance as he walked away.

Cain returned his attention to this Killigrew neighbor of h
understood why Weston was so peeved at his dismissal. She was rem
ch. Are pretty, even though looking a bit pale at the moment.

She must be in pain too, he realized, and admonished him
dawdling.

He steadied Galahad, preparing the frisky steed for Lady Henley
propriety weight, then reached out for her. She was not looking at him, lost
truth,” thoughts once again.

Malvern “Lady Henley, let’s get you to the Grange before you bleed to deat
She turned to him and laughed lightly. “Goodness, I hope I am
badly injured. But I will admit, it does hurt a little.”

“I’m sorry. I should have seen to those steps the moment I arriv
, if that and noticed their poor condition.”

thing to “It is not your fault. How could you possibly know I’d get mys
But the this coil?” She still had not turned into a gushing ninny, batting her
d I washim or tossing him coquettish smiles.

Nor did she appear to be plotting to entrap him.

In truth, her mind did not appear to be on him at all.

It was refreshing and at the same time irritating.

out her No, infuriating.

o detect Why was she not interested in him?

Was her heart given to another man?

opened? And why did he suddenly care?

ummon

ll work

ask.”
er your

Austell
er met.
woman.

back a

is. He
arkably

self for

’s light
in her

h.”
not that

ed here

elf into
eyes at



Chapter Two

CAIN PLACED HIS hands around Lady Henley's waist and lifted her on the saddle. Warmth flooded him the moment he touched her. "His name is Galahad. He can be a little contrary at times. Can you hold on to him with only the one hand?"

"I'll try." She did not look at all comfortable in the saddle. "The horse is enormous."

"Friesians are bred for battle." He placed his hands around her waist again to settle her more securely.

He'd held women before.

Lady Henley was no one special.

Of course, his body seemed to believe quite the opposite.

He released her a bit too hastily, inadvertently jerking on Galahad's neck.

Lady Henley gasped as the horse lurched forward. "Stop! I cannot get a grip on—"

Cain caught her in his arms as she tumbled off.

Her cheeks were now bright points of red, her embarrassment obvious as she tried to squirm out of his grasp. "I had better walk."

He refused to set her down. "Don't be ridiculous. You are in no condition."

"But—"

"Stop struggling or you'll fall again." He placed her back in the saddle and mounted behind her, which earned him a gasp of indignation. He ignored it. "This is purely for the purpose of getting you safely back to my home. I will not have you trampled because you cannot keep your balance on the horse. Rest your head against my shoulder, Lady Henley. Tensing your muscles will make you feel worse, and I would rather not have you casting your accusations all over me."

Not that anyone would notice, since he already looked like a beggar on the streets.

To his surprise, she stopped resisting and eased against him.

Good—he hated feigned prudery.

He quickly got her to the Grange and carried her to the gazebo, which was nestled in a corner of his garden. It overlooked the water, and there was a refreshingly light breeze present at this hour of the day. His father had chosen this garden niche as a place for the family to take tea in the afternoons, and he often watched the sun set over the water.

Indeed, it must be nearing four o'clock now, he surmised by the amount of light still in the sun. The light would remain for hours yet, since this was summer, and darkness never fell before ten o'clock in the evening.

Still, the colors of the sky as the sun began its descent were beautiful. There was a sitting area in the gazebo, cushioned benches along the sides and a wrought-iron table with matching chairs around it in the center. He ordered her, helping her into one of those chairs. "I'll be right back."

He startled his staff by walking into the kitchen and demanding towels, cloths, bindings, a jug of water, and a bottle of brandy. "Mrs. Chiltern," he said to his housekeeper, "I'll also need lemonade and some cakes brought to the gazebo immediately. Enough for two."

"For two, Your Grace?"

"Yes, for me and the young lady who needs these bandages and bread."

He strode back out with his supplies, hoping Lady Henley had not noticed. Well, she would not have gotten far if she had tried. The girl must have walked a good distance in the heat to get from Moonstone Cottage to the gazebo, then afterward to make her way into his park while injured. That effort would exhaust even an experienced soldier.

Her eyes were closed and her head lay propped on her uninjured arm when he returned, so he quietly set his supplies on the decorative table and knelt beside her. "Lady Henley, how are you feeling?"

She lifted her head and blinked her eyes open. "I am fine. Just need a moment's rest."

Those eyes of hers were stunning.

Her smile was soft and rather beautiful.

Yes, he was going to taste those lips before they parted ways.

"Hold out your hand." He drew a chair close to hers and settled himself on it, facing her. "I'm sure you've caught a splinter or two. I'll be as gentle as possible drawing them out. But first, I must wash the area of the wound."

then cleanse it with this brandy. It will sting quite a bit.”

She nodded. “Do whatever you must. My hand is already sore.”

He was surprised by how stoic she was when he applied the spirit. He was apalm and then dug out the splinters. She kept her eyes closed the entire time which allowed him to stare at her features.

She had a remarkably lovely face. There was also something beguiling about her body.

He bound her hand properly and then set her ruined handkerchief and dirty cloths aside. “Done, Lady Henley. You may open your eyes. Refreshments have arrived. Have something to settle your stomach, and I shall take you home.”

“Thank you, Your Grace. I am so sorry to have put you out. I should have paid closer attention to where I was walking on the beach.”

“What distracted you?”

She gave a light grunt. “Do you really want to know?”

He nodded. “I wouldn’t have asked otherwise.”

“Very well,” she said, taking his breath away with another of her “Men.”

He arched an eyebrow, trying to appear casual as fire surged through his veins. “Was there another man in her life? Someone other than him? Not that I would want her or had any right to her.”

Well, that wasn’t quite right.

He wanted her.

Hellfire.

He did not care for this at all. “Men? In general? Or is there someone specific?”

“Specifically my father’s weasel of a cousin. But you needn’t list your woes.”

“Not at all, Lady Henley. Perhaps I can be of help.”

She cast him an engaging smile. “Thank you, but I will figure it out on my own.”

“Are you certain? You almost drowned and then almost bled to death. Seems to me this problem of yours is troubling you greatly. Do you not want to confide in someone?” He had no idea why he was pressing the matter as why his insides were exploding in possessive torment.

He was not about to court her. He just wanted to kiss her.

Perhaps he was undone because she had not yet asked him for help, but did she appear to have the slightest intention of doing so.

“People always sought something from him. Why not this girl?”

“But she merely sipped her lemonade and nibbled at a slice of poppy seed cake.”

“Lady Henley, are we to just sit here in silence and stare at each other? I utterly think the time would be used more productively if we discussed this dilemma.”

“But I hardly know you.”

“Sometimes, it is easier to talk a thing out with a stranger than to do so with those closest to you.”

“That is true.” She pursed her lips as though mulling over the suggestion and then gave a curt nod. “Please, you cannot mention it to my sisters. They do not want them to worry.”

He had not met her sisters and was never in the habit of repeating what was told to him in confidence. “I give you my word of honor.”

“Thank you.” She let out the breath she had been holding. “You may stop at any time. It is not my intention to place any burdens onto your shoulders.”

He smiled. “Consider me warned. Go on, tell me.”

“Are you well versed in business affairs? I know many noble men who entrust such matters to their estate managers, men such as your very capable brother, Mr. Weston.”

“I am well versed. I trust Mr. Weston, for he is one of those rare men of substance, smart and honest. But now that I am back from the Continent, some important decisions will be made through me.”

She took another sip of her lemonade. “Well, I was consulted by Mr. Weston. But for this matter, perhaps you are the better person to consult.”

“He would likely have sought you out for advice anyway.”

“What is troubling you?”

“My father, Robert Killigrew, was the Earl of Stoke. Upon his death, my cousin inherited the entailed lands and title. But my father left us well provided for, having set up a trust fund for me and my sisters, Phoebe and Chloe.”

“Is this how you came to be at Moonstone Cottage? Was it a part of the trust?”

“Moonstone Cottage was left to us by my father’s sister, Lady Hester Killigrew. It is ours outright, thank goodness. That grasping wretch

elp, nor cousin cannot get his hands on it, although I would not put it past him
am named after my aunt, by the way. The spelling is different. I am
L-E-Y and she is...was...H-E-N-L-E-I-G-H.”

y cake. “One of my workers referred to you as Lady Hen.”

other? I She laughed lightly. “That is what everyone used to call my au
d your what they call me now. However, I assure you, I do not cluck, nor
feathers ruffle easily. But as I was saying, after my father died we v
longer welcome in our childhood home. It was a lovely townho
confide Mayfair. The new earl and his wife kicked us out the day after we bu
father. They would have done it sooner, except they were afraid of
gestion the ire of society’s powerful patronesses. We did not care, really. W
rs. I do coming to Moonstone Landing to visit over the years and expected to
the cottage when the time came.”

ig what A streak of sunlight shone upon her as she smiled up at him, bring
the gold and brown highlights in her hair. “It used to be haunted, c
nay put know? Have you heard about our ghost?” she asked with a sparkle of r
oile my her eyes. “He has not made an appearance in quite a while, but I thi
still with us. Well, that is another story.”

“Tell me more about this weasel cousin of yours.” He knew wh
n leave conversation was heading and wanted her to continue.

ole Mr. “While affairs were put in order, my father’s solicitor, Mr. C
looked after our trust. He is a kind man and was most reliable in sen
men of four monthly stipends. I’ve read the trust and know this is what was
ent, all stated, that we should each be given a generous allowance. I also kno
much principal was set aside for us, and therefore have a good idea o
sidering income should be coming to us monthly.”

source. He pursed his lips in irritation, not at Lady Henley, but at this cou
was the new earl. “And the payments have now dwindled?”

She nodded. “He has stopped them completely. We have received
ath, his much as a ha’penny in the months since he’s taken over trusteeship
ll cared I’ve written to him about it and have had no response. I’ve also writte
e.” bank manager and got back a curt letter, bordering on rude. I think I w
of this to go to London and find out what is going on. But what am I to c
there? I do not think the earl or the bank manager will see me.”

enleigh “You need a benefactor to intercede.”

el of a “I thought about contacting the Earl of Ashbrook, who has been

to try. Ifriend of my father's for many years. However, he is not in the H-E-N-health."

"I know him," Cain said. "He is a good man, but not up to the task
bother Ashbrook."

unt and "But I don't know who else to ask. Most of my father's friends a
do myor not in good health. The other members of our family are as much
vere nomercy of our weasel cousin as we are. This matter will turn ugly, and
ouse inknow anyone else well enough to impose this task upon them."

ried my "You haven't asked me."

earning She ignored the comment, her magnificent eyes fixed on him
e lovedcontinued. "My father left us quite well off, but I suspect the earl is
o live atnow he will accuse me of slander. I dare not say what I think he is doi

our funds. But the longer this goes on, the less likely my sisters and I
ging outany of our inheritance."

lid you Cain hated men like this new Earl of Stoke. He'd spent years
nirth inContinent fighting Napoleon to protect England from the little despot,
ik he issuch tyrants still existed in the form of men like Stoke. He'd probab

others to fight in his place while he continued to live his lavish life w
ere thiscare for anyone else.

To allow this cousin to now cheat these innocent young women int
Garrick,Cain. "I am due in London next week. Permit me to look into the ma
ding usyou."

clearly She frowned at him. "I did not confide in you to rope you into this

ow how "Perhaps I am bored and would enjoy tossing a few punches."

of what Her eyes widened in surprise.

They really were beautiful eyes, the sort a man could wake up to
sin whomorning.

"Well, you do look like someone never to cross. A bit scary, reall
l not so said, but her smile was soft and sweet, and she did not look part
duties.frightened of him. "You could knock him out cold with one blow.
n to thewife..."

ill have He frowned. "I would never hurt a woman."

lo once "Oh, you misunderstand. I did not think you ever would. You m
like a beast, but you were ever so gentle when tending my wound

glanced at her bandaged hand. "No, I was merely allowing my
a dearthoughts to wander. She has the nastiest disposition and is no doubt

best of urging my cousin to cheat us. One cannot be in her company without v
to throttle her. You will think me shockingly bloodthirsty, but
Don't imagining my satisfaction in hauling back and punching her myself,
in the nose."

re dead "You are hardly bloodthirsty. You could not frighten a fly." He
n at the his hands on his thighs. "That settles it. I shall speak to the bank man
I don't he gives me any trouble, I will go directly to his board of directors."

"You can do this? Oh, I suppose because you are the Duke of N
and he will be afraid to offend you."

as she He leaned forward and growled softly. "Officious little prigs like I
... Oh, my blood boiling. I will see him sacked without references if he dar
ng with me."

will see "How marvelous of you! I wish I had that power." She shook her h
would never really hurt him, for I'm sure he must have a family relian
on the wages. But it would be fun to scare him—"

and yet "This is why you would be inept at getting results. He would sen
ly paid softness and put you off. But I am not soft," he said with a quiet growl
ithout a She blushed as her gaze quickly darted to his body. "Indeed, you a
Ah, she'd noticed.

furiated "Your Grace, your kindness only makes me feel worse. How car
tter for you into our family affairs? If it were just for myself, I would not acce

"But you have your sisters to think about."

mess." She nodded. "I would do anything for them. I even considered m
for the sake of claiming our funds. The terms of the trust require each
shares to be distributed to us upon our marriage. Phoebe and Chloe
o every too young, but I thought if I found a good, honest man, at least we'd h
share for all of us to live on."

ly," she "Have you found such a man?"

icularly She winced. "No, not yet."

But his Relief inexplicably washed over him.

"The thing is, it cannot be just anyone. He must be someor
significant clout, someone a judge would take seriously when we pet
ay look have my father's cousin removed as trustee. Someone who can make
d." She and bank managers jump to attention when he demands a full accounti
wicked he must also be someone who would have my complete trust."

the one "That is no easy thing to find."

wanting “I am well aware.” She rolled her eyes. “I refused several of I was marriage in my first Season—my only Season—because those men solidly merely after my trust fund and did not care at all about me. I always thought would marry for love, and have not quite come to terms with having to slapped for convenience. Well, I don’t suppose it is convenient for me or my in-ager. If husband. Marriage of necessity is a better term for it. But I think I must London and see what can be done before I sacrifice myself at the altar. Alvern “Lady Henley, you would be wasting your time trying to fix this of own. Let me help.”

him get “I’ve known you all of ten minutes and now feel as though I’ve es defy you into—”

He laughed. “You? Bullied me? Have you not noticed that I am read. “I head taller than you and probably twice your weight? My fists are three t on his the size of yours.”

She grinned. “More like four. Your hands are big.”
se your “And I am not afraid to use them on little weasels, whether they l . or bank managers. If the earl has cheated you, then he will restore ev re not.” farthing or face my wrath.”

Her eyes sparkled as she laughed. “I would give anything to s 1 I drag squashed.”

pt.” Lord, this girl was exquisite.

“Even marry me?”

arrying
1 of our
are still
ave my

OceanofPDF.com

ie with
ition to
judges
ng. But

“I am well aware.” She rolled her eyes. “I refused several offers of marriage in my first Season—my only Season—because those men were merely after my trust fund and did not care at all about me. I always thought I would marry for love, and have not quite come to terms with having to marry for convenience. Well, I don’t suppose it is convenient for me or my intended husband. Marriage of necessity is a better term for it. But I think I must go to London and see what can be done before I sacrifice myself at the altar.”

“Lady Henley, you would be wasting your time trying to fix this on your own. Let me help.”

“I’ve known you all of ten minutes and now feel as though I’ve bullied you into—”

He laughed. “You? Bullied me? Have you not noticed that I am a full head taller than you and probably twice your weight? My fists are three times the size of yours.”

She grinned. “More like four. Your hands are big.”

“And I am not afraid to use them on little weasels, whether they be earls or bank managers. If the earl has cheated you, then he will restore every last farthing or face my wrath.”

Her eyes sparkled as she laughed. “I would give anything to see him squashed.”

Lord, this girl was exquisite.

“Even marry me?”



Chapter Three

HENLEY HAD JUST lifted her glass to take a sip and now spilled the lemonade all over herself. “What?”

She shot to her feet, ignoring the sticky liquid now oozing down the length of her gown. She needed to dart back home before this day got even more bizarre.

Had this gorgeous beast of a man just asked her to marry him?

He appeared mildly amused by her fluttering.

“Marry you? You are speaking hypothetically, of course. Are you kidding?”

He grinned as he rose and drew her to his side, one big arm circling her waist to keep her from bolting. “Did it sound like a hypothetical to you?”

“No...it... Blessed saints, I think I’ve hit my head and am hallucinating. Have you gone completely mad? Or did you say this to ruffle my feathers?” Well, consider this hen duly ruffled.”

“I said it because I meant it.” He grabbed one of the clean cloths he had brought out earlier. “Stop wriggling while I pat the spill dry.”

“I don’t know why you are bothering. My gown is already ruined. I tried to tug out of his grasp, but even though his hold was light and she could not escape him. “Not even Mrs. Hawke, my wizard’s housekeeper, will be able to remove the blood and lemonade from the fabric, no matter how often she boils the fabric.” She pushed at him again.

He emitted a soft warning growl. “Blast it, Hen. Stop fighting me. I’m not mad, but perhaps you are. I do not know of any other woman in my mind who would run from me. Is my offer so offensive?”

She stopped struggling and turned to stare at him.

To study him closely.

He was handsome...if one looked past his gruff exterior. He looked like a big golden bear, one with intelligent brown eyes, and he certainly knew how to hold a woman in his arms. There was something quite exquisite about his muscles, and she hadn’t been trying all that hard to wriggle away from

“No, it is not offensive at all. But...is there something wrong with you Grace?”

He emitted a hearty chuckle. “Not a thing wrong with me other than needing a bath. Is this what has put you off?”

“No, not at all. But I fear you have been out in the sun too long. I know of any man in his right mind,” she said, tossing his words back at him. “who would offer to marry someone they’ve known for all of ten minutes? Is this your idea of a cruel jest? Are you making fun of me? I assure you I do not appreciate your humor.”

“No, Hen.” He cast her a surprisingly sober look. “May I call you Grace? I am completely serious.”

She shook her head. “How can you be?” She glanced around, desperate for Mr. Weston to make a timely appearance.

In truth, she would be screaming at the top of her lungs for him not to do that for the fact that he often spoke of the duke in glowing terms.

“Your Grace, I am not suitable for you.”

“Why do you think we do not suit?”

“Um...because...” She tried to ignore her body’s response to being held in his arms. Well, he wasn’t embracing her but merely restraining her. She cannot be serious. Isn’t it obvious? My sisters and I are merely caught up in our gentility now. What would you want with the likes of us?”

“Sit down and let us discuss this as adults. Speaking of which, how are you?”

“Twenty, not old enough to marry without consent of my guardian. It happens to be the odious weasel cousin of mine.”

He made a grumbling sound and motioned for her to resume her seat. “I won’t dare refuse my offer. I’ll circumvent him if he tries. All the more reason for you to marry me. You are in need of a savior, are you not?”

She nodded. “But not a husband.”

“What do you not like about me?”

The question surprised her. Had she not been an obvious, fluttering fly around him? The man was stunning. He had to know it. “This is not like a fly, but purely about the short time I’ve known you.”

“Then my looks are acceptable to you?”

Another surprising question. “Your Grace, are you having me on? I am the handsomest man I have ever met. You are no doubt irresistibly beautiful.”

u, Your women. I'm sure you've left a trail of swooning debutantes between London and our cozy village."

er than "Then it is not my looks or odor that offends you?"

Dear heaven, nothing about him offended her.

I do not Apparently, she was partial to rugged men who growled like bears at him, had no idea until this moment, which probably explained why she had not found any of the young lords who preened and strutted like peacocks in London to her liking. "Mr. Weston speaks quite highly of you. So do my father. My sisters and I adored him. He was such a lovely man."

What that? I "Thank you. He and I were always close, even though we did not see eye to eye on a subject."

Desperate "Such as your going off to war. He always worried about you. Ever since I read the newspaper accounts and am familiar with your heroic exploits in the field of battle. You have also been kind to me in the few minutes we have had the opportunity to chat."

"Then where is the problem?"

She cleared her throat because this man was being awfully dense. "I believe it has been longer than that now." His lips twitched at the corners and then curved into a surprisingly appealing smile. "Close to an hour, I would estimate."

How old "That's right, not even an hour yet," she reminded him. "Are all men this rash to act?"

And, who He folded his arms over his chest. "I would prefer to think of myself as decisive, not rash. Do you not think you are a fine catch?"

What. "He "Of course I am. But what I think of myself is entirely beside the point. She cleared her throat again, hoping to take another approach. "Let us talk hypothetically for a moment."

"That word again," he muttered. "Why? My offer is real, Hen."

"Stop saying that. And now you are grinning at me. Stop giggling. Discussion is as much for your own good as it is for mine. If a man were truly interested in me... what would marriage to you demand of me? What demands would you place on me in return for securing my inheritance and that of my sisters?"

And you? By his silence, she knew he had not thought this part through at all. "See? You don't know."

London Which was all the more reason not to humor this absurd o
marriage. Well, not really absurd, but more an answer to her praye
thought had assuredly crossed her mind, and perhaps her straying c
property, although inadvertent, was not completely happenstance.

s. She'd ever meeting him, she had contemplated knocking at his door and aski
had notto marry her. But only as a last, desperate act.

s about She had also plotted scenarios in her head.

id your Encountering him by chance in Moonstone Landing.

Inviting him to tea.

always *Good afternoon, Your Grace. I am your neighbor, Lady Henley Kii
and I would very much like to invite you to tea...and me. Would yo
but I've terribly taking me on as your wife?*

s on the None of it was necessary now that he'd done the unthinkable
've had proposed himself.

How could he do such a thing when he did not know her?

Yet how could she pass up an offer from this duke?

s. "As I Not to mention St. Austell Grange was a magnificent home over
ites?" the sea. It was three times the size of Moonstone Cottage and
l at the landscaped garden that ranked among the loveliest in England.

r to an They stood staring at each other in the elegant gazebo, the s
honeysuckle along its lattices filling the air and blending with the sal
military breeze off the water. Her breath caught with a silent ache, for she co
herself as mistress of this manor.

yself as This was what her years of training and education had molded her
not only a wife and mother, but someone with the wherewithal to be a
point." in the community, to see to the well-being of the villagers, and do her
s speak preserve the family's legacy.

His eyes were alight with seeming interest as he studied her.
would you want our marriage to be, Hen?"

it. This "Oh, no. You are turning the tables on me. Do not respond to my q
an such with one of your own." She regarded him thoughtfully. "But since yo
entail? would want a love marriage, something that cannot be accomplished
eritance minutes' acquaintance."

He folded his arms across his massive chest. "It has been aln
. "Aha! hour's acquaintance by now."

"Stop mocking me. My question is serious. Are you a rake?"

offer of He cast her a devilish grin. “Do I look like one?”

rs. The She pursed her lips in irritation. “You are doing it to me again by answering my questions with ones of your own.”

Before He sighed and leaned closer. “I am not a rake. But women are attracted to me, and I will not deny that finding one to warm my bed has never been a problem for me. Knowing that I would someday inherit the dukedom certainly made me more appealing to these women. I am not deluded as to believe they liked me for myself.”

Now she felt bad for him. “I’m sure many of them did.”

lligrew, “I assure you, they were only thinking of my title and the material things that came with it.”

“Is this what you think of me? It cannot be easy for you to trust people when so many will befriend you only to use you. Which is what makes me offer all the more confusing. If you are serious about this...then why not use me just as any other toady who strives to wrestle a favor from you?”

looking “Did you come here for this purpose?”

had a “No.” She brushed back a stray curl that had fallen onto her forehead. The breeze was strengthening, a reminder the hour was growing late and she ought to get home. “Although I will not deny part of the reason I almost drowned was because I was lost in thoughts of you. To be honest, I would see as working up the courage to propose to you.”

He laughed. “I should have kept my mouth shut and let you do as you please—to be—would have been interesting.”

a leader “It wasn’t going to happen today. Perhaps not ever. I was only going to ask you if I were desperate and had run out of all other possibilities.”

look like I came prepared to dazzle you?” She glanced at her ruined hand. “What a bandaged hand.”

“Do you intend to cheat me or lie to me?”

question Her eyes rounded in surprise. “Of course not! I never would!”

u ask, I “Then where is the problem? Seems to me I’ve made a wise decision in five minutes.”

She wanted to shake sense into this bear of a man who had the power to make her dreams come true. “Please, take me home.” She turned to leave but took a stumbling step.

He sighed and put his arm around her. “Hen, I’m sorry. I am not trying to hurt you or trying to upset you.”

She shook her head. "I am not blaming you, just utterly confused. Stopmoment. I am a bit dizzy. I don't know if it is because of the loss of b this unbelievable conversation. Perhaps a little of both."

acted to Her hand was throbbing painfully. How could she think straight w been awas in pain?

Malvern She looked up at him, irritated to find herself attracted to this m not solooked as though he'd been lost in the mountains for weeks. He o smell like the oxen he'd been guiding, but beneath the scent of male something she found surprisingly arousing—there was also a tu l goodssandalwood, which signified he'd actually washed this morning.

Her heart was doing little somersaults as she stood beside him.

people He took her by the shoulders and gently turned her to face him. es yourtake you back home now, but there is one more thing I want you t ne? Amupon. I would be a faithful husband if this is what you want, a true m or fromWhether our union arose from necessity or after years of courtship, willing to comply with your terms, then what does it matter how long known each other? We can make of this marriage whatever we wis w. Thegive it thought. Talk it over with your sisters."

nd she She gaped at him like a stunned peahen.

reason I To go to London betrothed to him would open every door for h onest, Ioffer was almost too tempting to resist. Almost...but she had to p carefully or risk ending up trapped in a loveless marriage to a ma it. Thatwould take all of her inheritance and then cast her and her sisters off to his remote holdings.

oing to He seemed to understand exactly what she was thinking. "Hen, I s. Do I never do anything to hurt you or your sisters."

d gown "Even if you decided you did not like me? Do you understa concern?"

"I do. I will be clear about it in the betrothal contract. You need worry about being treated badly."

on." "And what of you? You would be stuck with me forever."

ower to The comment must have stirred something within him, ave andunrecognizable look sprang in his eyes. He raked a hand through his h groaned. "Stuck with you? Is this how you think I would ever view yo ickinghave the smile of an angel and eyes made of starlight. Being with you drag me back from the brink of hell. Why do you think I fled London?"

l at the “Was it not to avoid the Marriage Mart?”

lood or He cast her a wry smile. “No, I always expected to do my duty and
someday. I just needed it to be on my own terms.”

hen she “What terms? You’ve just proposed to me, a trespassing stranger.
you not give this matter a little more thought?”

an who “No. Hen, you are clearly not a dimwitted woman. Can y
ught tounderstand?”

heat— She placed a hand to his cheek, an impulsive gesture. But she’d he
race ofpain in his voice and could not resist. She gave his cheek a light, ca
stroke and felt the rasp of his beard against her palm. “This is about t
is it not?”

“I will He said nothing, but she saw the haunted look in his eyes, his hurt
o thinkand open.

arriage. “How stupid of me not to realize how badly these years have da
if I amy. But you seem able to hide it well.”

g we’ve “Not from myself.”

sh. Just She felt the depth of his ache in this admission. “I thought I was
who needed you.”

He took gentle hold of her hand and turned it to kiss her palm. “I
er. Thewe need each other. Do you understand now why I had to c
roceedMoonstone Landing?”

an who She nodded. “You found the frivolity of London life unbearab
one ofcheer. The glitter. The acclaim for your acts of valor.”

“The lavish ease of it just did me in. How can I laugh, have every
I wouldwish for drop at my feet, when so many of my friends were lost in

Their hopes and dreams were shattered, their families never to be th
ind myagain, and I am here with all life has to offer. I cannot tell you hov
women climbed over my townhouse wall to get at me.”

d never “No, not at you, but at the Duke of Malvern. This is what hurt yo
After everything you had endured and sacrificed, they saw not the m
were but merely an object to capture.”

for an He kissed her palm again, allowing her to see the pain in his eyes,
air andalso noticed something darker and drew in a breath.

u? You “I think you have returned home angry and unsettled. Is this why
I wouldoffering drastic measures to aid in my cause? My cousin’s behav
” inflamed your sense of honor, and you want to pound this weas

represents the worst in humankind to dust.”

“I marry He gave her another wry smile. “I am not angry, Hen.”

“Then what is the abyss you are so afraid of falling into? Does it hurt too much to talk about it?” She waited in silence for him to respond and he continued when he said nothing. “You needn’t explain it to me. I understand you not what you are going through, your anger and your grieving.”

She drew her hand away. “My cousin is my battle to fight, not your battle. Especially not yours if you intend to unleash all your suppressed rage and grief. I will not have you doing something you will regret.”

“He war, She turned away to look off toward the sea, but he drew her back to him, resting his hands lightly on her shoulders again. “He took advantage of his raw status to buy his way out of service in the army, did he not? This is the way men like him do. Now he would steal from his own family, treat you and your family as damaged scrapings on his boots. You cannot allow him to get away with it.”

“I don’t intend to. But I will not drag you down in this fight.” Then she saw him doing it in the fields, clearing timber and guiding the oxen through the one backbreaking work. She realized he was not doing it because those fields needed to be cleared, but because he needed to exhaust himself in combat. Perhaps sleep at night.

“Come to His fingers tensed on her shoulders.

“My sisters and I have helped out at the military infirmary in Mordor. The Landing,” she said. “We’ve seen the desperation in some of these men, a quiet seething of hopelessness and anger. These are men who have lost everything, their bearings and cannot find their way home with any clarity. The war years have changed them, and they no longer fit into their old lives.”

“The same “And you see this same look in my eyes?”

“I v many She nodded. “I recognize it in you not only because of those men, but also because this is what I am going through at the moment. Oh, I’ve suffered as you must have done. But I will admit to feeling beaten and almost drowned because I was so caught up in trying to find a solution to my cousin’s perfidy.”

“but she “Then marry me, Hen. It is the only way for both of us to win.”

She shook her head. “No. I will not enter into a marriage based on yours for the injustice of war and mine for the injustice of a weasel coalition. If you are still inclined to help me, I will gladly take you up on your offer, but I will not because I have to think of my sisters. But I will put a stop to your help.”

if I notice it is adding to your pain. The last thing I ever wish to do
you. Agreed? We start out as one friend helping another and se
urt you develops from there.”

nd then “If this is all I am to have of you...then for the moment, agree
erstandcupp ed her face in his hands and gave her a feather-soft kiss. He
brushed her lips with his own, but she felt it to the depths of he
: yours. “There,” he said in a whisper, “our bargain is now sealed.”

on him. She had never been kissed before, never had a man’s lips on hers.
Nor had a man ever run his thumb gently along the line of her jaw.
to face They stood so close, she felt the warmth of his breath upon her che
stage of His mouth remained achingl y close to hers.
is what She closed her eyes to savor the moment.

like the When she opened them again, he was staring at her. Could he tell t
her first kiss? Her heart beat frantically and she could not seem to settl
ie labor “Blessed saints.” He released her and ran a hand through his thic
en, was of hair. “Hen, I’m sorry. I did not realize...I did not think. Have you
se trees been kissed before?”

order to

OceanofPDF.com

onstone
ien, the
st their
irs have

ien, but
: hardly
down. I
n to my

1 anger.
usin. If
ir offer
ing me

if I notice it is adding to your pain. The last thing I ever wish to do is hurt you. Agreed? We start out as one friend helping another and see what develops from there.”

“If this is all I am to have of you...then for the moment, agreed.” He cupped her face in his hands and gave her a feather-soft kiss. He barely brushed her lips with his own, but she felt it to the depths of her soul. “There,” he said in a whisper, “our bargain is now sealed.”

She had never been kissed before, never had a man’s lips on hers.

Nor had a man ever run his thumb gently along the line of her jaw.

They stood so close, she felt the warmth of his breath upon her cheek.

His mouth remained achingly close to hers.

She closed her eyes to savor the moment.

When she opened them again, he was staring at her. Could he tell this was her first kiss? Her heart beat frantically and she could not seem to settle it.

“Blessed saints.” He released her and ran a hand through his thick mane of hair. “Hen, I’m sorry. I did not realize...I did not think. Have you never been kissed before?”



Chapter Four

CAIN STARED AT the lovely girl, unable to believe how sweet her lips felt on his. The touch of heaven—this was what had immediately come to his mind the moment he pressed his mouth to hers and felt the plump give of her lips. Was she real? Could he trust his own senses?

“Tell me, Hen. Has no one ever kissed you?”

Henley stared at him, her own senses obviously reeling. “You unwisely handed me my first. Was it not obvious?”

He groaned. “You are too good to be true. Come on, let me take you home before I decide to lock you away in a tower room and never let you go.”

Her eyes widened.

“I am jesting. I may look like a beast, but I will never do anything to harm you. I give you my oath.”

He led her to the stable where Galahad had remained saddled in vain for them. The groom trotted him out and held the reins while Cain lifted her up.

A now familiar flood of heat seared through him, as it seemed to do every time he touched the girl. He took the reins from the lad and mounted Hen.

She wriggled and turned slightly to look at him. “Your Grace, is this another horse I can use for myself?”

He had a stable full of them, but he was not ready to let go of her.

“Quiet, Hen.” He snapped the reins lightly, and they rode off at a canter. “Since we are to be in close company for a while, you need to be formal when addressing me. You have my permission to call me Hen whenever we are not in the presence of others.”

To his surprise, she did not protest, nor did she tense when he wrapped his arms around her to keep her securely in his grip.

How many times had he placed his arms around a woman? Too numerous to count, and yet not one of them had ever stirred his soul the way Hen

Perhaps it was the magical way her body seemed to fit his. She was a small woman, but he was a big man. Yet her soft curves perfectly matched his hard frame.

How was he to convince her they were right for each other?

He hardly believed it himself.

When they were far enough from the stable not to be overheard by the grooms, he resumed their earlier conversation. “If you will not consent to an actual marriage, then consider agreeing to a fake betrothal. It will give you more leverage when dealing with anyone involved in your cousin’s plot to cheat you. Don’t give me an answer to this idea now. We’ll talk further when I call on you tomorrow.”

“You needn’t take time from your busy day to—”

“Hen, stop. It is not a chore for me. *You* are not a chore for me.” Vesper wished to accept it or not, he was committed to helping her. “No one is to ignore that you were injured on my property.”

“You do not owe me a thing for that. I was the trespasser. But you are welcome to join us for tea. Tomorrow at four o’clock?”

He nodded. “I will be there.”

They rode in silence a while longer before she shifted again and looked back at him. “When exactly do you intend to leave for London?”

He grinned. “I’d go tomorrow if I could. But as I mentioned, it will take me a week to wait the week before I can sufficiently tie up affairs here. If you would like a chaperone, I could take you along with me in my carriage. It is new and elegant. You’d be far more comfortable in it than in a hired private carriage.”

Or...hell...you aren’t considering riding a public mail coach, are you?

She stiffened and cast him a defiant glance. “I would not rule it out if a private coach was too expensive.”

“Put it out of your head at once.” The girl was a newborn lamb. So delicate and luscious. Although she was not helpless, for she’d shown remarkable endurance as he cleansed her wound and dug out those splinters. No one could have been so brave. Nor could it have been an easy feat to rescue herself from the oncoming tide.

Still, she hadn’t the muscles to fight off unwanted attention, and that was going to catch the eye of every breathing male riding the common roads. “It is not safe for you. I’ll ask in town for someone suitable to chaperone you, and then you’ll both ride with me. Do you know where you will stay?”

is not a you reach London?"

added to "With the Earl of Ashbrook and his wife, I expect. I've already written them and should have their response within a day or two. Lady Ashbrook is diligent in her correspondence."

"I know where they live. It isn't far from my residence. I'll give you directions by his direction tomorrow. If you need anything while you are in London, just consider an answer to me there."

give me She smiled up at him. "Everyone knows where you live. The Earl of Ashbrook's home in Malvern is one of the finest in London."

er when He let out a chuckle. "And still you will not marry me?"

She knew he was merely teasing her and laughed along with a sparkling trill that floated on the breeze. "I may change my mind upon further viewing. Will you give me a tour of your London home while we are there?"

er will I "Warming to the idea of a fake betrothal? It will not hurt your cause if I am seen as eager to marry you."

you are Which, Lord help him, he seemed to be.

It was one thing to be slammed by desire. It was quite another to be slammed by desire and immediately want to marry the girl. He hadn't even looked at her. Their kiss had been ridiculously chaste. What was it about her that made her different from all the others?

Hen that made her different from all the others?

ill have Perhaps it was best if one of them used common sense and slow down. He had a hunch...whatever this was. He could make no sense of what was happening to him, only that the numb organ he called a heart had sprung to life upon meeting Hen and would not quiet down.

"She frowned lightly. "Not a betrothal yet, but merely a courtship. I hope this will be enough to bring my cousin around and make him abide by the terms of the trust."

loft and "I understand your reluctance, but I do not think a mere courtship is remarkable enough to scare him. Betrothal is the better route."

at a cry "Fake betrothal," she insisted, "and I have not agreed to it yet."

om the He nodded. "Yes, fake...until you decide to make it real."

It was not long before they reached Moonstone Cottage.

his girl The door flew open, and two young women who could only be her sisters rushed out the moment they saw Galahad trot into the courtyard.

ne you, "Oh dear," Hen muttered, obviously preparing herself for the throng of questions they were going to ask, especially when they noticed her hair.

bound and her gown stained with blood.

Not to mention their curiosity about him. It was not every day a woman arrived home in the arms of a duke.

“Please say nothing about our conversation regarding my cousin,” she said, her tone slightly desperate.

“I gave you my oath, Hen. I shall not break it.”

“Thank you. And try not to behave as though we are betrothed, for not. Nor are we *fake* betrothed yet.”

He grinned, but certainly understood her concerns.

A betrothal was no small step. If everyone believed they planned to marry, she could not break it off without his cooperation. Even if he cooperated, she might still be considered ruined, since betrothed couples were permitted certain marital liberties, and everyone would assume he had used every advantage.

He had acquired a bit of a reputation in his younger days. No one would believe her if she claimed he hadn't touched her.

It did not help that his body already ached for her.

If he compromised her, she would be forced to go through with Lady wedding. Despite his own mindless leap in that direction, he had no intention of coercing her to such an end. If she married him, he wanted it to be on reasonable terms and a choice freely made.

She still had doubts about him, because she did not know him at all. He looked like a bear caught roaming in the forest.

If he was displeased in the marriage, he could ship her off anywhere he wanted, place her in one of his remote holdings, and she would have to live with it. He would retain complete control over her and the wealth she brought to the marriage. Who was to say he could be relied upon to do what was best for her and her sisters? What was to stop him from taking her for himself and shirking his duties toward her?

He would never behave so cruelly, of course. But these had to be the questions swirling in her mind. He understood why she needed to be careful.

Her sisters surrounded her as soon as he helped her down.

Mr. Hawke ran over to take Galahad's reins and lead him to the stables, but Cain stopped him. “Good day, Mr. Hawke. I won't be staying. I'll be taking Galahad with me.”

“As ye wish, Yer Grace. I'm at yer service should ye require anything.”

that fine beast.” Hawke returned to his duties as soon as Cain dismissed the young man. “Hen! Hen!” Phoebe and Chloe now shouted in unison while he remained beside him. His presence certainly raised even more questions about her absence. But their relief at seeing her was palpable and joyful.

He shared a smile with Hen as her sisters continued to bob up and down and now both were chattering at her, giving her not a moment to get her feet under her. The younger girl had a head of red-tinged curls several inches darker than Hen’s golden curls, and the other had a mass of dark hair. He knew the youngest had to be Chloe, and the dark-haired one, the middle sister, could only be Phoebe.

He did not. They knocked Hen backward in their enthusiasm to hug her. She fell against him and tried to apologize as he steadied her. Her voice was soft and her sisters were a pair of noisy magpies, so she shook her head and cast him a mirthful glance.

“Thank goodness you’re home! We thought you had drowned!” Phoebe cried.

Chloe noticed the blood on Hen’s gown. “You’re hurt! We’re worried something awful must have happened to you.”

“No, Chloe. I am fine. Your Grace, may I introduce my sisters to you?”

“I cannot help it.” Chloe threw her arms around Hen’s neck and would not let go. “I’m so glad you’re safe. I was sure we’d lost you.”

Phoebe was wringing her hands beside them.

Hen once again attempted an introduction. “The Duke of Malverton was kind enough to tend to my injured hand and bring me home. It’s only splinters, nothing more serious. Chloe, do stop crying and take a moment to greet him.”

“All right... Good afternoon, Your Grace. Thank you for bringing my sister back to us. I’m twelve,” the girl said, sniffing as she released her grip on Hen and curtsied.

“And this is Phoebe,” Hen said, glancing at their middle sister. “I ought to have introduced her first, but Chloe is quite persistent.”

At least Phoebe had the presence of mind to behave with more decorum. “A pleasure, Your Grace. Would you join us for tea?”

He shook his head. “Another time. I’m sure you have lots of questions for me.”

d him. your sister.” He turned to Hen. “I’ll stop by tomorrow to look in on
le Hen Summon me at any time of the day or night if you develop a fever.”

uestions She pursed her lips, looking as though she wanted to tell him
is. coddling her, that she was quite capable of managing for herself.

l down, He supposed she was, but this was a new and marvelous thing to h
a word caring for someone else.

shades “Thank you. I will.”

air. He “Then I’ll be off.” He mounted Galahad with a casual ease and g
middle off to St. Austell Grange.

He had not known this woman two hours ago. How could she p
make such an impact on his heart?

But her A heart that had given him nothing but anguish throughout the wa
merely and his return to London. Death and bloodshed in battle, and shallow f

once home. So many people had accosted him in the few weeks si
! What return from the Continent, throwing themselves in his path. Demandin
him. Grabbing all they could.

e knew Scheming to grab more.

Hen was a gift, although she did not see herself as any differer
ou? Oh those grasping at him. But she was nothing like that lot, and this was
wanted to help her. This was why he wanted her.

l would She was sunlight.

She was starlight.

She brought hope into his life again.

ern was His big Friesian ate up the ground beneath his feet, and they we
is just back at the Grange, riding through its massive wrought-iron gates.

ment to and his men were no longer by the wooded area. They must have finis
the day.

ing our He looked forward to resuming their tasks tomorrow, the first of
ictantly was to start repairs on those cliff steps.

Hen would have drowned had she not been able to latch on to that
Forgive timber. Thank goodness it held, or she might have tumbled down the c

loe can He gave silent thanks for whatever force had kept her safe and l
her to him.

orum. But these feelings she aroused in him were most confusing.

He needed to sort them out, and ought to have been grateful to
ions for refusing his offer of marriage. Had any of his friends ever come

on you, claiming they had fallen in love at first sight and proposed to a woman
hardly knew, he would have knocked them out cold.

to stop Yet here he was, behaving exactly this way.

Weston was waiting for him in his study when he strode in. “How
im, this Henley?”

Cain motioned for him to take a seat. “She is fine. Nothing more
few splinters, which are now safely removed and her hand properly c
alloped and bound. Her sisters were worried, of course. Care for a drink? I
need of one.”

possibly He strode to his cabinet and poured him and Weston brandies. “W
must fix those stairs. Lady Henley could have been seriously hurt or
ar years in the rising tide and drowned. I’ve seen too much death already, W
rivoly don’t think I could have handled hers. It tears me up inside knowin
nce his close she came to disaster.”

g all of Weston nodded thoughtfully as Cain handed him the glass. “You l
don’t you? I thought you would. Her sisters are nice girls, too.”

“Yes, Phoebe and Chloe. I ought to have listened more closely wh
nt from spoke of these Killigrew neighbors. Lady Henley is a mother hen to
why he Her name is appropriate. Lady Hen. And her sisters are little more than
chicks.”

Weston laughed.

Cain took a sip of his brandy and grinned. “All right, just say it.”

“What?” Weston arched an eyebrow. “That she’s a good sort? I t
re soon so.”

Weston Cain snorted.

shed for “What?” Weston stared at him a long moment. “Gad, you like
mean, really like her.”

f which “What if I do?”

His old friend laughed. “You’ve been moping about the Gran
broken hardly fit company for anyone, then she comes along and suddenly.
liff. say it? You are smitten.”

brought “I wouldn’t take things that far.”

“Your eyes are alight and you are chirpy as a bird.”

Cain responded this time with a growl. “I am going to kick your ar
her for here to Dover if you dare refer to me as chirpy again.”

to him Weston leaned forward and regarded him thoughtfully. “Fine, then

an they call this impact she has had on you something else. Life saving searing?"

is Lady "You are getting carried away. Although, I will admit, she is somewhat special?"

"Different from the others, for certain."

more than a "How does she compare to Lady Alexandra?"

leansed Cain sank into his chair and took a healthy swallow of his brandy. "I am not to mention her name in my house."

"Go ahead and sack me for my impertinence if you must, but I've really had you toying with Lady Henley's affections if your heart is still so trapped—"

Weston. I "Damn it, Weston. Do you think I would use the girl as a thing? Besides, what business is it of yours if I do?"

"Those Killigrew sisters are among the finest ladies you will ever like her, Lady Henley in particular. She has a sweet, trusting heart, and I will not let her hurt by you. I care for her, not as you think... I am old enough to know your father, possibly even her grandfather. But I look at those girls and cannot do them, but think of all I missed out on by never marrying and knowing the man baby-raising children. Now that they have lost their parents, they have no one but a distant cousin to look after them. Frankly, I think he is more of a danger than a help to them."

Cain set his glass aside. "What have you noticed?"

old you "Other than the worry etched on Lady Hen's face whenever I happen to see her coming out of the bank? It does not take a brilliant mind to figure out something is terribly wrong. These girls are not frivolous spendthrifts. It happened to mention the Earl of Stoke when speaking to her recently, she immediately tensed. Something is going on. I want to offer my help, but what can a mere estate manager do? The man would shove me aside as easily as picking a flea off his waistcoat."

..dare I "He will not shove me aside," Cain said, deciding to tell Weston his plans. "She has confided in me, and I have agreed to help her."

Weston looked disappointed. "She confided in you? But she knows you."

se from "This is precisely the reason I got her to open up to me, because she is a stranger to her... and it did not hurt that I am her neighbor and a duke. I shall tell you something, Weston. I never felt closer to a woman while I had

“? Soulspeak. It wasn’t the proximity. She touched something in my soul. Do me to explain it, for I have no idea what happened to me today. But one...” that I must help her. My feelings for Lady Alexandra have not a thin with it. I am long over her.”

“You are?” Weston appeared astounded.

“She was a boyhood infatuation. I hadn’t seen her or thought of ly. “Doyears. My happening to run into her in London last month had nothing with my decision to come here.”

will not Weston stared into the dark amber liquid in his glass. “I hope so ound to carefully with Lady Hen, will you? I fear you have the power to hurt worse than this new Earl of Stoke ever could.”

trinket? Cain rose to put an end to their conversation. “Duly noted. I’ll see the morning. Let Mrs. Chiltern know I’d like supper sent up for me r meet.chamber. I have a bit of work to do and would prefer not to be disturbe not see

“Very well, Your Grace.”

to be her Cain watched Weston leave the study and quietly close the door ot help him. Only then did he sink back in his chair and bury his head in his joys of Was it possible the man was right and he’d never gotten over Alexand

ie but a Was this why he’d grabbed hold of Hen and behaved like that?

ger than No, it could not be. Besides, Alexandra was married and out of his

Not that he wanted to reach her even if she were free again. The had come and gone. He was no longer a boy fresh out of his first ppen to Oxford. Nor was Alexandra ever the angel he had imagined.

ure out Were there some unrealized, lingering feelings for his old love tha rifts. Ihim behave as he had toward Hen? How else could he explain his rid and she proposal of marriage to this girl he hardly knew?

ut what He ought to be relieved she had rejected him.

though In truth, he did not feel relieved at all.

If anything, he wanted to carry Hen off to the nearest minister ar n of his their wedding ceremony done and over. It would not happen, of cou did not have a license. She was not old enough to give her consent. Bu hardly age of twenty, she was only a few months off from that all-important consent.

I was a He’d marry her sooner in Scotland if he had to.

But I’ll He’d marry her again in England when she came of age, if necessa

ard her She was no child, but he needed to protect her.

not ask This feeling in his soul could not be ignored.
I know He would not press her on accepting his offer of marriage, not yet.
g to dosurely would if it was the only way to make certain her trust fund wa
safe hands.

His hands. For he knew no other way to protect her.
f her in He was eager to see her tomorrow.
g to do Were his feelings for her real?
Or completely imagined?

. Tread
her far

OceanofPDF.com

e you in
e in my
ed.”

behind
s hands.
ra?

reach.
eir time
term at

it made
iculous

nd have
rse. He
it at the
t age of

ry.

This feeling in his soul could not be ignored.

He would not press her on accepting his offer of marriage, not yet. But he surely would if it was the only way to make certain her trust fund was put in safe hands.

His hands. For he knew no other way to protect her.

He was eager to see her tomorrow.

Were his feelings for her real?

Or completely imagined?

OceanofPDF.com



Chapter Five

HEN'S SISTERS STARTED tossing questions at her the moment the duke was not about to call him Cain—had passed through their gate and disappeared onto the road.

“Tell us everything,” Phoebe demanded, locking arms with her. “Would you make you some tea? Let’s get you out of that gown. Oh, it is quite lovely. And it was one of your prettiest, too. I’m sure the duke must have appreciated the way you looked in it.”

“I doubt he noticed anything other than the blood on my hand.”

Chloe was still sniffing. “What happened? How did you hurt yourself? You were gone a very long time. We searched for you and could not find you on the beach. We thought a wave had swept you out to sea. Don’t ever let us like that again.”

“I’m so sorry, Chloe. I will be more careful from now on.” Hen led them upstairs and proceeded to tell them about her adventure while they helped her change out of her damaged garments, for the stain had worked its way through the muslin and into the linen of her chemise as well.

Her sisters listened, enraptured as she told them about the oncoming storm and how she’d clawed her way up the perilously splintered steps. However, she did not mention their cousin’s possible embezzlement of their trust or the duke’s marriage proposal.

How could she when she hardly believed it herself?

Phoebe frowned when she finished the recounting. “What had worried you that you did not notice the tide coming in and got yourself trapped on the beach?”

“Just things in general,” Hen answered evasively.

“It is our cousin, isn’t it? Do you think we have not noticed your visit to the local bank or the anxious way you await the post?”

Hen sighed. “I was never good at hiding my feelings, was I?”

Chloe settled on her bed. “No, you show everything. Tell us about

duke. Do you like him?"

Hen shrugged. "He was very nice to me."

Phoebe gave her backside a playful swat. "Just how nice? Did you?"

"What a question to ask!" But Hen blushed furiously.

"Oh my! He did kiss you! How did it feel? Splendid and transparent!" Phoebe's grin was full of mischief. "He looks like a beast. I was terrified—she ran in and grab a rifle when I first caught sight of him. But then I noticed and looked quite cozy in his arms. I'm glad I decided not to shoot him."

Hen laughed, put at ease by her sister's teasing. "I did not look 'Shall I ruined you think?" was tired from my ordeal, that's all. And he did not exactly kiss me, appreciated

"How many ways are there to kiss a person? Ha! You are blushing! Oh, Hen. You do like him!" Phoebe examined the gown her sister had taken off. "Do you think he might help us with our cousin?"

Hen nodded. "He has already offered. Annoyingly insistent about myself? and you might add."

Relief washed over both her sisters, something she immediately recognized or scare since they were no better at hiding their feelings than she was.

"Thank goodness," Phoebe mumbled, her voice a ragged whisper. "I did them you took him up on the offer."

"I did, Phoebe. Do not fret about our situation. Nor you, Chloe. I will its way secure a proper chaperone for me, and we are to go to London together. ing tide week. I intend to stay with Lord and Lady Ashbrook, of course. But t however, will call on me while I am there. I've invited him for tea tomorrow so st funds discuss our plans."

Chloe clapped her hands. "Excellent. He does not look like a you so cross. I think he looks like a big, wild bear. Our cousin, that slimy c hoped on ought to quake in his boots when he sets eyes on him. That horrible deserves a good comeuppance."

Phoebe set the gown over a chair. "Should we all go to London? I hate to miss out on the fun when the duke traps him in his big paws."

"Honestly, Phoebe. He has nice hands. And no, you are not coming visits to me." Hen gave a determined shake of her head. "I don't want you an near that weasel. Stay here at Moonstone Cottage, where you will both out the of his reach while the duke and I deal with him. Ugh, I cannot stand t

of him as the Earl of Stoke. Papa was an excellent earl and everyone
him. Cousin Willis is the lowest form of life.”

he kiss Chloe put a handkerchief to her eyes and dabbed her tears. “I can’t
to hear what happens in London. But what can we do if the duke doesn’t
bring Cousin Willis around?”

orting?” “Drastic action would be required,” Phoebe said, done assisting Hen
ripped to her clothes and now settling at the foot of her bed. “We’d have to con-
ced you the duke to marry our Hen. It would be the only way. Do you think he
consider it? Any chance at all? He seemed quite solicitous of you, but
cozy. Only because you almost bled to death on his beach?”

not how Hen remained silent.

 Phoebe’s eyes widened. “Blessed saints! Hen...? No, it cannot be.
; again. asked you to marry him?”

ad now Hen wanted to deny it, but the words caught in her throat because
could never lie to her sisters.

out it, I She could not even nod her head.

 “He was in jest,” she finally managed to squeak, her breath still tra-
noticed, her lungs. “A jest. Nothing more.”

 But she knew it was not. She felt it in her bones. She’d felt his sinc-
“I hope her soul.

 “I turned him down, of course.”

He will Phoebe groaned, fell back on the bed, and stared up at its blue
ier next canopy overhead. “Oh, what a nitwit thing to do! He was the answer
ie duke prayers. How could you refuse him? Do you think he might ask you
we can You have to accept him.”

 “Yes, Hen. You must,” Chloe said with equal vehemence.

man to Phoebe nodded. “We are not saying this to save ourselves. Well
oward, for that reason, of course. But we saw the two of you together. You...
id man must have sensed this himself, or he would never have offered for you
even in jest. Dukes are very careful about such things.”

l would “Well, he wasn’t. He hadn’t known me more than an hour be-
blurted that ridiculous proposal. Who does that?”

ng with “A man who knows what he wants,” Chloe chimed in.

ywhere Hen came to her side. “But that’s just it, sweetling. I don’t think he
i be out what he wants. He is restless and uncomfortable in his own skin. He is
o think man he was before heading off to war and is still searching for the

He lovedought to be. Nothing feels right to him yet.”

“Except for you,” Phoebe said. “This is what he recognized on i
not waitBut you spurned him.”

oes not Why were Hen’s sisters making this so difficult for her? She was
worried she’d made a terrible mistake, and they were only adding
en withmisery. “I talked sense into him. It isn’t at all the same thing. Anywa
onvinceis nothing to be done about it now. We shall see him tomorrow for
e wouldconsider what happens then.”

out is it Phoebe patted her hand. “You are right. I spoke out of turn. Who
right mind would ever trust such an offer? He might be our neighbor, b
still a stranger. We only knew his father, but he’s gone now, and w
Has hesay the son is as nice?”

Chloe giggled. “I wonder what he’d do if you poked him? Do yo
use shehe would bite?”

Hen rolled her eyes. “For pity’s sake, he is not a bear.” She pul
young sister off the bed. “Come on, let’s have supper, and then I am g
pped inturn in early. We’ll see if the duke shows up tomorrow or comes to his
and completely forgets about me.”

erity in “No! He couldn’t possibly forget you.” Chloe launched herself into
arms. “If he does, then I will dismiss him from my thoughts as the
fool ever to exist.”

damask Phoebe laughed. “I second that opinion. I wonder what Aunt H
r to ourand her sea captain, Brioc, think about him. Shall we try to summon b
again?ghosts and find out?”

“Or lure Cousin Willis out here and have Brioc chase him into th
Chloe said with glee.

, partly “Nonsense—now we are all just getting silly.” Hen scooted her
.fit. Hedownstairs, and they had a picnic supper in their garden because the e
ou, notwas too beautiful to spend indoors. They had light fare, a potato potta
which they dunked fresh bread as they watched the vivid pink ar
fore hestreaks darken upon the sky.

Later that evening, when they had all retired to their bedchambe
walked out onto her small balcony to look up at the stars. Her cham
: knowsbelonged to the sea captain ghost, Brioc Arundel, at one time, then
not theher Aunt Henleigh’s bedchamber when she bought the haunted Mo
man heCottage after his death.

He'd haunted the place until Aunt Henleigh died a few years ago. Instinct. Hen was certain he had been here merely waiting for her aunt to join.

In truth, on summer nights such as this beautiful one, she felt the ready strength of their love for each other and could imagine them dancing up to her moonstones that shimmered beneath the water on the clearest, crispest night. It was said those moonstones glowed brightest when love was in the air. The Duke of Malvern might jest about such things, but she knew he was real and could not be bound by time or place. Hearts meant to be together would find one another.

But he's... Was this why he had offered to marry her?

How is it... Had he felt this way about her?

She shook her head and hurried back inside, hoping tomorrow would bring answers.

It seemed impossible the duke should choose her out of all the eligible ladies in the realm—and not only choose her, but decide on it within minutes of knowing her.

Her senses... How could love possibly be this strong?

Well, she was *assuming* he loved her.

But Hen's... It was quite possible he did not and had chosen her for other, more legitimate reasons. Not necessarily any bad reasons. Perhaps he felt calmed

After all, he was a man in turmoil, unable to shake off the effects of war. Henleigh... Having the ability to soothe his anguish was a valid reason. How likely was it for his soul to be at peace. Perhaps he wanted her because she reminded him of someone familiar and pleasant.

On the sea,"... Well, she simply did not know.

The day had exhausted her in every way, and she fell into a deep sleep before her head even hit the pillow.

Evening... Since Hen liked to sleep with her drapes aside, she was awakened the next morning by the gleam of sunlight across her face. Eager to see the day, she threw off her covers and opened the doors that led onto her balcony.

From her vantage point she had a view of her garden, and beyond it, the blue waters of their cove.

Her had... She watched the sunrise over the water.

How became... How could London ever compare to the natural beauty of this little town in Cornwall?

The dew was still on the ground, a silvery coating upon the flowers.

and grass. Indeed, everything shimmered at this fragile hour, and even
in him sparkled as though touched by faerie magic.

romantic “I’ll need a bit of that magic today, Aunt Hen,” she said, address
pon the soft morning breeze. “Will you help me? I think I botched my chan
nights. the duke.”

r. She sighed, knowing it was foolish to believe the ghost of her a
w love the sea captain might still be lingering in Moonstone Cottage.

t to be Hen washed and dressed for the day, tied her hair back in a simple
at her nape, and then went to look in on her sisters.

Both were still fast asleep and cozily tucked in their beds.

She would not disturb either of them now. Instead, she silently m
would way outdoors. Her intention was only to walk to the edge of the garden
it met the cottage’s cliff steps so she could look out over the sea. Thos
youngled down to the beach, but after yesterday’s mishap, she was not g
n a few walk there alone for a few days yet.

She changed her mind when she saw a figure standing by the
edge.

It was not difficult to identify the tall and muscled man.

reasons “Cain,” she whispered, liking the sound of his name on her lips.

by her. Despite his request, she was never going to call him that. He v

ar. Duke of Malvern to her.

ie must Why was he here? Perhaps to study the cottage’s stairs and rebuild
minded match?

He must have sensed her watching him, for he turned suddenly and
back at her.

p sleep She held her breath, uncertain what to do.

Then he smiled and began to make his way toward her.

d early She had not done up her hair, and now gave it a pat in dismay. W
start the was no social call, nor a suitable hour for visitors. He could not expect
al cony. look perfect. Nor was he properly dressed, clad only in his shirt and br

t to the She heard the soft clomp of his boots as he started up the stairs.

“Good morning, Your Grace.” She glanced back toward the house
started down to meet him partway. “What are you doing here?”

part of “The name is Cain. I told you, I do not want formality between u
we are alone.” He brushed a stray wisp of hair off her cheek, and his k
r petals remained lightly pressed against her skin. “You look lovely, Hen. I l

the seawith your hair down.”

The wind was a little brisk this morning and blew the stray wisps of hair onto her cheek. “I only tied it back loosely. It isn’t practical, but I can’t expect to find anyone out here, or I would have done it up properly.”

“I’m glad you didn’t.” He stood two steps below her and still in the shadows of the eaves.

She smiled at this big man. “You haven’t shaved. I was worried whether you would.”

He emitted a rumbling chuckle. “Do you want me to?”

She shook her head. “Chloe thinks you are a talking bear disguised as a man. But I don’t mind the way you look. Flouting convention suits you in a way where

His hair, too long to be fashionable, was drawn back in a tie at his temples. “I wondered what I would think when meeting you again,” he said in a voice deep and resonant. “I wasn’t mistaken—you are lovely beyond belief.”

Heat shot into her cheeks. “I’m sure I am not.”

He took her bandaged hand and held it with care in his palm. “Your eyes shine like the stars of heaven. But I did not come here to court you or seduce you.”

“Then what are you doing here?” She was more relieved than disappointed, because this man would have her agreeing to anything if he were not careful. No one had ever spoken to her as he did.

Oh, she’d had compliments tossed at her when in her first Season, but she easily saw through them as lies. The duke had a way of making her feel that he stared at her every word, made her feel the intensity of them, and this was far more dangerous.

How could she possibly be someone special and miraculous to him?

She slipped her hand out of his, needing to put a little distance between them before she found herself melting in his arms.

No wonder women climbed walls to get at him. The man was irresistible.

She could see the flex of his muscles against the fine lawn of his breeches. His buff-colored breeches hugged his trim torso and firm thighs. His brown boots that looked worn but obviously were of the finest leather.

“I could say I wanted to look at your cliff stairs and possibly copy the design for the restoration of mine,” he said. “But I really had no purpose in coming here other than my heart led me here. I did not expect you to be awake like you are now.”

“I could say I wanted to look at your cliff stairs and possibly copy the design for the restoration of mine,” he said. “But I really had no purpose in coming here other than my heart led me here. I did not expect you to be awake like you are now.”

“I could say I wanted to look at your cliff stairs and possibly copy the design for the restoration of mine,” he said. “But I really had no purpose in coming here other than my heart led me here. I did not expect you to be awake like you are now.”

“I could say I wanted to look at your cliff stairs and possibly copy the design for the restoration of mine,” he said. “But I really had no purpose in coming here other than my heart led me here. I did not expect you to be awake like you are now.”

“I went to bed early and woke as the sun came up. I don’t know
sp backcame out here either. I was restless, I suppose, and could not stay in
did notShe cast him a wry smile. “But I learned my lesson when almost dr
yesterday and had no intention of going anywhere near the beach.”

net her He glanced in the direction of the water. “Then I won’t ask you
me. Your sisters will never forgive us if they lose you again, even if it
nderingfor a few minutes.”

“Will I see you later?”

He nodded. “If I am still welcome.”

ed as a “Of course you are. My sisters and I plan to walk into town la
1.” morning to pick up cakes from Mrs. Halsey’s tea shop. She makes t
nape. cherry tarts in all of Cornwall. Have you tried them?”

aid, his “No, but sounds tempting.”

relief.” “We’ll serve them for your visit. Do you have any particular favori

He grinned and held out his arms. “Do I look as though I am pa
ou are,about food?”

here to She laughed. “You are big, but quite fit. All hard muscle. Nothi
about you.”

d than He climbed up one step so that his head was a little above hers
g if shestood awfully close. “And you are all softness. Ah, you are frowning
Shall I go now, Hen?”

but she “No...that is...not on my account. I wasn’t frowning. I was
believethinking.”

ar more “About what?”

His lips and the nice way they had felt against hers.

l? But how could she tell him this?

etween He was studying her, his eyes taking her in. Was he going to l
again?

istible. He grinned. “Do you want me to, Hen?”

is shirt. Her heart began to race. “Do I want you to what?”

le wore “Kiss you.”

How did this man understand what she was thinking?

them in He chuckled. “Your cheeks are red as fire.”

ng here “Was I that obvious?” She could behave priggishly and deny
at thisentered her mind. But she would only be denying herself the pleasure.
nice the first time.”

7 why I “I thought so, too.” He took her hands in his and tugged her cl
doors.” touch purposely gentle so as not to hurt her injured palm. “I know y
owning still puzzled by whatever this is between us. But I want you to know,
a wish come true for me.”

to join “Don’t say that.”

is only “Why not? It is true.”

“How can I be? You are one of England’s most eligible bachelo
can have any woman you want. Why me?”

“To be honest, I don’t know. I saw you yesterday and my hear
ter this alive. This is the only way I can explain it. I was sure I would wake
he best morning and realize my mistake, dismiss my feelings as momentary m

But seeing you again now...” He shook his head and emitted a light g
know I made the right decision.”

ites?” He leaned forward and pressed his mouth to hers, this time prolong
articulartouch of their lips. Yesterday’s kiss had been light as a feather, but t
felt more urgent. Hungrier and unmistakably real. His lips sank deep
ng soft hers, still gentle but probing and possessive, as though he want
surrender.

and he Not that it was a battle.

at me. But with this kiss, he was staking his claim.

He placed his hands on her hips and drew her up against him. The
merely no denying the feel of his body against hers or the power of it. He ste
step below hers, and they were now thigh to thigh, and hip to hip.

Her breasts softened against the hard wall of his chest.

“I am going to marry you, Hen.” He wrapped her in his arm
deepened the kiss.

kiss her She placed her arms around his neck and moaned, the sound rese
something between a sob and a whimper. Mostly, she felt relief that
wanted her.

These feelings he stirred were new and struck her with the powerfi
of a storm wave.

She could not stop her body from tingling, so she held on to him
never touched a man so beautifully formed...muscles upon muscle
it had and divine.

“It felt He wanted her.

“Dear heaven,” she whispered when he ran his tongue along the s

ose, hiser lips to tease them slightly apart.

you are “Heaven, for certain.” He wound his fingers in her hair, slid them t
you areher windblown curls.

Her ribbon loosened and blew away, leaving her hair as free and
the beat of her heart.

She could not get enough of this man.

rs. You “What you do to me...” he whispered, his voice raw.

“I fear you do the same to me.”

t came He drew his lips off her mouth and began to trail kisses down her
up this “I knew you would taste sweet as nectar. I need to stop kissing you t
adness.take this too far. I don’t want to do something we shall both regret.”

roan. “I “What is there to regret?”

“Nothing, I suppose.” But he emitted a pained groan and drew awa
jing the She wanted to draw him back. Her head was spinning and he
his onereeling with these fiery sensations of delight.

er onto “Cain?” She was pleading for him to hold her again, craving the s
ted herof his arms and the warmth of his body.

“I’m right here, Hen.” He swallowed her up in another embrace.

She inhaled the arousing scent of sandalwood on his skin. “Is th
our married life will be?”

ere was “Yes, all this and more. Whatever you want it to be. Are you ac
ood onemy offer of marriage?”

She gazed up at him. “Are you still offering?”

He nodded. “Yes. My mind is unchanged.”

ns and “Thank you.” She hugged him and buried her head against his sh

“I want to marry you. It isn’t because I need you to defeat my cous
mblingselfish of me to want you for myself? Please tell me we are not insane.
he stillthis to be real. Promise me this is not a mistake.”

He laughed. “Does it feel wrong?”

ul force “No. But how can it possibly be right on less than a day’s acquai

If either of my sisters had come to me in this absurd manner, I wou
l. She’dlocked them in their rooms for a month. I am supposed to be the s
s...tautone.”

“Love doesn’t have to make sense.”

She gasped and drew away to stare up at him again. “Is this what
seam of feeling for each other? Love?”

“Perhaps not yet. But in time, I hope so. Hen, you are fluttering. I can see how obviously ruffled your very pretty feathers.”

“How did we leap from necessity to love? Why are you so calm and wild as this?”

He took her hands in his. “Because I feel at peace when I am with you. I felt this way yesterday and again today. I look at you and know this is home.”

“I am your home? No. We are moving much too fast. There’s so much to discuss.”

“We’ll have plenty of time for discussion this afternoon. Write down the terms that are important to you. I’ll make certain they are included in the betrothal contract.”

“We really are doing this? A betrothal contract? It could be all for nothing. My weasel cousin may never sign it.”

“He will not dare refuse. Not only am I a frightening beast,” he said, “but I am a favorite of the royal family. I have powerful connections, Hen. Your cousin might defy me, but he will never dare defy them.”

“I don’t want anyone else brought into this dispute, certainly not a member of the royal family. They will take a pound of flesh from you in return for a favor. It is too steep a price for you to pay. Is this not true?”

“No, Hen. They would not make demands on me in return for a favor. I have no intention of involving anyone else unless it becomes necessary. Just you and me for now. We can do this on our own. But once we are in London, everyone will be watching us. They will sense immediately if you are scared. So, you need to be brave. Confident. You need to be a lioness. I want you to be a bear.”

She laughed. “No, that is Phoebe, not me. But you are a great bear, so I shall try my best to be a respectably fierce she-bear.”

He kissed her on the nose. “Very well, my bear mate. This is your chance? You must be to protect yourself and your sisters. What terms shall I include in the betrothal contract?”

“I don’t know. Nothing that will hurt you. As for me, I ask that you include what’s right to protect Phoebe and Chloe.”

“And you.”

“Yes, me too.” She trusted him, odd as it seemed. But she had known her father, and he had been a man of honor. More important, his father

I have spoke with pride of this son he had raised. Mr. Weston always spoke of him, too. "Do terms of intimacy go into a contract?"

n about He arched an eyebrow and cast her a rakish grin. "Care to elaborate

Her cheeks heated. She cleared her throat. "Sleeping arrangement
n you. I not know if such things were ever mentioned."

at I am "If the circumstances call for it. Hen, I know you are untr

Unspoiled. I do not expect you to share my bed. If this is what worri
still too then rest easy. As my duchess, you'll have your separate quarters ad
mine."

e down "Oh, adjoining?"

l in our "Does this not suit you?" He frowned. "Do you wish us to be kept
apart?"

naught. "No, adjoining is all right. I thought...that is... Are you certain v
never share a bed?"

said in "I don't know. Is this how you want it?"

n also a "Is it not the custom?" She did not know what else to say, so she
cousin mute. He was the duke. He would know better how these thing
supposed to work.

r not a "I am a restless sleeper. It is better we keep to our separate quarters
you inflickered in his eyes. "I had better return to the Grange. You ought to
" to your cottage."

for. But He gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and left her on the stairs.

ry. It is She watched him as he walked along the sand, hoping he wou
e reach around to look at her. But he never did.

r if you Hen sank onto the step and buried her head in her hands. She ha
ess." swept away by his kisses and the ache he stirred in her body.

golden But he was a man still haunted. Still scarred by war.

hat you but it was the word of a man in torment.

ude for Perhaps he was lying to himself. Which meant he was lying to
them.

you do Inadvertently, of course.

At heart, she sensed he was an honest man.

It was so odd, the way they behaved around each other. Apart, the
own his both think logically, but together, neither of them seemed capable of
r oft thought.

highly She watched him briskly stride toward the Grange. When he was
out of sight, she hurried down the steps to retrieve her ribbon that had
fallen into the sand. Frugal times called for frugal measures...only, she had
not. I did agree to marry a wealthy and powerful duke.

What were they doing?

She got the sense neither of them really knew.

Was he always going to insist on their maintaining separate quarters?
Was it possible to convince him they ought to share a bed?

What if he refused?

farther

OceanofPDF.com

we shall

stayed

is were

s." Pain

return

ild turn

ad been

s word,

both of

y could

rational

She watched him briskly stride toward the Grange. When he was almost out of sight, she hurried down the steps to retrieve her ribbon that had fallen into the sand. Frugal times called for frugal measures...only, she had just agreed to marry a wealthy and powerful duke.

What were they doing?

She got the sense neither of them really knew.

Was he always going to insist on their maintaining separate quarters?
Was it possible to convince him they ought to share a bed?

What if he refused?

OceanofPDF.com



Chapter Six

THE SUN SHONE brightly, but the breeze was cool off the water as Hen and her sisters walked to Moonstone Landing to run their errands late morning. Their cottage and St. Austell Grange were situated on the hill above the village that lay nestled in a pleasant cove below.

Although not large, the village had everything any resident would need: a church, a schoolhouse, a bank, postal office within a general merchant store. A doctor, blacksmith, fishmonger, several taverns, a tea shop, a bakery, and a fine inn. Every Wednesday was market day, when the farmers would sell their fresh grains and produce in the village square.

Moonstone Landing was also expanding, since the army had planned to enlarge the ancient fort's barracks and improve the local docks. She hoped these additions would increase prosperity for the local residents. Now that war was over, there would be an influx of soldiers returning who would need employment.

Also not to be overlooked were the well-heeled Londoners who were starting to take notice of their quaint village with its charming flowered squares, and beautiful blue waters. She and her sisters thought this was an ideal place to live out one's life. Were it not for the need to care for her London cousin, she would happily spend all her time here.

"Will you be stopping at the bank?" Phoebe asked as they walked the cobblestone main street and greeted villagers in passing.

"Yes, but I doubt there will be anything for us. Cousin Willis is not going to repent his ways without a nudge in the right direction. And by no means a hammer fist to the face. Well, not really a fist, but a legal assault."

"I like the idea of a fist better," Chloe remarked.

Phoebe laughed. "Me too."

Hen nodded. "It is nice to dream of such a thing. He is a horrible man and deserves his comeuppance, but I wouldn't want the duke to get in trouble on our account. Not even a duke can hit an earl without their

repercussions. But if he does hit him, I hope he lets me watch.”

Chloe giggled. “You must write to us in detail if he does. Seems to me he could get away with it. Dukes are more powerful than earls, and the Duke of Malvern is more powerful than the Duke of Malvern. Oh, I do wish you had agreed to marry him.”

Hen stayed silent.

Phoebe groaned. “Hen? What is that look about?”

Phoebe felt her cheeks heating again.

“Has something changed since yesterday? I knew you were oddly quiet at breakfast this morning.”

She sighed. “I may have done something.”

Phoebe took her by the arm. “Something good or something bad? Go on. Don’t keep us guessing.”

“All right.” Hen winced at the thought. “I happened to see the duke at the beach early this morning.”

“Our beach?” Chloe asked.

Hen nodded. “I think he must have come by to inspect our stairs. I did not expect to see me there at that early hour. But he walked over to greet me. Obviously, he could not ignore me...and one thing led to another...”

Phoebe laughed. “More kisses? You really are setting a terrible example for your sisters, you know.”

Hen nodded in agreement. “Yes, a terrible example. Chloe, do not let anything as I have done—certainly never accept an offer of marriage from a man you’ve known less than a day.”

Phoebe gasped. “Accept? Is this what these latest kisses led to? You agreed to be his wife?”

Hen put a hand to her heart. “Oh, Phoebe! What have I done? I cannot think straight when he is close.”

Chloe began hopping about and clapping her hands. “We are saved!”

“Don’t say that. We don’t know anything about this man, truth be told. And we were not completely helpless,” Hen insisted. “I would have found out a way to restore our trust fund.”

“You did,” Phoebe said gently. “You took the only logical step and brought the duke into our dispute. We may not know him well, but we’ve read enough about his exploits to know he is valiant and heroic. And I knew his father. And Mr. Weston surely would have said something if

not think the duke was a good man. But you have also gotten some splendid out of solving our woes.”

“What is that?”

“You have gotten a man who loves you.”

“Phoebe, he—”

“He must love you, Hen. Do you not believe in love at first sight? Not what you felt for him, too? You’ve just said it yourself—the two cannot think straight when you are around each other. It is wonderful.”

“It is frightening. Oh, it may be fun to read in stories, but how certain this is real? He does not know me and I do not know him. Why cannot adjust to each other?”

Phoebe gave her a playful nudge. “Only you would worry about thing. Do you think any other woman would give a fig about the feelings? No, they would simply grab him and all they could get out

This is why he is so sure of you. As for you, if that man cannot get you, then he is a hopeless curmudgeon who will never get on with and didelse. You are the kindest, most sacrificing person I know.”

Hen shook her head furiously. “We’ve hardly had to sacrifice you will I ever allow Cousin Willis or anyone else to take advantage of us.”

“I know, but hurling fists is not your manner. You ensorcel me your charm.”

She laughed. “Phoebe, stop. I am hardly an enchantress. Can from imagine? It is ridiculous.”

“The duke doesn’t think so. And look, he and Mr. Weston are riding you havetown. Oh, they’ve seen us.”

Chloe shot into the quiet street and waved at the two men. “Seems I morning, Your Grace. Mr. Weston. We’ve come into town to buy our afternoon tea. Will you be joining us as well, Mr. Weston?”

Weston glanced at the duke, who nodded. The kindly estate man be told. doffed his hat. “It appears I am, Lady Chloe.”

“Indeed, Mr. Weston. You are most welcome,” Hen assured him, the duke’s consent.

The men must have been on their way to purchase supplies for the ve haveof the Grange’s cliff steps, but had spurred their horses forward upon lso, wethem instead of turning off toward the mercantile store. Both f he diddismounted and approached them.

nothing Mr. Weston tipped his hat to them again. "I understand congratulations are in order, Lady Henley."

She regarded him with dismay. "Oh, His Grace has told you?"

The duke chuckled. "Hen, that is the most despondent reply I have heard. Do you think you might be a little more cheerful about our betrothal? Is this?" "Hen told us on our walk here. We are thrilled about it." Phoebe looked pointedly at her sister and then gave her a not-so-subtle nudge. "Are you Hen?"

Chloe was all smiles and giggles. "Your Grace, may we let everyone know?"

"Of course," the duke replied. "It is no secret."

She clapped her hands again with glee. "I am certain there will be an extra pie in it for us when we tell Mrs. Halsey. She'll be delighted, especially if she is first to hear the news. That woman loves to gossip. Word will run throughout the village within five minutes of our telling her. What a reward will be for her. Yes, we might even find two extra pies tossed in."

"Make sure one is apple." The duke cast Chloe a wink. "It is my favorite. NorBut I hear her cherry pies are equally delightful."

How could he jest about pies when the marriage could turn out to be a disaster?

"Hen," he said with a chuckle of amusement, taking her arm. "I assure you, marriage to me will be a lot less painful than a tooth extraction. Will you escort the young ladies to their shop? I'll follow along in a ring with Lady Henley."

Once the others were out of earshot, the smile faded from his lips. "Goodyou want to back out? I fear it will be too late to do so in another minutes for..." "I don't. I am happy about it."

"Then why the frown?"

"I never do things on impulse. I am cautious and deliberate by nature. Phoebe claims I sometimes think things to death. These strong feelings are not for you scare me. Do they not scare you? It has only been a day, and I am taking a plunge into the waters of a lifetime commitment. *A lifetime commitment*... what do we really know about each other?"

He shook his head. "I know that you are kind. Thoughtful, as you have now confirmed. Beautiful to look at and delightful to kiss. I have excellent instincts. If I am not scared, then neither should you be. Are we all

relation then?"

"Yes...mostly."

He arched an eyebrow. "Mostly? What still troubles you?"

ve ever "You will think me foolish."

othal?" He tucked a finger under her chin to raise her gaze to his. "Tell me

e stared "The sleeping arrangements."

n't we, His expression darkened, and he immediately tensed. "What about

You've made it clear you do not wish to share my bed, and I will not
everyone you to it."

She shook her head in confusion. "You think I do not want to
know...share? What gave you that impression?"

I be an Now it was his turn to appear confused. "Did you not say so the
pecially morning? Well, you said nothing when I suggested it. But you did not
spread pleased by the idea. I was not going to push you. Few men of my rank
coup it bedchamber with their wives, and I assumed your silence meant that
what you preferred."

avorite. She let out a breath. "No, this is not what I want. I thought it was
you wanted. I do not mind sharing. I like being in your arms. I think it
to be able nice to fall asleep while held by you. I just... Everything is so
that's all."

assure He eased noticeably as she rambled.

Weston, She probably made no sense at all, because her thoughts were
moments scattered. But he seemed to understand the gist. A shared bed. A
bedchamber.

os. "Do "Hen, let me make it easy for you. This is all new to us. Once
te." married, I'll have you settled in the duchess's chambers. Next door to
and we shall be close. But..." He took a deep breath and sighed. "My
troubled. I was not merely saying this out of hand. It is a serious matter
nature, possible I will lash out when caught up in one of my nightmares. Let
s I have how it goes, all right? We can change things if my dreams ever calm
we are What matters is that we are always under the same roof."

ie. And "Does this mean you have no intention of sending me away?"

He emitted a pained groan. "Send you away? I want to hold on
you just with every ounce of my strength. I want to clutch you so tightly, I'm
excellent I'll break you in half."

ll right, She smiled. "You do?"

Before he had the chance to answer, they heard a shriek from inside the tea shop. In the next moment, Mrs. Halsey's daughter tore out of the shop and started waving down their neighbors.

"Oh dear," Hen said.

"It is done," the duke murmured. "The news is out."

"And it is going to spread through the village like wildfire."

He took her hand and gave it a light squeeze. "Are you all right?"

She nodded. "It was never my intention to call it off... Well, I might have done. But only because it was moving so fast. This is something that I don't want to say about me. As I mentioned, I like to mull things over slowly and with deliberation. Perhaps I think too much, as Phoebe claims. I do like you very much, Grace. This was never an issue."

"Cain."

She groaned. "It feels so odd to call you that."

"Then you may call me something else. An endearment, perhaps? My darling? My love? My dearest beast?" He cast her an affectionate smile that melted her heart. "Or is it too big a leap for you right now, my dear?"

She shook her head. "You are teasing me, but I am not afraid to take the leap...my darling."

"There, that didn't hurt at all, did it?" He laughed. "Sounds nice."

She nodded. "It does. But this is what frightens me. Not frightening, just...confuses me. I like being in your company. And I liked your company especially the scandalous one you gave me this morning."

"It was tame. You'll know when I kiss you without holding back about this morning, I believe I owe you a hair ribbon."

She tucked her arm in his as they started toward Mrs. Halsey's tea room. It picked out their baked goods. "No, I found mine in the sand after you let it's secret retrieved it."

"I should have known. Cautious and frugal, that's what you are." He arched an eyebrow in wicked amusement when she began to fret her lips. "You are overly thinking again."

"See, this is precisely my fear. That you will wake up tomorrow and realize—"

"I am going to kiss you in public if you do not cut out this nonsense. You are a worrier, too. Heavens, I think I am about to marry Mr. V."

side theThis is him to the last detail—cautious, frugal, worrier, deep thinker. C
rop andbody is nothing like yours. Quite unappealing, actually. But yours is
glorious. Hen, I am teasing you. What must I do to make you feel
ease?”

They paused a moment to stand clear of a passing carriage before
on. “I will calm down. It just takes me longer to absorb things than
other people. You trimmed your beard. Did you do this for me?”

ht have He nodded.

o learn She cast him a sincere smile, quite liking the way he had cleaned
ith duehe still had the look of a woolly bear, but one who might pass in polite
u, Yourbecause he was so handsome. “It looks nice.”

“I’ll shave it off and have my hair trimmed once we reach London
be more effective if I fit in with the fashion of society’s elite. The lo
wild man shipwrecked on a deserted island is not going to win anyone
os? My “It won me over,” she admitted.

ile that His eyes crinkled at the corners and his smile was mirthful.
autiousYou’re the only one whose opinion matters to me. Perhaps I’ll grow
once we return from London. Which reminds me, we still need to find
o test itsuitable chaperone. And what about your sisters? Will they be a
without you here? Should I engage someone to stay with them while
gone?”

ens me, “I think they will be fine with the Hawkes to attend them. Would
kisses,mind if Mr. Weston stopped by from time to time to look in on t
well?”

ck. But “In truth, I think he was going to do it anyway.”

Hen waited for him to open the door to the tea shop and escort her
shop todelicious scent of warming pies, of apple and cherry and apricot, of cin
a left. Iand raisins, enveloped her. But she had not a moment to breathe there
before Mrs. Halsey emitted a joyful cry and flew around her counter
re.” Heher.

p. “Ah, Then the kindly baker remembered herself and bobbed a curtsy
duke before giving Hen another heartfelt hug. “I knew it! Mr. Halsey
ow andnot tell you our lovely Lady Hen was perfect for His Grace? And
they’ve gone and done it!” She was still bobbing curtsies and giving
e. I seehugs as she rattled on. “Betrothed! We are so happy for you both!”

Weston. Hen cast her a gracious smile when she finally managed to free

Only his from the enthusiastic embrace. "Thank you, Mrs. Halsey."

hot and "We shall have everyone from the village up to celebrate at the more at upon our return from London," the duke said, placing a possessive arm around Hen's waist. "I'll leave all the arrangements to Lady Henley and her walking sisters."

in most He then turned to her. "Weston and I came to town to pick up supplies for the repair of my cliff stairs. We had better be off. I will call upon you later." She nodded.

up. Oh, He cast her a look that had her quietly melting again.

society She wanted to kiss him, but it would be scandalous to kiss him in public. She wished to do it...ardently, and with great depth of feeling.

1. I will He grinned and looked over at his companion. "Come, Weston. We must go to work of a better collect our lumber from Mr. Bedwell's mercantile if we're to have any work done today."

Hen watched the duke stride out, surprised by how empty she suddenly felt inside.

it back Was it possible she was already in love with him?

d you a He had a commanding presence, not to mention impossibly good looking. No one could overlook him when he entered a room.

you are Phoebe nudged her. "You are staring at that door like a bereft widow." Come on, Hen. Let's pick out the pies. You will see him in a few hours.

ld you Hen shook her head. "I wasn't staring."

hem as No one believed her.

She sighed. "Mrs. Halsey, what do you recommend for our afternoon tea?"

in. The Hen and her sisters walked home an hour later laden with packages because they'd bought too much. But in their defense, Mrs. Halsey had in all in marvel and everything in her shop looked delicious.

to hug Their housekeeper met them at the front door. "Let me take your bundles, my loves. Oh, Lady Hen! Why did you not tell us this morning that you were betrothed to that gorgeous man? What joyous news!"

y, did I "Do forgive me, Mrs. Hawke." Hen handed over the pies. "I thought now the duke wanted us to keep the news a secret. Clearly, I was mistaken. It is all out, and we are both immensely happy."

"I knew it the moment I saw the two of you together. It is a love match, my dear. I'll make something extra special for tea today."

“Yes, please do. Mr. Weston will be joining us as well.”

Grange The sturdy woman nodded. “He’s another fine man. Too bad he’ve armfound the right lady for himself. But I suppose he is married to his duti and her Phoebe and Chloe had gone inside while Hen remained behind to to Mrs. Hawke, but Phoebe came running back out a moment later. S lies forwaving a letter in her hand. “Hen! I think we’ve solved the problem ater.” escort. Our cousin, Prudence Landers, has asked if she may come to vi must write back to her at once and ask her to serve as your compa London. She’s a widow and would make the perfect chaperone. Cor he waynot waste a moment.”

Mrs. Hawke returned to the kitchen with their parcels while s We hadPhoebe went into the drawing room and sat together at the writing desl ave any “I did not want to say anything in front of Mrs. Hawke,” Phoe quietly, “even though she is the kindest person and I do trust h iddenlyPrudence is clearly experiencing the same issue we are with wicked Willis. Here, read her letter. She does not come right out and say it, b certain this is what has her worried.”

l looks. Hen read the letter. “It isn’t a far ride from here to Plymouth. Perh duke would send his carriage for her. If she came right away, she’d al puppy.a few days to spend with you and Chloe before we went off to London s.”

Phoebe nodded. “Do you think the duke would look into her trust well?”

“I’m sure he would.” Hen took out the quill pen and inkpot. “Bu ternoonawful about dragging him deeper into our affairs. I was hesitan involving him in our own situation, and now to add Prudence? I sup ackagescannot be helped. That weasel has cheated all of us, and it may be r was amutual benefit to approach him as a united front. A judge might overl complaint, but if he is cheating his entire family, it has to be obvious l e thosebe removed. I’ll speak to the duke about it this afternoon.”

ing you “You don’t look happy, Hen.”

“Cousin Willis is such a vile little clot. I am glad we are about to ta ight theon. But how much do I dare foist on the duke? Will there not come is nowhere he says enough is enough and requests to be released fro betrothal? I will accept without question. We cannot be officially be natch, Iwithout Willis’s consent anyway.”

” “He won’t ask to be let out.” Phoebe placed a hand over hers. “I

not leave you to fight this on your own.”

The time passed quickly, and the clock soon chimed the four o’clock hour.

Hen had changed into one of her favorite gowns, a cream silk gown with a layer of pale green voile. She wore a single strand of pearls at her neck and had added pearl clips to her upswept hair. Her gloves were a delicate cream lace. “How do I look, Phoebe?”

Both sisters had joined her in her bedchamber. “Perfect,” Phoebe said. “The duke will not be able to take his eyes off you.”

Her sisters then twirled to show off their own gowns. Phoebe’s was a deep blue silk and Chloe’s was a pink muslin. “You both look beautiful,” Phoebe said. “Oh, I think I hear riders approaching.”

“It must be the duke and Mr. Weston.” Chloe squealed and tore open the door to Hen’s bedchamber.

Phoebe and Hen were not far behind.

Hen’s heart melted at the sight of the duke.

She watched him dismount his enormous black stallion with a graceful hand and pass the reins to Mr. Hawke. Mr. Weston did the same, and his horse roared into Mr. Hawke’s care.

The pair then marched to the door. Chloe had already flung open the door. “How perfect of you! We have news to share.”

Hen groaned. She hadn’t wanted to bring up the topic of Prudence. It felt immediately. Did the duke not deserve to have his slice of pie in peace about the way she was assailed?

“What news?” he asked, following after Chloe as she led the way out to the terrace. It was their practice to dine outdoors whenever the weather permitted, and today was a lovely summer’s day. A gentle breeze blew the water and rustled through the lush shade trees.

“We received a letter from a cousin of ours, Mrs. Prudence Lander began. “She is a Killigrew like us, the daughter of my father’s cousin who has been a widow for several years. Her husband died early on in the Napoleonic war. My father took it upon himself to provide for her. I suppose you know where this is going—our weasel cousin is trustee over her funds as well, and she has not received anything since he took over.”

“I see.” The duke rubbed the nape of his neck.

Hen sighed. “I’ve already told my sisters...if you wish to e

betrothal, I will completely understand. You may rely on me to sign w
o'clockdocuments may be necessary. However, since Prudence seems to be a
by his dishonesty, I would like to ask her to accompany me to Londo
with anwidow, she is the perfect chaperone. Whether you are willing to hel
r throatnot, we must go. I think we may do better now that it is not only me
delicatesisters he's cheated, but others in the family who are willing to
forward."

replied. "I am not breaking off our betrothal," Cain said. "Stop worryin
will. In truth, having her with us will make it easier for me to bri
s a paledishonest cousin of yours to task. Who else in the family has been da
l," Henby his actions?"

"Two elderly cousins of my father's. They live just outside of Lo
out ofam certain we shall have their cooperation."

"They are a bit dotty," Phoebe added, "and live together in a smal
with a pleasant young couple as caretakers because they cannot get arc
themselves. Father used to visit them every week. We meant to do th
casualbut Wicked Willis kicked us out, and we are no longer able to loo
andingthem as we'd like."

"We write to them often," Hen continued, picking up where Pho
1. "Youoff, "and would like to bring them to Moonstone Landing. But I dc
how we can manage it without enough resources even for ourselves."

Prudence The duke nodded as she handed him a slice of pie. "You and I can
beforeout once we are in London, Hen. I've also been giving thought to wh
are to stay. Now that we are betrothed—"

onto the "Unofficially. Wicked Willis, as Chloe calls him, must give his cc
weathershe reminded him.

lew off "He will. And we are betrothed. There is no 'if' about it. I want y
Mrs. Landers to stay at my Mayfair residence."

s," Hen "Malvern House?"

1, and a "Yes, and I shall take rooms at one of my clubs for the duration. It
c Wars.no imposition for me to move out. I keep very little at my home anywa

r where "Oh dear."

she has "You are fretting again." His eyes were alight with amusement
seem to worry more for my comfort than I do. Rest assured, I am no
will let you know if I decide I do not like the arrangement."

nd our Hen set down her teacup and turned to him. "But all of i

whatever unpleasant.”

affected “And none of it is of your doing.” He dug into his slice of apple pie. As a “This pie is delicious. Send my compliments to Mrs. Halsey next time you are in her tea shop.”

and my Hen frowned as she refilled his cup of tea and then her own. “How do you come to be so calm?”

“Because there is nothing we can do from here. We will confront the problem once we reach London. In the meanwhile, enjoy yourself. This is very good. You ought to try some.”

amaged She raised her cup to her lips. “I think you must have ice in your blood.”

He cast her a steamy look that shot tingles through her body. “I cannot stand you, Hen. My blood flows hot as volcanic lava when I am around you.”

She choked on her tea, setting her cup down with a clatter.

In the house Chloe and Phoebe giggled like peahens. Even staid Mr. Weston cracked a smile.

the same, Hen shook her head and laughed.

back in on Their party broke up two hours later, and the duke took her moment while the others strolled indoors. “I want to let you know that I have already sent word to my Bow Street runner, a very capable man by the name of Homer Barrow. He and his men will do some investigating for me and have helpful reports awaiting us by the time we reach London. Unless your plan is a complete idiot, which he may very well be, this matter is already dealt with quite efficiently.”

“You seem to have everything in hand. I feel as though I’ve consented to nothing.”

“Don’t ever say that, Hen. There are many things in which you will lead and I will happily sit back and let you go about your business. Your cousin is doing is no small matter. He is emboldened because English laws ignore the plight of women, treating them as a man’s property. Until these laws change, you are fighting an uphill battle. In effect, you give him the castle on the hill, the defensive moat, and the army. It gives him nothing, not even rotting cabbages to throw at his fortified walls. But you have me.”

“You have me.”

She knew he was right. “And what are you?”

He grinned. “Your battering ram. Your flaming arrows. Your thousand-man army prepared to lay siege to his castle.”

“You have me.”

She knew he was right. “And what are you?”

He grinned. “Your battering ram. Your flaming arrows. Your thousand-man army prepared to lay siege to his castle.”

She reached up and kissed him on the cheek. “You are enjoying this, aren’t you?”

He nodded. “Immensely.”

He kissed her back, not a light kiss on her cheek but full on her forehead, deep and urgent, evoking sinful waves of pleasure from her. “Oh, good.”

Cain cast her a smug smile of satisfaction, but turned serious a moment later. “My parents were a love match. Did you know this, Hen? They were perfect together, unbeatable when standing together. This is what I hope you will become. It isn’t a question of who has the strength and power. At times, I will have it. At times, I will. But never against each other.”

She loved listening to him, learning the workings of his mind. “You must have been a magnificent leader, inspiring your troops and engaged in battle. I am glad you are on my side and not my enemy. I would never surrender to you before you ever got off a single shot or uttered a demand.”

“I hope our fights are few and far between. I’ll likely lose all of the battles I’ve fought.”

“I’m serious, Hen. Seeing you sad and upset would hurt me more than anything. We’ll never fight again. I’ll stop by tomorrow. Write to your cousin.”

“I will.”

She watched him stride away, then ran up to her bedchamber and looked at the portrait of Brioc Taran Arundel. There were several portraits of him throughout the house, but this one hanging over her mantel captured him in his most natural expression and was her favorite. For this reason, she had not taken it down to replace it with something more feminine. It was the only portrait of him she had not touched in his bedchamber.

“Brioc! Aunt Hen! Can you hear me? Did you bring me this man? I am forever in your debt.”

There was no response.

The pair had disappeared upon Aunt Hen’s death.

Still, she liked to think they were somewhere close by, watching over her and her sisters. She knew the sea captain existed because she and Phoebe had seen his ghost and even spoken to him when they were younger and had often visited their aunt.

He was gone now.

ng this, The duke had appeared in his place, very much alive, and, for w
incomprehensible reason, wanted her for his wife.

Well, she was a worthy catch.

mouth, But *he* was nothing short of a miracle.

liness.” Yet she was too sensible to believe in such things. “Is he too goo
nomenttrue? Is there something I should know?”

were a Her hairbrush clattered to the ground.

ve will It had been sitting across the room atop her bureau, and she l
es, you touched it.

Her heart sank. Was this a warning to be cautious?

‘I think Did Cain have secrets he was keeping from her?

as you

doubt I

elf and

a single

m.”

e than it

l stared

the sea

aptured

ion, she

n truth,

If so, I

ver her

ebe had

nd had

OceanofPDF.com

The duke had appeared in his place, very much alive, and, for whatever incomprehensible reason, wanted her for his wife.

Well, she was a worthy catch.

But *he* was nothing short of a miracle.

Yet she was too sensible to believe in such things. “Is he too good to be true? Is there something I should know?”

Her hairbrush clattered to the ground.

It had been sitting across the room atop her bureau, and she had not touched it.

Her heart sank. Was this a warning to be cautious?

Did Cain have secrets he was keeping from her?

OceanofPDF.com



Chapter Seven

CAIN HAD TAKEN to stopping by Moonstone Cottage in the afternoons to see Hen and her sisters. He often brought Weston along for the purpose of acquainting him with Phoebe and Chloe, since Hen would be leaving behind while Cain and she went off to London.

He hoped his estate manager would look after the girls as though they were his own, for Hen would never rest easy thinking they were being left alone to fend for themselves. Of course, they would also be in the care of Mr. Hawke and his wife, who had moved into the caretaker's house on the property and would see anyone coming in or out.

Still, they were merely a couple in service and not trained in the art of self-defense.

One thing he had not discussed with Hen was the possibility of the Stoke trying something underhanded, perhaps attempting to abduct her while he and Hen were off in London.

He intended to set up precautions.

Not only would Weston look in on them each day, but he would have the local authority, Constable Angel, do the same. He also considered hiring professional guards and perhaps speaking to the major in charge of the nearby army barracks. It would not hurt to have the army take extra patrol duty near Moonstone Cottage.

Of course, he dared not mention it to Hen.

First of all, he doubted her cousin planned any such thing. It was improbable and would have her needlessly fretting.

Second of all, Hen would insist on taking her sisters with them if she believed they might be in any danger, which would put the girls in closer proximity to their cousin and assuredly place them in greater danger.

"Weston," he said, striding toward the estate manager as he supervised the workmen securing the steps that led from the cliff walk down to the beach, "Lady Henley's cousin, Mrs. Landers, has arrived. Join me

when I ride over.”

The man mopped the sweat off his brow and grinned. “All right. C time to wash up and make myself presentable. Are you asking for my about this woman who will be guarding Lady Henley’s virtue durin stay in Town?”

“No, don’t be ridiculous. I’m sure she will be charming if she’s a like these Killigrew sisters. I just want her to know who you a understand she can trust you.”

“All right, but she will have little reason to engage with me, si time will be spent in London with you.”

“Do you not want to meet her?”

Weston sighed. “I’ll go. You’re right. She ought to know my face.”

“All three sisters seem to like her. I understand she is b correspondence between her and the earl.”

“That man is such a horse’s arse. Rest assured, I won’t let h anywhere near those girls.”

Cain rubbed his damp nape, for the day was particularly hot and had been beating down on them relentlessly. “Constable Angel is as two of his best guards to watch over Phoebe and Chloe. They all k report to you and obey your instructions. I’ll introduce them to you a call on the ladies.”

“I think you are giving the wretched earl too much credit for cunnave the deceit.”

“Probably, but I dare not underestimate him. If I were he, I certainly use these girls as pawns in the battle.”

Weston frowned. “What would he gain by harming them?”

“Not to harm them, but he could demand they be taken under hi After all, he still has guardianship over them. Chloe in particular is vul because she is only twelve and too young to stand up for herself. Pho little lioness, and I think she can take care of herself. If he dared t away from Moonstone Cottage, she would bite his head off.”

“What are you going on about? Lady Phoebe is a sweet girl.”

“She is, but she also has fight in her. Perhaps I’ll have a chat v commanding officer overseeing the new army barracks in town. Th to the eyes on those girls, the better.”

“You are bringing the army into this? I’m not sure I like the

having young soldiers around those girls.”

“Give me your opinion,” he said, looking at Weston. “They would not be permitted inside the house, just to patrol it in the face of Weston’s continued disapproval. “No, I suppose you’re right. Probably inviting more trouble to have young men swarming about the place.”

“I’ll leave it to you and the constable, then. Keep close watch on the girls and their sisters.”

“You know I will.”

Cain patted him on the back. “Another thing’s come up, something that will also require my attention while I am in London.”

“What is it, Your Grace?”

“I received word about the Marquess of Burness,” he said, referring to his best friend, Cormac Stockwell. “Apparently, he was badly injured in the fighting immediately after Waterloo.”

“I’m sorry. I know you and he are as close as brothers. I’ll keep you both in my prayers. This is why you are so keen to have these extra expenses.”

“Moonstone Cottage. Your friend’s situation may keep you in London longer than you had planned.”

He nodded. “I hope it will not be necessary. Cormac is too young now to be determined, but his wounds are severe.” Cain felt a tug to his heart. Although they were not brothers by blood, they had been friends since childhood.

“They had grown even closer throughout the war years. These bonds of friendship forged in battle were often stronger than any blood ties.”

“How badly is he hurt?”

“I’m not sure yet. But if he is dying, I need to be by his side.”

“I see.”

“I can do both, Weston. I can be a friend to the marquess and take care of Lady Henley’s situation. I’ve given her my word. She will have my undivided attention.”

Weston eyed him dubiously. “Keep that in mind. War takes its toll on men. You are still struggling with your own demons. I think your own wounds will affect you more deeply than you realize. Just don’t disappoint Lady Henley. She’ll never complain, but you made her a promise and you must keep it.”

“Enough lecturing, Weston. I know my duty. I’ll meet you at the Grange in an hour.”

“I’ll keep it.”

“Enough lecturing, Weston. I know my duty. I’ll meet you at the Grange in an hour.”

Cain strode back to the Grange, his thoughts on Weston’s comment.

did not have to choose between Cormac and Hen. He would do all he could for both of them. Abandoning Cormac in his time of need was out of the question. Hen would understand, for would she not sacrifice anything for her sisters? Was this not the very reason she had agreed to their betrothal?

Hen's He slowed his pace as he marched across his park toward the manor house.

How was he to tell Hen? He had to talk this over with her.

Would she resent his divided attention? Having offered himself up as savior, was it fair to then devote significant time to his friend? Not if he needed to do more than visit regularly and offer his companionship. (Cormac had a younger brother who worshiped him and was shouldering the burden of his care now that Cormac had returned home to recover from his injuries.)

The hour flew by, and before Cain knew it, he and Weston were on their way into Moonstone Cottage. Chloe, as had become her habit, swung open the door to greet them with her typically effervescent cheer. "We cannot wait for you to meet Cousin Prudence! She is eager to meet you, too. Come in now! How are the repairs on the cliff steps going? Mr. Weston, you look good and look like a wooly bear."

He laughed. "I've promised your sister I will shave my beard once I reach London."

Chloe clapped. "I know you will be the handsomest man in all of England once you do."

He tweaked her nose. "Let's hope your sister thinks so."

They marched through the house and onto the terrace, where the full afternoon breeze and the shade of the trees managed to make their outdoor time comfortable. Hen's eyes brightened the moment she saw him.

This was why he needed her. She lightened his heart with her friend's smile and those sparkling eyes. How could any man not be drawn into despair when in the company of this girl?

He allowed Hen to make introductions all around.

While his gaze was mostly on his betrothed, he also took the measure of her cousin, Prudence Landers. The sisters thought highly of her, but not so quick to accept her. If one cousin could be a weasel, who was to say that trait did not run in the Killigrew family? He did not want anyone

he could advantage of Hen and her sisters.

But it did not take him long to assess the widow and come to a final conclusion. She was about ten years older than Hen, he estimated, for a few gray strands in her dark hair and her eyes looked careworn. Her grand was several years out of fashion, but she wore it with elegance.

“A pleasure to meet you, Your Grace.” She cast him a friendly smile. “I thought you might walk in wearing a halo over your head, for this is how our cousins described you.” She then turned to Weston. “And you as well, Weston. It is indeed a pleasure to meet you.”

“As it is you,” Weston said, and bowed over the woman’s hand.

It did not escape Cain’s notice that his estate manager never took her seriously off Prudence Landers for the remainder of their visit.

What was it about these Killigrew women?

Phoebe remarked on it when Weston took Chloe and their cousin Pen the walk on the beach. “I thought Mr. Weston was a confirmed bachelor. I see it is only that he has not met the right woman until now. What do you think, Hen? Will he ask Cousin Prudence to marry him today? Or will he wait until you return from London?”

“Phoebe, that is absurd. They’ve hardly known each other, and she blushed and abruptly clamped her lips shut.

Phoebe laughed. “What were you going to say, dearest sister? They’ve hardly known each other an hour? You are one to talk. What do you think, Your Grace?”

“Perhaps it is something in the Moonstone air that makes babies suddenly want to give up their freedom,” Cain replied. “Perhaps it is just theensorceling Killigrews.”

Phoebe nodded. “I think he will ask her when you return, because Weston is as conscientious as Hen. He will not say anything to disturb her from her chaperone duties. But once you are home, he will ask her out of moment she steps down from the coach, and she will accept him.”

Hen rolled her eyes. “You are getting carried away.”

“Not at all. I think it is wonderful, this knowing on the spot that you have just met the man of your dreams. Or woman of his dreams, in Mr. Weston’s case. I think this knowledge must be buried deep in our souls, do you not think so, Your Grace?”

He gave a moment’s thought before agreeing. “I do. Had you asked me to say so, Your Grace?”

He gave a moment’s thought before agreeing. “I do. Had you asked me to say so, Your Grace?”

He gave a moment’s thought before agreeing. “I do. Had you asked me to say so, Your Grace?”

week ago, I would have scoffed at the notion. Whether this knowledge springs from one's soul or is simply madness in the air, I do not know she had existed."

"To me," Phoebe said, "it is like looking at a puzzle with pieces haphazardly strewn across a table. None of the pieces make sense, until I find the important one, and suddenly all becomes clear and everything falls into place. How did it feel to you, Hen?"

"I am still trying to figure it out," Hen replied.

"Rubbish," Phoebe retorted. "It hit you like a bolt of lightning. Others are our cautious Hen and insist on thinking things to death. You cannot stare at lightning. It strikes too fast. But I hope this happens to me. I want to imagine what sort of man might be my perfect match. Perhaps a more professorial type to balance me out, since I tend to be too vocal and opinionated."

Cain laughed. "You would walk all over a man like that. Stomp on grapes and do you think he were nothing more than grapes to be trampled in a wine press? I doubt there would be any lightning bolts between you."

"That isn't fair! I can be sweet when I want to be."

"You are all delightful. I did not mean for you to take offense." Hen shook her head, still laughing. "But you need a man who will challenge you."

"Oh, Phoebe," Hen said. "Do not think too hard about it. You'll just do you when the right one comes along."

The others returned, putting an end to their conversation.

achelors
ust you



Mr. "WHAT DID YOU think of Mrs. Landers?" Cain asked Weston as they rode back to the Grange, their horses at a gentle lope.

"You're not going to believe me when I tell you."

"Not only will I believe you, but I expect I already know what you are going to say. You did not take your eyes off her the entire time we were there."

Weston laughed. "I thought you were mad to propose to Lady Hen. It seems this madness is catching. I was lost by the time I bowed my hand at our introduction. I will not say anything to her now, of course."

acknowledged her full attention to deal with that weasel cousin and be a
7. But it chaperone to Lady Hen. But..."

Cain frowned. "What is that 'but' about?"

pieces "I just realized, I am no one of consequence. You are marrying Lady
until you Will you forbid me from marrying Mrs. Landers? Assuming she will
ng falls me. You and I would then be related by marriage. It is one thing to be
employ..."

"But quite another to be in my family?"

only you Weston nodded.

not think "You are one of the best men I know, you old warhorse. She could
cannot find a finer husband. I'd sooner have you as a relation than the
e quiet, Stoke." Cain meant it, too. Titles did not make men noble or worthy
cal and he would not deny he enjoyed the privileges offered by his rank, he
considered himself above all other men.

him as He valued honesty, loyalty, and strength of character. Bloodline
ss. And irrelevant.

"High praise, indeed," Weston said with a laugh. "I am honored
prefer me to the Killigrew family weasel."

he shook They rode directly to the Grange, but they had no sooner stabled
' horses and walked toward the house when Cain's butler handed him a
st know "Your Grace, the messenger said it was urgent."

"Thank you, Manton." Cain took the letter off the salver and motioned
Weston to accompany him to his study. "It's another one from the Marquis
of Burness's brother, Lord Stockwell. I recognize his seal."

Weston followed him in and closed the door. "You are frowning
does the letter say? The news cannot be good about your friend."

de back Cain's heart sank. "It is confirmed. They are going to amputate his
They have to do it before gangrene sets in."

"I'm so sorry."

you are "So am I." He forced back tears, knowing how devastating this had
re were for Cormac. Had his friend been the bookish sort, he might have taken
loss better. But Cormac was the sort who grabbed life with both fists
ley, but he was about to lose one now. "I have to go to him."

ver her "What about the ladies?"

se. You "I am not forgetting them." He began to pace, his mind now awash
newly formed plans. "They can travel together to London the day

propertomorrow, as planned. I'll leave them the use of my carriage. Nothing changed, only I will ride on ahead of them. I'll leave first thing in the morning. The ladies are still to stay at Malvern House. I'll—"

ly Hen. "They cannot travel on their own. It is absurd to consider it. Even if I will have assign six footmen as outriders for the carriage, it simply isn't the same in your need to be under *your* protection. What sort of message will it send to the earl if they arrive separately from you?"

"Blast it, Weston. I did not ask for your opinion."

"Yes, you did. Why else have me come in here while you read the newspaper? You wanted me to be the voice of reason."

Earl of "I don't need you telling me what to do."

. While "You cannot abandon them, not even for your friend. His arm is lost whether you reach him tomorrow...which you cannot do even if you know how to ride a horse riding through the night. He'll be at his London townhouse regardless of whether you reach him in three days' time or five, he will already have lost his arm. And what will Lady Henley think if you ride off now? How would you ever gain her trust if you abandon her now?"

Cain raked a hand through his hair. "She will understand. I will not be abandoning her. I will be in London waiting for her."

a letter. "Go ahead and convince yourself of it, but do not be surprised if you find it doubtful."

ned for Cain slammed his fist on his desk, not out of anger but frustration. Weston was right, as always. However, Cain's heart was in a roil, and he simply could not remain here. "I have to go."

}. What "Then I suggest you ride back to Moonstone Cottage and ask Lady Henley if she would not mind leaving first thing in the morning."

his arm. "What if she refuses?" In truth, this was something he had not thought through entirely, this having to take someone else's feelings into consideration.

id to be "Then grit your teeth and stick to your planned departure. It is a matter of a day or two. As I said, your friend's arm is lost no matter what you do...only you leave. Just ask her. She won't deny your request."

"I hope you're right." He strode out of his house and called for his horse to saddle Galahad again.

irl with Within moments, he was flying across his parklands and onto the road toward Moonstone Cottage. Chloe, the family's little watchdog, mu

ing has alerted Hen, for it was she who ran out to greet him as he dismounted in the look terrible, Your Grace. What has happened?"

"Stop calling me that. I am to be your husband. I am Cain." He said if you meant to sound harsh, especially since she was in the right.

e. They Mr. Hawke had run forward to take his horse, so he and Hen went to that alone. But it was hard to keep his temper in check when good men like Cormac suffered while her weasel of a cousin got away with stealing.

"Sorry, I am out of sorts and taking it out on you." She tucked her arm in his. "Come inside and tell me what's wrong."

Her touch put him more at ease, but he still was not fit company, did not want the other women hovering.

is lost She must have sensed this, for she suddenly tugged him away from the house. "Let's walk along the beach where we can speak privately. The water is low," she said, casting him an endearing smile, "so no danger of either of us being lost or drowning. Tell me what has you so riled."

will you He told her about Cormac as they walked along the sand.

He spoke not only of his friend's injury but of their long and not-so-friendship. Hen was a good listener. The tide was starting to rise by the time he had finished pouring out his heart to her.

f she is Well, there was also much he *hadn't* said. He and Cormac had experienced things in battle that he would not burden her with. They had caroused their way through London's cathouses in their younger days and those stories were *certainly* not fit for Hen's innocent ears.

The waves now lapped too close to where they stood. He took her hand and led her to sit on the steps where they would be well away from the water.

thought He read her the letter he'd received from Cormac's brother.

is into She showed nothing but sincerest concern. "We must leave without Prudence has not unpacked yet, so it will be nothing for her to be ready only in the morning. I'll ask my sisters to help me sort out the gowns I am to take with me when we needn't worry. We shall both be ready to leave first thing tomorrow."

"Thank you, Hen. I'm sorry to put you through the rush."

groom "Don't be. He is important to you. Would you prefer to ride alone or don't want to slow you down. Prudence and I can follow—"

he road "No. Weston has already taken me to task for considering this very thing. He is right, as always. I've given you my promise and will see it through."

l. “Your friend is in loving hands with his brother. My presence will not change the circumstances. He will lose his arm whether or not I am there. But I hadn’t need my friendship more than ever. I must make time to see him when he is in town.”

ere not “Do you think he would consider staying here with us when he is such as stronger and can travel? I mean...it feels odd that I will soon be you and living with you at the Grange. We can put off our wedding if you don’t want to be in the way.”

” Cain laughed. “You will never be in the way. And I don’t want to and he our wedding. If anything, I want to move it up. I think I’ll need you more than ever over these next few weeks. I do want to invite Cormac to the Grange. I think it will be good for his recovery. Hen, thank you for the tide is understanding. You don’t know how much this means to me.”

er of us She placed a hand on his arm. “I still don’t understand what you mean, but I’ll stop questioning it and simply accept my good fortune.”

The wind blew softly through her curls. He put a hand to them and tenderly brushed the loose strands off her cheeks. “Just look in the mirror. How do you like the time you not see the beautiful light that you are?”

She cast him an affectionate smile. “More compliments from Cormac and the golden bear. You shall put me in a swoon if you keep this up. But if you had also leave tomorrow, then we had better finish this conversation and get to bed.”

ys, and They’d climbed no more than halfway before he held her back. She arrived in turmoil, and she had soothed his aching heart.

er hand There was something magical about Hen. This girl was his angel and his salvation.

He wanted to wrap her in his arms and kiss her into forever.

He had two arms to wrap around her.

at delay. *Two arms.*

eady by Cormac would never be able to do this with the woman he loved. You know his nature, this loss would make him a bitter wretch, and he would never accept love or believe in love even if it smacked him in the

Cain felt guilty about having his own chance at happiness.

head? I Finding Hen. Having all this.

He crushed his lips to hers, desperate to rid himself of these feelings. Anger and frustration, needing to absorb her and gain relief for his aching heart. My heart.

ng his She stared at him oddly when he ended the kiss, for it had been rou
he willfilled with raw emotion. "I'm sorry, Hen. Did I bruise your lips?"
le I am "No." She cast him a worried look and then turned pensive. "But
to know exactly what you are sorry about. Your friend? Or being betrc
feelingme?"

ur wife
wish. I

OceanofPDF.com

put off
u more
to the
ou for

i see in

lightly
ow can

Chloe's
e are to
work."
κ. He'd

gel. His

loved.
ne who
ie face.

lings of
aching

She stared at him oddly when he ended the kiss, for it had been rough and filled with raw emotion. “I’m sorry, Hen. Did I bruise your lips?”

“No.” She cast him a worried look and then turned pensive. “But I need to know exactly what you are sorry about. Your friend? Or being betrothed to me?”

OceanofPDF.com



Chapter Eight

CAIN TRIED NOT to show his impatience, for it wasn't Hen's fault his coach made slower progress than he would have liked because of the rain. The road to London was in good enough condition that a moderate downpour would not have held them up too badly. But there was no moderation to the rain that came down in sheets at times and required them to wait for hours while the flooding receded.

These days of bad weather felt like a harbinger of doom to Cain.

However, the delay was not nearly as bad as it could have been, and they reached London with barely the loss of a day. A heavy mist wrapped them in a blanket of gray as they entered the bustling outskirts of the city.

"You are frowning again," Hen said, shaking him out of his musings. The hour was late and they were all tired. She and her cousin were seated next to him, as they had been the entire journey. Even having a brief respite from himself did not relieve his feeling of confinement, for the summer heat made riding in these cramped quarters unbearable.

He had left his big Friesian behind in Moonstone Landing because he knew he would never have time to properly exercise the beast while on the road in Town.

He cast her a wry grin. "My impatience is showing."

"For your friend. You are eager to see the Marquess of Burness," Prudence peered out the window. "Look at all the coaches on the road at this late hour. Yet I think it cannot be more than an hour before we reach Malvern Hill."

He followed her gaze. "No, that is optimistic. Closer to two hours, I should think. It will be midnight by the time we arrive."

"Much too late to visit your friend," Prudence said. "I'm sorry about the delay, Grace. I know how eager you are to see him."

He shrugged. "I'll call on him and my Bow Street runner tomorrow morning."

Hen nodded. "Prudence and I will manage for ourselves while you are gone. Don't worry about us. I'm sure we will be in good hands with your sister's

for tonight, just drop us off and then be on your way to your club.”

Prudence nodded. “Yes, do not let us detain you.”

These Killigrew ladies were not the demanding sort, something he appreciate more if not for his distraction over his friend’s condition.

But this only made him feel worse. He had made a promise to F. He did not want her to think she was being pushed back to a secondary carriage

“Is there anything you would like me to do tomorrow?” Hen asked
He shook his head. “No, just remain at Malvern House. Do not
This applies to both of you. I don’t want you going anywhere without
I would have no idea what your weasel cousin will do once he hears you are
ain that town.”

“As you wish,” Prudence said. “We are so very grateful for
assistance. That man is such a toad...or weasel...vermin, for certain. I
a malicious person by nature, but I will take great delight in seeing
nd they brought down.”

Cain leaned forward. “I have not done anything for you yet. I
promise immediate success. All I can do is try.”

Hen put her hand on his. “It is more than we ever dreamed possible
gs. The

He sank back against the squabs, knowing Hen and her cousin he
l across
ench to hopes. He needed to take down the Earl of Stoke and kick him back in
’s heat hole from which he’d emerged. He also needed to see Cormac.

The unfairness of life ate his insides raw.

He had never come to terms with the damage done to good people
ause he occupied the bad, the petty, and the dishonorable got away with so much. Yet would
he to take on the role of avenging angel? He could not fight every battle
every injustice. To attempt it would drain all the fight out of him and
3.” Hen him a shell of a man.

Not to do anything would dishonor all he held dear... No, he
te hour. choose his battles wisely.
ouse.”

He felt a great weight lift off his shoulders when they reached Malvern
ours, I House. It was late, close to midnight, just as he had predicted.

The ladies were happy to finally settle in. Cain escorted them in
7, Your make certain their bags were brought up to their bedchambers and
repast prepared for them.
v.”

Hen cast him a tired smile as his housekeeper, Mrs. Crawford, escorted
you do. them to her quarters. “I have never slept in a more beautiful room. I f
taff. As

a queen.”

“It is the duchess’s suite of rooms,” Cain said, dismissing his housemaid. He would not give her leave to attend Hen’s cousin. Only once she had left them would he comment again. “I saw no reason to place you elsewhere, since I know Hen and will be married before the week is out.”

Concern. He had expected one of her shimmering smiles, but she did not seem pleased.

“What’s wrong, Hen?”

“How stupid of me not to consider...my sisters won’t be here back in wedding. It did not feel real to me before, but the finality of it is now in.”

“He took her hands in his. “It will not be a grand affair. Indeed, not more than a few witnesses and a quick ceremony performed the moment he signs the betrothal papers. I’ll hold a pistol to his head if I must. We’ll have a proper celebration once we are back in Moonstone Landing. I dare not delay. It is best to have it done as soon as possible for the safety of your sister.”

“You are right, of course. It is the only sensible course of action.”

He kissed her on the forehead. “Will you be all right? Shall I stay here while longer?”

“No, you needn’t. You must be exhausted too. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She glanced across the hall, where Prudence was now comfortably seated.

“You’ve seen to everything for us. I think I’ll turn in as soon as I wake while dirt off my face and hands.”

“Then I’ll be off.” He kissed her once again. “Sweet dreams, Hen.”

“To you as well,” she said, casting him a tired, but still radiant, smile.

He climbed back in his coach, pausing for a word with his coachman.

“Farnum, once you drop me and my bags off at my club, return the coach to Malvern House and get yourself a good night’s rest. I may have need of you again soon, but not tomorrow. Sleep the entire day away if you like. Bring me word for my summons any time after that.”

“Aye, Your Grace,” Farnum replied in his thick Cornish accent.

Farnum was another longtime family retainer, a grizzled former soldier and as light and tough as old boots. In their own way, Farnum, Weston, and other retainers long in service to the family provided a bedrock foundation. It showed Cain. It showed him life went on and daily routines were carried out no matter what chaos swirled around them.

Well, England had not been a battleground this time around, and keeper buildings and family ways had not been disrupted. Still, few families had been spared the ravages of war—so many of their sons had gone off to war and too many had not returned.

It took no more than another ten minutes to reach Bedford Place, a sort of look-out for exclusive clubs. The steward on night duty at the Malabar Club was most solicitous of him when he arrived, quickly seeing his bags were taken upstairs and his quarters prepared to his liking. “Are you in need of anything, Your Grace?”

“No, all I need is a good night’s sleep. Send a valet up to me in the morning. I’ll leave my boots outside the door for him. See they are properly polished.”

“Of course, Your Grace.”

Cain undressed, dropping all his clothes onto a chair for the valet to attend to in the morning, and then poured himself a glass of wine from a bottle of excellent vintage set out for him. A basket of light fare had been brought up and placed on the side table beside the wine, its contents a little including some fruit, cheese, and a few scones.

After washing up, he opened the window to allow in a cooling breeze. However, the air felt warm and too dank against his bare skin to provide much comfort. The club was not far from the Thames, and his room was filled with the odors of the river and the city.

Well, it was better than breathing in the acrid scents of battle, he supposed.

The steward had also sent up a bottle of the club’s finest aged brandy, but he left it for him atop the bureau. But Cain did not touch the bottle. He would open it tomorrow. For now, the glass of wine was enough.

He drank down the smooth liquid and stretched out atop his bed. His body was too hot to bother with sheets or a coverlet. The moon was shining through his window—not quite a full moon, but silvery and big, as it would be in the summer months.

He poured himself another glass of wine, for his demons were stirred. He knew from past experience his sleep would be restless.

But drinking did little good.

He would have to imbibe the entire bottle to get drunk enough to forget his sorrows, and then he’d wake with a splitting headache, a cl

so the stomach, and that always-present ache in his heart.
ies had He did not bother to finish the second glass of wine. He needed
o fight, his mind clear for tomorrow. What he also needed was an undisturbed
sleep.

and the But it was not to be.
ub was He awoke in the middle of the night in a cold sweat and the sheets
e taken about his body like a constricting snake. The moon was no longer up
a valet, silvery light shone in through his window.

All that surrounded him was a tomblike darkness.
in the He inhaled, taking several deep breaths. But the air felt acrid,
roperly nostrils filled with the earthy scents of London, too reminiscent of dead
corpses.

He sat up and tried to calm himself, shake off his dread.
valet to Had anyone heard him cry out?
om the There were only four bedchambers available at this exclusive club
ad also often used in the summer months, since most men of means spent the
ontents puttering about their country estates at this time of the year. The members
this club could afford such niceties, and all had country homes.

It was such a tidy way of life. One of ease and privilege.
provide His hands were shaking and his body soaked by the time he
m soon regained control of himself.

He listened for footsteps, but heard nothing. No one was stirring at
ttle, he halls.

“Hellfire.” How was he to sleep with Hen if this was what she would
ndy and subjected to nightly?

He was not worried about merely disturbing her sleep. What
e would accidentally struck her while he was thrashing about?

He could not bear the thought of hurting her.

Well, she would have to sleep in her own quarters. He had
visible tended discussed it with her. Was it not common for a married duke and duchess
to maintain separate chambers? He would visit her often enough, just never
ing and falling asleep beside her.

This arrangement would have to do. It wasn't as though he intended
to seek anyone else to wrap in his arms.

Hen was the only one for him.

Yes, this would have to be enough.

Besides, Hen had shown she was never one to complain.

He fell back into a fitful sleep, awakened by the club's valet who slipped into the room to take Cain's clothes and freshen them. "Your Grace," the young man said, his eyes rounding in dismay when he saw Cain stir. "I do not mean to disturb you."

"You didn't. I was already awake. Have a bath ordered for me, and no breakfast brought up."

"At once, Your Grace."

Cain debated whether to shave off his beard today, but decided against it. Homer Barrow would not care what he looked like. Cormac would give a good laugh when he saw him, and was likely in desperate need of a laugh.

Hen was already used to him looking this way and had not been bothered by it. In truth, she apparently got a quiet thrill from him looking like a bit of a fool.

The notion made him smile.

Within the hour, he was on his way to Homer Barrow's office. The man was a portly fellow, a grandfather type with a bulbous nose and keener features than most. Little got past this very clever Bow Street runner. "Your Grace, I've been expecting you. Do come in. Please, have a seat."

Cain settled in one of the sturdy chairs beside the man's desk. The desk was finally piled with papers, mostly reports, no doubt, for Mr. Barrow's excellent reputation. Indeed, Cain would call it a nose for digging out the information others wished to hide. "I was eager to speak to you. Have you found out anything for me?"

Mr. Barrow smiled. "I happen to have a helpful acquaintance at the club in the west of West London. This is where Lady Henley's trust fund is held, and as he indicated in your letter to me. The accounts for her sisters are held there as well. It seems the Earl of Stoke is trustee on several other accounts managed on behalf of various female family members. I took the liberty of asking my helpful acquaintance to provide information on those, too."

"Well done, Mr. Barrow. I was going to ask you to do this for me, but I'm ever pleased you have anticipated my request and already attended to it. I brought Lady Henley and her cousin, Mrs. Prudence Landers, with me to town. Is Mrs. Landers one of those family members you mentioned?"

"Yes, Your Grace. She is indeed."

"Anyone else?"

Barrow nodded. "Two others who I am told are elderly ladies."

acquaintance found only those accounts managed by him...or should
when hemismanaged? Shall we continue our search?"

Grace," "No, not on my behalf. That covers everyone in Lady Henley's
I didThe scoundrel is cheating them all. The only question is, how badly?"

"As far as we can tell, he takes the interest out each month, but ins
ne andsending it to the ladies, he deposits it in a secret account under an a
name for himself. This way, nothing shows up in his regular accou
uses the secret funds to pay for the vices he and his wife maintain."

ainst it. "Lady Stoke is in on this?"

have a "Oh, yes. She is as much a part of it as he is. The woman enjoys
igh. but is not very good at it. Not even stealing from the family coffers is
I scaredto cover all her losses."

ig bear. "And the earl? What are his vices?"

"While his wife attends the more elite gaming clubs, he prefers the
he manhells," Barrow continued. "He doesn't gamble much but will go ups
n eyes.enjoy enticements of the female persuasion. They are a low pair, Your
re beenI've had a man assigned in their house as well. They treat their s
poorly. Not an ounce of generosity in them."

he desk "What of the bank manager? How deeply involved is he in abett
had anearl?"

ing out "Another slimy scoundrel, but he will turn on the earl as soon as th
ive youare cut off. There is no friendship between them, only the lure of easy

The bright spot in this sordid arrangement is that they have not ye
ie Bankmore than the interest. The principal of each trust remains intact. I
as youthey feared to be too bold because they are still new to this game and
here aswish to draw too much attention to themselves at the start."

anaged Cain nodded. "Well, I am about to hit them over the head with a h
ing my,That ought to gain their notice."

"What will you do, if I may be so bold as to ask?"

but I'm "The Marquess of Burness has a brother who is chairman of the
it. I'veboard of directors. The marquess happens to be my best friend. I am
I me toway over to visit them next. Burness's brother will quietly look i
information you have provided and freeze these accounts. Neither th
manager nor the Earl of Stoke will be permitted to touch them. We'll
the testimony necessary out of the bank manager in exchange for a
es. Mypunishment. But rest assured, he will go to prison."

and I say, “Aye, to betray the trust of his employer and the bank depositors earn him no less.”

family. “Burness’s brother will be livid for certain. That dishonest manager have ruined the bank. He may have done extraordinary damage instead of depending on how many others like Stoke have been able to bribe him. I assumed I’ll leave it to their board of directors to interrogate him about accounts. He account thefts. As for me, I just need him to testify against Stoke.”

“Your Grace, even with this discovery, having the earl removed as could take months in court.” Barrow arched an eyebrow. “You do not gaming me as a patient man. What are you planning to do?”

enough “It is quite simple, really. Threat of exposure and public humiliation does not immediately resign and turn over all accounts to my superior. Lady Henley is quite a clever young lady. She has read her father’s trust copper knows the document gives the current trustee power to appoint his successor. I will call upon her father’s solicitor later today to confirm this is correct, Your Grace, although I have no doubt of it. Then it is a simple matter of confronting servants with the evidence, having him appoint me to succeed him, and in the stroke of the pen, have him resign.”

ing the “We are at your service should you require witnesses. Often, men these are slow to understand their game is at an end.”

the funds Cain smiled. “Perhaps I will ask for this acquaintance of yours conveniently situated in the bank to come forward. But rest assured it taken leave him out of it unless we have difficulty getting the bank manager. Perhaps all he knows. I understand how carefully you’ve cultivated your influence. I did not and would hate to draw attention to this effective man. His name was mentioned unless I have no other recourse.”

hammer. “Thank you.”

Cain stood and reached out to shake Barrow’s hand. “You have these ladies,” he told the Bow Street runner, “and I mean it sincerely.”

bank’s “Aw, Your Grace.” Barrow rose and came around from his desk to on my Cain to the door. “It is my job. However, it is gratifying to know that I helped because of my nose.” He tapped on the bulbous protuberance of the bank and laughed. “I do what I can to clean up this world. I know it is only I get all ways. But I like to think it is something.” He handed the reports to Cain.

lighter “It is a very important thing you do. Thank you again, Mr. Barrow. I let you know the outcome, although I expect one of your informants

should deliver the news to you within five minutes of its occurring. Is there in London you do not know?"

Barrow chuckled. "Oh, I am aware of all the scoundrels. Very few already, my notice."

Well, Cain felt as though one weight was now lifted off his shoulders.

He had expected Barrow to be successful, but not this soon. The fruits of his diligence were a pleasant surprise. Hen and her cousin were trustee delighted.

Since the hour was still early and the day bright with sunshine, he went to walk along the Thames embankment toward the Belgravia residence of his friend, the Marquess of Burness. It felt good to stretch his legs after a revision. days in the coach.

The Burness butler opened the door as soon as he was seen to pass through the gate. "Your Grace, do come in. I'll inform Lord Stockwell of your arrival at once."

Cain was led directly into the family's private salon instead of the next visitors' parlor and offered refreshments. "Nothing for me, Merrick."

The butler bustled out, closing the door behind him.

It did not take long for Cormac's brother, Lord Stockwell, to arrive. "Cain, thank goodness! I was hoping you'd come. Cormac is in a bit of a shape. He's upstairs, spends most of his time in a howling temper. My wife and I will want to take our little girls to our country estate because Cormac's sickness is upsetting them all."

"I'll see what I can do for him, John." Cain set Barrow's report aside on a decorative writing table. "I'll need to speak to you about these papers when I see your brother. It is an important matter concerning your bank accounts through these reports while I am with your brother—they're important."

"Of course. Let me take you upstairs to Cormac first. Come join me in my study when you are done. Thank goodness you are here. I don't know of any other man in the world able to talk sense into him at this moment."

Cain followed Cormac's brother up the grand staircase, his heart pounding and his muscles in a tense coil. He dreaded what would come of this little him, this proud, valiant friend now suffering the loss of his arm.

The stench of blood and sweat accosted him as soon as he walked through the door into the large bedchamber fit for a marquess. "Cormac, it's my duty to tell you he's dead."

"Bloody hell. Who let you in here?" his friend said in jest.

anyone There was a chair beside his bed, so Cain settled in it. “I won’t a
you are feeling because you’ll only bark at me and tell me to go to
escapethere anything I can do for you?”

Cormac, already propped against a mound of pillows, opened h
and stared at Cain. Dark rings had formed under his eyes, which wei
rewardsbloodshot. He looked awful and was obviously in intense pain. How n
ould beit was physical, Cain simply did not know. “You could leave me alone
me die in peace.”

e chose “Forget it. I am not going to leave you alone, and you are not g
e of hisdie. I’ll chase you into hell and drag you back if you dare go befo
ll thosetime.”

Although he had prepared himself for this visit, his friend’s condit
stridingcame as a shock. He had never seen a man look more anguished. Co
well ofdark hair was matted and damp. His complexion was sallow, save fo
dark circles under his eyes, which were almost purple from exhaust
of thelooked ill. He looked angry.

“All right, no death,” Cormac replied. “I am not going to kill
Cain. Not that I didn’t briefly consider it when the doctor brought out
ush in.and began to cut through my bone, but doing myself in would dest
terriblebrother.”

ly wife “He loves you so dearly.”

houting Cormac nodded. “I know. He is a better brother than I deserve.
cannot grow an arm back for me, and neither can you, so kindly sp
de on ayour platitudes.”

s after I “Do you talk to him this way, too? He would give his life for y
c. Readwould I.”

.” “I know.”

i me in “Your situation could be worse.”

’t think “Are you going to lecture me now? Tell me I’m not the only so
ment.” have lost a limb? I’ve heard that lecture already.”

already “Then I won’t repeat it.”

onfront Cormac waved his good arm to indicate his room. “And don’t tell
one of the fortunate ones, that I have the means to take care of myse
throughof all, this is all possible because of my brother. He took care of the
e.” fortunes while I was off fighting, and he’s taking care of me now.”

“John is a very good man and always has been.”

sk how “He’s the best brother any man could have. Which only makes it w
hell. Is “Why? Because he is your little brother? You always looked out

when you were younger. He is merely repaying all you did for him
his eyesgrowing up. This is how families ought to be. So, don’t be an obstinate

re quite “Damn it, you are still lecturing me.”

nuch of “And you are still behaving like a four-year-old tyrant. I hear you
and letconstant rage, and your shouting scares his wife and their little girls.

no way to repay their kindness. Are you going to behave, or must I
oing tosense into you?”

re your Cormac laughed. “Good to see you, too. No, I am not going to be
am still angry as hell.”

ion still “Why? Because you were an idiot and got yourself shot *after* the b
ormac’s Waterloo had ended?”

or those “Yes, it was very stupid of me. But that’s only part of it, as w
ion. Heknow.” Cormac shook his head. “They all walk on eggshells around
cannot abide their pity.”

myself, “It is love for you they are expressing, and frustration they can do
his sawto change your situation. Nor can you. But you are alive and, as
roy myinfection does not set in, should be able to resume most of your activiti

“I am a cripple who cannot even pull up his own trousers without h

“You’ll figure out a way to button your falls. Who’s your doctor?”

But he Cormac grunted. “George Farthingale. He’s the best aroun
are meunderstands battle conditions. He treated wounded soldiers in the Per
War.”

you. So “Good, then he ought to know what he is doing. Have you asked h
a one-armed man pulls up his drawers? Perhaps he can also tell you
one-armed man undresses a lady. That’s what has you most frustrate
it?”

ldier to “I take it back—you can show me some pity. I am not likin
bluntness,” Cormac said, cracking a smile. “Women used to flock to
moths to a flame.”

me I’m “I am sure you can convince them to undress for you instead of tal
lf. Firstthe chore yourself. Speaking of which...well, it isn’t really on the topi
familywanted you to be the first to know. I am getting married.”

Cormac struggled to an upright position and gaped at Cain. “A
jesting? Why are you getting married? Who was clever enough to li

orse.” into a compromising position?”

for him “I wasn’t lured.”

n when “You asked her willingly? I don’t believe it. Who are you marrying
orse.” gossip rags reported that you fled London to escape the ladies.”

“I did leave, but they were wrong about the reasons. I ran to Moor
are in a Landing and met someone there. Do you recall my father built a house
That is outside that Cornwall village on the seacoast?”

I knock Cormac nodded. “St. Austell Grange. You called it an
monstrosity.”

have. I “It is big, but not really so bad. I may have been out of sorts
remarked on it. In truth, it has been a haven for me. It is quite splendid
attle at the views are magnificent. It has cliff walks, hidden coves, and a sandy
beach.”

ell you Cormac arched an eyebrow. “Don’t tell me about the house. I’ve
d me. I know about this girl who caught you.”

Cain briefly told him about how he and Henley met.

nothing “Don’t tell me—you fell in love with a mermaid.”

suming Cain’s grin spread wide. “The point is, she almost drowned because
ies.” could not swim. Fortunately, she had the presence of mind to save
help.” One thing led to another, and I asked her to marry me.”

“Hold on, I think you missed a few steps.”

rd and “No, Cor.” He raked a hand through his hair. “You won’t believe it
insular I took one look at her and knew she was meant for me. She’s in London
me now. I hope to bring her around one day soon so you’ll have the chance
im how meet her. She has also suggested I invite you to visit us at the Grange
how are welcome anytime. It will do you a world of good.”

rd, isn’t “Blessed saints, Cain. So you are really going to settle into
bliss?”

g your “Yes, but I’m still me. Flaws and all. The only difference is that she
me like the only woman sharing my bed from this day forward. Consider visiting
at the Grange. The invitation is an open one. Come whenever you like.
king on stay as long as you like.”

ic, but I “I’ll think about it.”

“I hope you do,” Cain said. “That place changed me. Henley changed
are you Lady Hen is what everyone calls her. But she is not one to cluck and fl
are you do her feathers ruffle easily. I want you to meet her, but you have to

yourself up. Is it all right if I bring her around tomorrow?"

Cormac's grin faded. "No, I am not fit company."

ing? The "Are you running a fever?"

"No."

onstone "Thank goodness. Are you contagious?"

use just "Of course not."

"Is there a reason you cannot wash up? Shave that scruff you call absurd attempting to grow on your chin?"

"You are one to talk. Look at you. How does your Lady Hen s when Ibeneath all that hair? And if you dare say she sees into your soul, I an lid, and to vomit."

plendid "I intend to shave the beard off tomorrow. So what do you say? bring her around to meet you? It is important to me, Cor. No one mean want to to me than you."

Cormac cast Cain a wistful smile. "Lady Hen will take my place no

Cain shook his head. "You are a brother to me. She will be my expect I will grow more deeply in love with her each day. But you use shewe've been through the fires of hell together. We are bound to each herself, whether or not we share the same blood. There is ample room in my h both of you."

"All right, damn it. I'll meet her. You know I would not do his, but anyone else."

on with "I know. It means a lot to me."

ance to "Don't get mawkish about it. But do me a favor and keep your vis ge. You I am not back to full strength yet. I'll even shave and wash—how's friendship? But all is not well with me, Cain."

wedded He reached out and patted Cormac's shoulder. "Nor am I well, but something I will have to work out with Hen once we are married."

he'll be "Still suffering those bad dreams?"

iting us Cain nodded. "The horrors of battle haven't left me. In truth, tr like and adjust to peacetime seems to have made them worse. I am haunted b dreams. Dark, frightening visions. I cannot seem to shake them. I wa to share my bed, but how can I ask her when it is not safe and I cou ged me. her?"

uss, nor "Does she know?"

o clean "Not all of it yet. Oh, she understands I do not sleep well, but she

idea how intense these dreams are or how dangerous they can be. I'll tell her about it before we are married because I have to be honest with her.

"What do you think she'll do?"

He shook his head and laughed. "She will look upon it as a challenge. Any other woman would accept sleeping in separate quarters and not the least. But Hen won't. She'll push me to take her into my bed. I will do it once I am certain these nightmares have stopped."

"And if they never do?"

He leaned forward, his expression confident. "They will. Hen will see you going them out eventually."

"I hope so, for your sake. You look happy, Cain. Truly happy."

"I am," he said with a nod. "So will you be when you meet this more woman. Don't fall back into your sulk. I vow, you will know it the moment you set eyes on her...unless you're too drunk to see straight. Do not let your frustration get the better of you."

"Ha! You think this is merely frustration? Have you not heard of Selene and I, Selene wants nothing more to do with me. The thought of being held by another arm... Get it? I no longer have two arms to hold her, and it disgusts her heart for Cain emitted a soft growl. "That is her failing, not yours. You are off without her, as you well know. She would only have made you miserable for whether you came to her with one functioning arm or two."

"You never liked her."

"She is and always has been completely wrong for you. But it is short. Always had poor taste in women. What draws you to these shallow, scintillating beauties anyway?"

"Same reason you were once drawn to them, and not so long ago that it is so easy. I know exactly what they want from me, and it has nothing to do with love. I am a coin purse for them and more than capable of providing the pretty trinkets they desire."

"Expensive trinkets," Cain said.

His friend shrugged. "I can afford it. The point is, they can be bought so easily, and they place no demands on my heart. Still, I will admit Lady Selene hurt me off guard. I knew she would drop me, but I never expected her to do it so quickly. She was quite heartless about it. This is what comes of shallow relations, I suppose. There's no real caring involved. Just an easy way of exchanging money for sex. That's what it boils down to, does it?"

talk to However, I would have stuck with her if the circumstances had been reversed.”

“Because you are honorable, even if you are a dolt at times.”
Cormac laughed again. “I’ll likely continue to be a dolt. I don’t care if I’m the only good woman in my life, especially not now. I would only hurt her badly if I’ll stick to the shallow, scheming vipers for the moment. I like to think I know when it is time for me to open my heart. Who knows if that woman exists for me?”

“She does.” Cain slapped his hands on his thighs and rose to leave. “We good? I’ll bring Hen around to meet you tomorrow. I have business to discuss with your brother right now.”

“What sort of business?”

“Hen and I will tell you tomorrow. It concerns her. Has nothing to do with you.” He strode to the door. “You had better be washed and shaven when we call.”

“So had you. Go away, you arse.”

“Stop scaring your nieces.”

“Gad, get out of here or I am going to throw something at you.”

“It’s good to see you, too.”

He marched down the hall and strode downstairs, feeling better than he’d seen his friend. But Cormac had a long way to go before healing.

What could Cain do to help? He and Hen would return to Moonstone Landing once her situation was resolved. Nor did he expect them to return to London much over the coming year, perhaps only when Parliament was in session.

No, he had to get Cormac to Moonstone Landing.

But how was he to convince his friend to join them?

ding all

OceanofPDF.com

bought

7 Seline

and her to

times of

elegant

isn’t it?

However, I would have stuck with her if the circumstances had been reversed.”

“Because you are honorable, even if you are a dolt at times.”

Cormac laughed again. “I’ll likely continue to be a dolt. I don’t need a good woman in my life, especially not now. I would only hurt her badly. So I’ll stick to the shallow, scheming vipers for the moment. I like to think I’ll know when it is time for me to open my heart. Who knows if the right woman exists for me?”

“She does.” Cain slapped his hands on his thighs and rose to leave. “Are we good? I’ll bring Hen around to meet you tomorrow. I have business to discuss with your brother right now.”

“What sort of business?”

“Hen and I will tell you tomorrow. It concerns her. Has nothing to do with you.” He strode to the door. “You had better be washed and clean-shaven when we call.”

“So had you. Go away, you arse.”

“Stop scaring your nieces.”

“Gad, get out of here or I am going to throw something at you.”

“It’s good to see you, too.”

He marched down the hall and strode downstairs, feeling better now that he’d seen his friend. But Cormac had a long way to go before healing.

What could Cain do to help? He and Hen would return to Moonstone Landing once her situation was resolved. Nor did he expect them to return to London much over the coming year, perhaps only when Parliament was in session.

No, he had to get Cormac to Moonstone Landing.

But how was he to convince his friend to join them?



Chapter Nine

CAIN RETURNED DOWNSTAIRS and was led to the study, where Cormac's awaited him.

"Ah, how did it go with my stubborn brother?" Lord Stockwell led him to one of the wing chairs beside the unlit hearth and settled him in one of the others. "I heard the two of you laughing. Thank you for that. I could do the same, but we are so different in character. We care for each other, but we certainly don't understand each other. It is so frustrating especially at times like these. He is hurting so badly, and I don't know what to say to him."

"He has agreed to see me again tomorrow."

"Good—I think he needs you more than he does me."

"No, John. Don't ever think that. He is giving you a hard time because he knows he can get away with it. But never doubt how important you are to him."

"Thank you." John laughed wryly. "I think I needed to hear that. I think I am stronger than I truly am and can take all he dishes out. I am not. He has always been the strong one in the family, physically and intellectually. Our father was livid when he went off to war. I was the spare and he would have been the one sent off, but Cormac would not hear of it. He thought that I was the brains in the family and needed to be left here to run the Burness holdings."

"You've obviously done a good job."

He shrugged. "Cormac could have done it, too. He's just as clever as I am, only he was too busy chasing the ladies to put his mind to business matters. He went around with the worst sort of ladies, too. Unfortunately, he has no intention of changing his ways."

"I know." Cain winced. "We sowed our wild oats together from before the war and through the war years, but those days are over for me."

"I'm not sorry Lady Seline ended their relation as brutally as she

hope he learned a lesson from it.”

“Even if he had, he would never admit it to you.”

John nodded. “I know—he’s too stubborn and prideful.”

“He’ll come around in his own good time. I am bringing Lady I my betrothed, to meet him tomorrow. He has promised to make presentable. See to it that he does.”

John cast him a genuine smile. “I will make certain he is scrubbed head to toe.”

“Good. I think he responds better to demands than to pity.”

“You know me, Cain. He’s my big brother and I’ve always worked with him. I cannot help but be soft with him.”

“Try to growl at him just a little. Let me know if he needs to be solid kick in the arse. I’m happy to oblige.”

Cormac’s brother laughed. “I won’t hesitate to send word if I need help.”

John was a gentle soul, and so was his wife, Charlotte. In truth, the woman was as timid as a mouse, sometimes irritatingly so. She was a fluttery, easily unsettled sort, and Cain knew that had she been trapped on his beach with the tide coming in, she likely would have drowned.

Indeed, Lady Stockwell and Hen were both gently bred ladies, but where all similarity ended. Hen had a spine to her. Lady Stockwell would have cowered against the rocks and allowed the water to overtake her.

He shook out of the thought and moved on to the urgent business of the bank. When he was done recounting Hen’s situation and the embezzlement, his Bow Street runner had discovered going on with the assistance of the bank’s manager, John was appalled.

He stared at Cain in dismay. “Dear heaven, I must get in touch with the other directors immediately. I dread what else might be going on under our very noses. We could be ruined over this. Who will ever trust us with our funds if word gets out?”

Cain nodded. “The faster it is addressed, the better. But I think you should not keep it quiet. Get ahead of the news, let your depositors know you are ever vigilant and have safeguards in place that helped you to discover the attempted theft. But I strongly suggest you retain Mr. Barrow to dig into your accounts. I think your manager has done no more than petty pilferage since he did. I to now, but you had better make sure of it.”

“I will get on it at once.” John reached over and shook Cain’s hand. “Lady Henley’s losses are not restored by that thieving Stoke, rest assured I will restore the funds out of my own pocket.”

Henley, “No, John. It isn’t necessary. I’ll take care of Hen and her family myself. I’ll make sure those accounts are put out of Stoke’s reach until I can get step down as trustee.”

“Consider it done. And by the way, Lord Justice Arnold happens to be on the bank’s board of directors. If there are any pleadings to be filed, I expect there must be if you wish to remove Lady Henley’s cousin as the sole guardian, I suggest your barrister file them with him. Rest assured, you will get prompt action.”

They both rose, Cain once again assuring Cormac’s brother he would return tomorrow. “I am staying at the Malabar Club for the sake of privacy during your absence. Hen and her cousin are at my house. Send word to me there should you need me. The club’s steward will know how to reach me.”

“Thank you, I will.”

Cain was pleased with all he had accomplished in a morning and looked forward to seeing Hen next. He intended to take her to her father’s solicitor to make certain they understood the terms of the trust, and they would have to discuss with this man how to prepare the proper documents for Hen’s weasel of a cousin to sign. Cain’s soon-to-be wife was no peahen, and he wanted her to be a part of the discussion concerning her future and that of her sisters.

He walked through the London streets with a purposeful stride and reached Malvern House as the distant church bells chimed the twelve o’clock of the hour. “Dinsmore, where is Lady Henley? Would you ask her to join me for a study?”

“At once, Your Grace,” his butler said. “She and Mrs. Landers are under our outdoors, enjoying the garden on this very pleasant day.”

“Even better. I’ll go to her.” Cain strode to the parlor and through the double doors that opened onto a terrace overlooking the garden. Hen and her cousin were seated in a shady spot on the lawn, a blanket spread under them and each of them with a book in hand.

Hen scrambled to her feet when she saw him. “Did your Bow Street runner have any news for us? Oh, forgive me.” She grinned impishly. “How are you...my darling?”

He laughed. “Quite well, now that I am with you.”

and. “If Her cousin now got to her feet. “I am sure the two of you would assured I speak in private. I’ll—”

ly. Just “Stay, Prudence,” he said. “This news concerns you as well.” She inhaled lightly. “Very well.”

him to Both ladies now stared at him, obviously eager to learn what happened.

o be on “My runner uncovered everything,” he said. “I never quite appreciated, as I how good the man was at his job until now. He’s already discovered as her account held by the earl and traced the source of its funding to your will accounts. The months of payments which should have gone to each went into this secret pocket of his instead.”

would Hen was listening with avid interest. “What happens now?”

propriety “I know the chairman of the bank’s board of directors and have told you him of what has been going on. He is about to sack the bank manager will offer a lighter sentence in exchange for information against the earl will also dig through every account the bank holds to make certain the looked no other victims.”

icator to He glanced from Hen to her cousin. “Your accounts will now be have the under the immediate control of Lord Stockwell. He is the brother of my re-sign friend, the Marquess of Burness, and is also the bank’s chairman. From that of any moment on, no one will be permitted to touch the Killigrew accounts him.”

de and “Hoorah!” Prudence cheered. “That weasel will have a surprise come o’clock him.”

e in my Cain nodded. “I’m next on my way to see your father’s solicitor, know he was handling your affairs and you have faith in his abilities. He seated you to come with me to review the terms of the trust with him. I’ll review yours too, Prudence. But if you don’t mind, I would like to go through it with Hen. There are other matters we need to discuss privately with and her solicitor.”

r them, “Of course. I cannot thank you enough for all you are doing,” Prudence replied. “I shall be perfectly comfortable awaiting both of you in my magnificent house.”

ow are Hen ran upstairs to grab her bonnet, gloves, and reticule, and then came back down. She stared up at him, her big eyes filled with wonder as she saw Cain stood at the front door waiting for his barouche to be brought.

l rather “Did you have a chance to see your friend? How is he?”

“I’ll tell you once we are on our way. Ah, good. Here’s the carriage. It was a sleek, polished black conveyance with the Malvern crest embossed on the doors and an open top that was kept drawn back on pleasant days. It could be drawn forward to provide some shelter for the riders in cold or rainy weather.

He settled his large frame in the carriage beside her. “You are from a secret place, aren’t you?”

“Is it wise for you to be seen with me just yet? Won’t it tip off your cousin?”

He nodded. “Your account is secure by now. Lord Stockwell immediately summoned his board and has gone down to the bank himself to see the manager and have him taken into custody for criminal charges. Rest assured, but the board members will act swiftly. It is their investment, their entire fortune. He put at risk by the actions of your cousin and their untrustworthy manager were.” She listened attentively as he took a moment to explain how the bank was structured.

“The directors reap the profits, but they also are fully exposed to any losses. If depositors start taking out their funds, they will all be ruined. So if it is a matter of their downfall or my cousin’s,” she said, “then the next logical step, “they will see my cousin destroyed.”

“Do not feel bad for him, Hen. I can see that soft look in your eyes. Remember, he gave not a care for you or any of your relations. It is time to get the news of our arrival to start leaking out. I want him to feel the noose around his neck, as he will feel it when he learns you are enscorped.”

Hen. Malvern House. You look lovely, by the way. Have I mentioned it yet? I’d like to ask you to bear. Ridiculously handsome, of course. But I thought you were going to have a shave.”

“I will, first thing tomorrow morning. You may not recognize me when you turn up at Malvern House. By the way, Lady Fielding is hosting a audience party tomorrow evening. I expect there will be an invitation awaiting you when we return from our errands this afternoon. I’ll make myself presentable before that. I may even cut my hair.”

“Stop,” she teased. “You are making me swoon.”

He winked at her, but quickly sobered. “I ought to warn you that your weasel cousin will likely be at Lady Fielding’s.”

Her eyes widened. "Are we to confront him at her party?"

"No, Hen. All you need to do is behave like a woman in love. I passed informally announcing our betrothal there."

"But how can we when we need his consent? He'll never give it."

"By this time tomorrow, it will not matter whether he does or not. If you and your accounts will be out of his hands. In truth, if he has a broken head, he will be running out of London as fast as he can."

"What of his guardianship over my sisters?"

"They will be out of his reach as well," Cain replied. "This is why you must see your father's solicitor. He will take care of the trust details."

"What details?"

"Stoke's designation of me as his successor and then his immediate resignation. That covers the financial assets. We shall then pay a call on the wealth solicitor, who will also be set to work."

"On the matter of the transfer of guardianship? What will that involve?"

"It will require a judge's blessing."

"But that could take months," she said. "Oh, I am not concerned for my sake, since I will turn twenty and one soon, but what of Phoebe and the others? I've heard how some of these judges appoint their friends, who may be worse than Stoke. At least he only stole the interest. What if they appoint someone other than you?"

He arched an eyebrow. "Seriously, Hen? Do you doubt the extent of my power? I have a very long reach. Not even the most crooked judges would dare defy me. And what is Stoke to bribe them with now that your accounts are out of his reach?"

She groaned. "It is a good thing I like you. Well, actually...it is a good thing you like me. We would have been lost without you."

"I suppose finding you gorgeous helped persuade me to help you when I cast her a wry smile. "But I like to think I would have come around dinner helped a neighbor. Mr. Barrow, that Bow Street man I retained to investigate your situation, said something that struck me as deceptively profound."

She turned eagerly to listen. "What did he tell you?"

"He is a modest man and gruff in appearance, but that belies his intelligence. He is best in his field, intuitive and experienced. It is not his hefty fees he is paid that spur him on. It is the ability to help those who cannot otherwise help themselves. He calls them little victories. But t

not little to the people he helps. Nor to all whose lives are bettered but will besomeone wicked is gotten out of the way.”

She nodded. “I understand perfectly. His accomplishment spread a ripple on the water. His information has saved me and my sisters, Protected our elderly maiden aunts. Well, it was not just him. You had a brain in everything to do with our turn of fortune.”

“It is not done yet. But we are underway.”

“Yes, and I must admit it feels good. But you know what the best reason why we are here is?”

“No. Enlighten me.”

She cast him another grin. “Since you have been so efficient in intervening and mediated down the Killigrew family villain, it may not be necessary for you to do anything on my beard.”

He kissed her on the tip of her nose. “No, I think my woolly bear does not have a clue? I have a question for you. I need to talk to you about. It concerns us and our marriage.”

for my “You are not smiling, so it must be something serious.” She smiled lightly. “Of course, I should have understood. It may not be necessary for me to marry you. You’ve been quite efficient in saving us all.”

He took hold of her hand. “Only time will tell if I have been successful in wresting control from Stoke. As for our marriage, I have no intention of begging out, even if he capitulates this very day. It is completely within my power to will dare you to think so, and I hope never to give you cause to doubt me on that point. My offer is sincere. My desire to marry you has never wavered. But you must know I am taking on more than you realize.”

a good “How so?”

“We’ll talk about it later. We’re here at the Inns of Chancery and the Court of Requests. My father’s solicitor and his own were merely across the courtyard from each other, having established their bureaus in the various buildings connected to the old judicial inns.

” They went to her solicitor first.

“Good day, Mr. Garrick,” Hen said, and quickly introduced the two of them. As soon as they were led into his office, Cain recounted all that had been going on.

se who “I knew I did not like him the moment he sauntered into my office. He declared he was taking control of the Killigrew estate and guardianship of the children.”

because the girls," Garrick said. "He did not even ask to review the terms of the trusts before he sacked me and left. I am at your service, Your Grace. As for what you need to be rid of that scoundrel, I can have the desired audience drawn up today appointing you as his successor. I'll have his resignation ready today as well."

"There is one more thing I need you to prepare on behalf of Lady Dorothea and that is a list of her terms for our betrothal contract," Cain said.

part of Hen laughed. "That is simple. I have no demands. Whatever you give me is up to you."

"Fine, then I will advise my solicitor to give you everything. I'm not taking carriages, an obscenely large allowance."

to shave "You are the most irritating duke I have ever met. You cannot give me everything."

lays are "Why not? Much of it is mine to freely bestow, except for the crown and our properties, which must go to our eldest son. Provision must also be made for our other children. However, once I am gone, I will not have you dependent on anyone for your comforts."

sary to She cast him the softest smile. "What would I need if I did not depend on you?"

successful at He was not surprised by her response. He knew she wanted him to give up his wealth. For this reason, he wanted to give her all that was his to control. "Ignore her, Mr. Garrick. First, make certain the betrothal contract states she is to keep control over all assets she brings to the marriage. You may do whatever you wish with the rest you will inherit from me for charitable endeavors or whatever else you like. I know you'll do it wisely. Besides, if our sons are anything like me in my youth, they'll be kept under tight control. I was a brash idiot, and I fully expect they will be no different."

surprising "I'm sure you were always wonderful. Your father adored you," she turned to Garrick. "Do your best. Come up with something fair to me. Keep in mind, my needs are modest."

to men. They left him and crossed the courtyard to pay a call on Cain's secretary, Mr. Chiswell. His bureau was far grander than Garrick's, and he had a large army of clerks at his beck and call. "Your Grace, do come in," he said, immediately ushering them into his rather grand private office.

tip over "I won't keep you long," Cain said, noting others were waiting to

of their busy man. This was another advantage of being a duke. Appointments would matter. He had only to walk in and he would jump to the head of the queue. In this instance, he took advantage of the privilege.

He introduced Hen to Chiswell and quickly told him all that was going on. "Stoke needs to be discharged as guardian, and I must be appointed in his place. The barristers to which you refer your trial matters have been discussed with the judges. Get them to work on the petitions right away. He needs to be removed from all trusts concerning the Killigrew family. If they can get the documents in front of Lord Justice Arnold, have them do it."

"Of course, Your Grace," Chiswell replied. "Need I point out, Your Grace, the obvious conflict of interest, since he is a director of—"

"That is Stoke's problem. Let him try to have Lord Arnold's decision overturned. Who do you think the other justices will side with? A distinguished colleague or a thief?"

Chiswell cleared his throat. "Yes, I see your point. We should have the petitions ready by the end of the week."

Cain arched an eyebrow. "Have them ready by end of today."

The man's jaw dropped. "Please, Your Grace. It isn't possible."

"Make it possible. They need to be in Lord Arnold's hands by tomorrow morning at the latest. Send your clerks out to take affidavits from Mr. Street runner and Lord Stockwell. He and his board of directors are not clearly on this matter as we speak. Lady Henley and her cousin, Mrs. Lande. Hen, also willing to attest to his villainous conduct."

"But this cannot be done without his knowledge. No judge will apply the law to him without giving him the opportunity to plead his case."

"He has no case," Cain said. "He and his wife have been stealing the will be these accounts for months. They will run from London the moment they served papers. Have him temporarily removed, if that is the best you can do."

She *ex parte*. Just make certain I am temporarily appointed to replace him as guardian over Lady Henley for a few days, just long enough to get my consent for us to marry. After that, we can go through whatever steps are necessary to permanently put all the Killigrew sisters, as well as their small and elderly aunts, under my care."

Chiswell mopped his brow. "It will be done."

Cain nodded. "There is also the matter of a betrothal contract between me and Lady Henley. You will receive a list of terms from her solicitor."

did not. As for my terms...there are none. You are to give her whatever she asks for. In Chiswell's eyes widened in alarm. "Your Grace, perhaps something you and I ought to discuss privately."

"I can assure you, Lady Henley wants nothing from me. But my father has pointed out that you give her a generous portion upon my demise, and none of the trust. She is to have full control of her inheritance. My Moonstone Islands and her assets are to be included in that portion. In addition, her assets are to remain her own and in her control during our marriage."

Hen was frowning at him again. "Can this contract be amended after we are married?"

The solicitor nodded.

"Good, because the duke and I may need to make changes at a later date." She turned to Cain. "You have done so much for me already. And I thank you for enjoying tossing your wealth and status around. But I do not have the taste and hope never to develop them. At the moment, I cannot imagine myself retiring anywhere but in Moonstone Landing. Thank you for taking care of this in our contract."

"Of course, Hen."

"But don't overindulge me. You know this is not why I wish to marry you. And I hope you also know that as between us, there need not be anything in writing. Whatever you ask, whatever I can do to help you, are yours."

The duke spared a glance at Chiswell, who was regarding them in the same gaping-mouth manner as Garrick had. One would think Cain and Hen had known each other their entire lives, but it was not yet even two weeks. The trust they had in each other was remarkable, but she made it easy for her.

He had never warmed up to anyone this quickly.

However, he was no fool, and understood human nature quite well.

And Hen did not understand how she had gained his trust in so many ways over their short acquaintance, ways that revealed her character. Not only the kindness and sacrifice she showed toward her sisters, but

others as well. It was in the respectful way his workers had spoken

That she even acknowledged them revealed her considerate nature. Even being worried about her own funds, she still saw to the needs of those who had fallen on hard times.

cs.” It was in these small gestures that his feelings for her solidified. This bread delivered to a hungry family, or a smile and a moment to chat local. Others, like her weasel cousin and his wife, would sneer at those wishes in stature and deem them beneath their notice.

of it in The opposite was true with Hen.

standing She had shown her kindness again just now in her willingness to stay. That was hers with him. Of course, the law would deem her property his after their marriage, but even if they were not married, if he was in need, she would help him out.

How could he not view her as perfect and want to protect her with all his might?

er date.” He had never trusted a woman to this extent before. It made him think of what an idiot he had been over Lady Alexandra, a woman not to be trusted. He’d known it even as he fawned over her as a foolish young lady, as so many others to this day, had sought him out for his wealth and title, nothing more.

Hen looked at the man he was.

She liked him as he was.

to marry She also liked to stand on her own two feet. The more he did for her, the more uncomfortable he seemed to make her.

you, is She remained pensive as they rode back to Malvern House. The roads were congested and their carriage moved slowly, but Cain was in no hurry. Their time together to come to an end. “What are you thinking, Hen?”

and Hen “How much you’ve accomplished in one day. It isn’t even four weeks, yet and you’ve managed to stir up at least a dozen hornet nests. You’ve got bank directors, top solicitors, top barristers, and probably the entire Bench hopping to your instructions. And you are doing all this for me. I don’t know how to repay you.”

“You already have.”

ny little She dismissed the comment with a shake of her head.

It was “There’s something more I need to talk to you about.” He took her hand. “I suppose this is as good a time as any to discuss my situation. You need to know this before we are married...although knowing you, I don’t think you will be deterred. Marriage to me will not be easy.”

se who She regarded him in puzzlement.

“Hen, I am not well. We’ve briefly touched upon it, but it is time to talk about it properly.”

ed—theknew everything. I do not refer to my physical strength. Obviously, I
: with athrough the war physically unscathed, nothing more than a few scars.
e lessersoul was damaged. Quite badly. I am always restless... I'm not sure
how to explain it. I do not sleep at night.”

“I gathered as much the first day I met you. You work yourself
hare allpoint of exhaustion in the hope you'll be too tired for dreams.”

is upon “They haunt me, Hen. They aren't merely bad dreams. I have no
ed, sheover when they come on, but when they do, I cannot make it thro
night without thrashing about violently. It feels as though I am being
1 all hisin a grave and buried alive. I don't know how to make this feeling
overtakes me sometimes in my waking hours, but usually I can ma
ough tothen. But I find myself choking, struggling to catch my breath.”

ever to “Cain, I'm so sorry.”

h. That “I've situated you in the duchess's chambers, and this is where yo
lth andremain after we are married. I'm not sure this is even enough of
distance for you. It is possible I walk in my sleep.”

“Have you ever done so?” she asked.

“Not that I am aware. But the duchess's bedchamber has been emp
her, thenow. I don't know what I'll do once I am back in my quarters and yo
the room beside mine. You had better keep our adjoining door locked.”

streets “Keeping you out?”

urry for “It must be this way,” Cain said. “At least for now. I'll still come
every night because I don't think I can keep my hands off you. E
o'clockcannot let me fall asleep in your bed. I have to get away from you, a
ou havemust be diligent in keeping that protective barrier between us.”

King's “It feels so wrong.”

I don't “I know. I want so badly to wake up after a peaceful night and fi
sleeping in my arms. I'd love to see your morning smile and the glow
eyes when you first open them. But it would destroy me if I found yo
bruised because of something I had done. This is how our marriage ha
er handI'll still be with you, but only while I am awake.”

. I want Tears formed in her eyes.

I don't He caressed her cheek. “It won't be so bad. Most *ton* couples
same. In truth, most of them see each other as little as possible, v
awake or sleeping.”

me you She cast him a smile of encouragement. “We will work on it.”

made it “Don’t expect miracles. All right? This problem isn’t going to ma
But mydisappear. For all I know, it could get worse. And I vow, I will lock r
I knowagainst *you* if you dare crawl into my bed to test it out while I am sle
will never have a moment’s rest if I cannot trust you to be careful. I
f to theme you will never do this, Hen.”

“You have my word,” she said in all earnestness. “But can you p
controlme one thing in return?”

ugh the “If it is in my power.”

g tossed “Can you promise me that we shall always live under the same roo
stop. It
image it

OceanofPDF.com

ou must
a safe

ty until
u are in
”

to you
but you
and you

ind you
in your
our face
s to be.

do the
whether

“Don’t expect miracles. All right? This problem isn’t going to magically disappear. For all I know, it could get worse. And I vow, I will lock *my* door against *you* if you dare crawl into my bed to test it out while I am sleeping. I will never have a moment’s rest if I cannot trust you to be careful. Promise me you will never do this, Hen.”

“You have my word,” she said in all earnestness. “But can you promise me one thing in return?”

“If it is in my power.”

“Can you promise me that we shall always live under the same roof?”

OceanofPDF.com



Chapter Ten

CAIN WAS NOT certain he could make that promise to Hen. To reside under the same roof? Of course, he wanted this. But not if it would hurt her.

She was not happy when he refused to make her that promise.

“I do not say it lightly,” he tried to explain, but could see he was irritating her. “I will try my best to keep us together.”

“As will I, even if I have to sleep in a medieval suit of armor. We will remain under the same roof, Cain. I do not want our marriage to fall apart.”

“Blessed saints, it never will. I will never break my wedding vows.”

He returned her to Malvern House, but remained only long enough to check the salver on the table in the entry hall. He needed to be certain there was no urgent message waiting for him. He found an invitation from Lady Fielding for her party.

It pleased him.

Hen caught him smiling. “Word certainly gets around fast. I suppose you will not be joining us for supper tonight or tomorrow, then?”

“Perhaps not tonight. There’s still much to do. But I am invited as a guest to Lady Fielding’s party. Of course, that guest will be you.”

“Oh, I am not certain I have a suitable gown to wear. I did not know how foolish of me. But Phoebe might have packed one for me.”

“If she hasn’t, then go to your modiste right away. Have her put a new gown on my account. Promise me you will do this, Hen.”

She bristled. “Let’s just not make promises to each other, all right? I will take care of my gown for Lady Fielding’s affair. I am not yet your wife. I don’t like to be thought of as your... I don’t know. It does not feel right.”

He could see she was still aching over his refusal to promise her a permanent marriage. But he was not going to lie to her. Nor would he ever allow himself to become a danger to her.

She stiffened as he leaned over to kiss her on the cheek.

He sighed and kissed her anyway. “I’ll see you tonight if I finish with my work.”

ugly business earlier than expected. If not, I'll come by first thing tomorrow.

He wanted to stop by the bank to see if Lord Stockwell needed his services. He would be closing to the public shortly, not that any doors would ever open to him. Dukes were not *the public*.

The guards were locking up just as he arrived. "Your Grace," the man said, immediately allowing him entrance. "Lord Stockwell and several members of the board's members are in his office. He told me to bring you straight up to his study when you come by."

The man quickly secured the doors behind them and escorted him up the marble stairs to the private offices.

Cain noticed four directors in addition to Cormac's brother seated around a seated man who had a frightened look on his face and could be the bank manager. Also in the room were two clerks seated behind desks set up in the corner, no doubt to prepare the necessary affidavits to be taken to Cain's solicitor.

Lord Stockwell made quick introductions as he strode in.

Cain was familiar with most of these men.

"How far have you gotten with this cur?" He posed the question to the directors present.

"We were just getting started," Lord Easterly, one of the older gentlemen, replied. "But he does not appear to want to cooperate."

"Is that so?" Cain kicked the chair out from under the manager, causing the stunned man to tumble to the floor. He then grabbed the manager by the lapels and dragged him upright. "Let me be clear about this, for you may think... far worse treatment in prison if you do not cooperate fully with us. You tell these lords what you have stolen from their depositors, what Lord Easterly has stolen from his family, and whoever else assisted you in these thefts. If you omit any detail, I shall personally see you hanged, drawn, and quartered. Are we clear?"

The man nodded, his face now ashen and the sly gleam in his eyes extinguished.

Cain knew he had shocked the directors as well, for these were gentlemen of a cozy and probably regarded him as mad.

Well, let them all think he was a little mad. He did not mind playing the role of devil in this situation. After all, he still looked the part.

As the directors were about to resume questioning the manager,

Barrow.” A young guard who had led Cain upstairs suddenly hurried back in. “My help. Ithe said, addressing all of them but settling his gaze on Cain, “Lord Stockwell close to the door asking to be let in.”

They all looked to Cain.

The porter He smiled. “I will deal with him.”

One of the The manager gasped.

It should “Cain, dear lord.” Lord Easterly hurried out after him. “You’re not to...”

It is up the Cain arched an eyebrow. “No, I am not going to kill him. As to anything else, I give you no promises.”

He was standing He walked out with the guard, knowing he’d left these men worried only because of what he meant to do. In fact, he intended to do absolutely nothing.

He was writing “Have you let him in?” he asked the young man.

It is to be “No, Your Grace. He is standing on the steps. I haven’t unlocked the doors. We have a strict protocol at the bank not to open them after we

“Good. Just leave him standing there. Do not respond to his knocking or shouts. He’ll get the message soon enough. No one is to get inside the bank. Lord Stockwell authorizes it. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I am clear on that, Your Grace. I have taken the liberty of informing the gentlemen, the night guards on Lord Stockwell’s behalf. They came on duty with the bank doors closed, and they are all here now.” The guard straightened up proudly. “I will be staying, too. Until matters settle, it is wise to keep everyone here by his or her post.”

The man will get The man was young and affable in nature, but Cain was concerned that he was not up to the task of supervising others, especially those senior guards. Lord Stockwell had worked here before this young man was even born.

He left. If If others were involved in the manager’s misdeeds, was it not likely that they had taken place after hours and guards were involved? These conspirators would be scrambling to cover their tracks.

In his eyes Cain kicked himself for not thinking to bring in his Bow Street runner.

But this reminded him—Barrow had told him about a source at the bank. One of the gentlemen There were a few clerks and tellers still finishing up downstairs. Was any of them his source?

During the The young man cleared his throat, his manner suddenly serious as he spoke in a low voice. “Your Grace, rest easy. I am not a fool. Mr. Barrow contacted me, not an hour ago and told me what to look out for. Do not let my ease

lords,” and jovial manner deceive you. I am on alert. And do you see that guake is at there? His name is Mick. He is Mr. Barrow’s best man. Between us making note of everyone employed here as they make their way out.”

Cain was going to give Barrow a hefty bonus for this.

He patted the young man on the shoulder. “I ought to have kn eases my mind greatly. There are clerks and tellers still here. Is there t going way out for them? And is it also being guarded?”

The man nodded.

nything “Good, show it to me. I’ll take my leave as well.” Cain went nex solicitor’s office to check on his progress.

d about “The barrister has the pleadings drawn up and is merely await affidavits,” Chiswell said. “But he tells me Lord Justice Arnold will r this matter because it would give the appearance of impropriety.”

ked the “Lord protect us from honest judges,” Cain muttered. “Does close.” understand how important it is to his own interest in the bank?”

s or his “He fully understands, and this is why he will recuse himself. : unless arranged for one of his colleagues to hear the matter tomorrow mornin

“And then what?”

alerting “And then nothing, Your Grace. The presiding judge will ma hen the decision on the facts presented. Hopefully, he will rule quickly. But ghtened expect a miracle. The judicial system is a process, and you are also ask o watch the Earl of Stoke, a peer of the realm, to be removed of his authority c own family. Not only removed, but removed without notice to him he was commoners have the right to defend themselves from such allegation ds who peer, he has all this and more. He will exert his privilege and avc punishment.”

ly these “We’ll see about that.”

; would “Your Grace!” Chiswell said. “It is obvious this man is a bounde villain, but there is only so much the law can do. You cannot mete o unners. own justice. It will destroy your life as well as his. What would Lady ik. say? Do you think she wants you to violate the law on her behalf? Pro Vas one against one of her own relations, no less?”

“Calm down, Chiswell. I am not going to murder him, so you c he kept wringing your hands. Just keep the pressure on him. That is all I need ame by do.”

y smile Cain walked out, needing air.

ard over But the air was damp and carried the scent of rotted fish off the T
we areThe skies were now overcast and threatening rain.

Having set everything in motion, he knew he ought to simply
Chiswell, Lord Stockwell, and Mr. Barrow to attend to the business I
own. Itout for them. They were all honest, competent men.

a back He decided to return to Malvern House and share a quiet supper w
and her cousin. However, his demons were working themselves up
him. He needed to walk off his anger and frustration first.

t to his He hadn't walked far before a carriage drew up alongside him and
to match his pace. A beautiful young woman popped her head
ing thewindow. "Cain, darling. I thought that was you. I had no idea you we
not takein town. Why did you not send word to me?"

"Should I have, Alexandra? I doubt your husband would have appr
he not She shrugged. "Fenwick's off at his country estate mucking ab
stables with his horses. The man hasn't touched me in months. All he
He hasabout are the Newmarket races. I vow, he cares more for his horses
g." does me. What are you doing this evening? Have supper with me tonig

"No, I'm busy."

ake his The rain began to fall, merely intermittent droplets at first, but
do notturning into a more persistent patter. "Do not be a fool," Lady Al
king forsaid. "Hop in before you are drenched. I'll drop you off at Malvern H
over hisis on my way. Why are you so reluctant? It is only a carriage ride. A
1. Evenyou know how much fun you and I can have in a carriage." She cas
is. As aseductive smile. "All you have to do is ask nicely."

oid any The rumble of thunder sounded in the distance and the rain be
pound down on him with force.

"All right. Just the ride, Alexandra." He had to return to Malvern
r and aand patch things up with Hen. He did not like leaving things as the
ut yourbetween them. But how could he have promised to keep them under th
Henleyroof? He wanted it, of course. Was that also not made clear to her?

ceeding She had to understand his concern.

He could also bring her up to date on all that had transpired since h
an stopher side. Having set all in motion necessary for Stoke's demise, all th
l you toto do was wait for his downfall to occur. Hen would appreciate his I
her abreast of all that was going on. It was obvious she did not like to
out of things.

James. Alexandra squeezed close to him, regaining his attention. "Will you talk to me? You seem miles away. That is very rude of you."

allow "Forgive me, but I have a lot on my mind."

ie'd set She cast him a practiced pout. "You are a beast. Can you not think while I am beside you? There was a time when you could not keep Henhands off me. Or your mouth."

inside "That time has long since passed."

She was now almost atop Cain, rubbing her perfumed body against his. "It doesn't have to be. Touch me again. Here. Now."

out the She tried to sit astride him, but he stopped her. "Do not embarrass yourself, Alexandra. I mean it. Our time has passed."

She began to sulk. "But I am so bored. Why have you suddenly turned prudish? Is this not the ideal situation for you? A woman to pleasure you and they understand your needs and asks for no commitment?"

He thinks He ignored the question.

than he She frowned at him, now giving him the silent treatment as she pretended to gaze out the carriage window. There was not much to see other than a swirling mist and still-pelting rain. The streets were mostly empty and quickly everyone had run for cover to wait out the passing downpour.

Alexandra It would pass quickly, as most of these sudden deluges did.

ouse. It True to form, it was not long before the rain stopped and the sun broke through between the gaps in the clouds. "Well, it has been a joy to see you with him, Alexandra," he said, not bothering to hide his sarcasm. "I shall walk home of the way."

egan to "Don't be ridiculous. I'll drop you off at home."

Probably not the best idea, but he was not going to argue with her. Housewoman had a jealous nature and was already in a pique because he was a werewitch who wished to serve as her stud bull. To make a thing of dropping him off would only rile her further.

In any event, Hen was unlikely to be standing by the window watching carriages roll by. His thoughts remained on Hen and what he'd left going to say to her.

ney had "I heard the oddest thing from a friend of mine as I was riding in the carriage a short while ago," Alexandra said, breaking the silence and shifting her focus back to him once again.

Her hand drifted casually onto his thigh.

you not He drew it off. "Stop it, Alexandra."
"Are you not interested in what I heard?"
"No."

ok of me Lord, she was pouting again.

ep your "Then it must be true. Are you betrothed to a little sparrow? Or
wren? Some sort of bird. Ah, I have it—a little hen. Lady Henley Kill
Alexandra laughed. "That's it. Lady Hen. How droll. How did she trap
ist him. "She did not trap me. I asked her and she accepted."

"Of course—who would pass up an offer from a duke? She must be
ibarrassclever than she seems. What tricks of seduction did she use to pleasure
mindlessly as to elicit a proposal of marriage from you? Perhaps I
rned something I can learn from her. Is she demanding anything from you?"

ou who "Nothing at all."

"Do not be absurd. Why else were you walking out of your sol
bureau looking so morose?"

etended "Alexandra, it is none of your business."

han the "Why will you not admit she trapped you?" She leaned again
ow, asrubbing her breasts against his chest. "You do not owe her your loyalty
pleasure you. You used to like the taste of me."

"That was in the past."

urst out "It doesn't have to be. It is a pity, really. You and I ought to have
again, the ones to marry. Fenwick turned out to be a bit of a limp rag. He
the rest please me, and I no longer please him. Ah, well. It really should have
you for me. But you went off to war, and I wasn't going to wait around
you. Nor did you bother to ask. I had to look out for myself."

er. The He nudged her gently away. "You would not have waited for me if
did not had begged. We both know it. Have your driver stop here. I'll walk the
would the way to Malvern House."

"Not on your life. Are you afraid to be seen with me? Worried you
ow and then will not believe you when you tell her nothing happened between
he was sent is all over you."

Bollocks.

he park "I am not worried about her. She trusts me." He certainly hoped
loser to Alexandra was going to make this innocent ride look as bad as possible.
He should have walked and taken the drenching.

"Oh dear," Alexandra said as her carriage drew up in front of his

“Is that your little Hen peering out the parlor window? Shall I kiss you to see what she does?”

He refused to follow her gaze. If Hen happened to be looking... No, she would not be looking out onto the street when she had to be occupied with finding a suitable gown to wear for Lady Fielding’s party?

“Goodbye, Alexandra. Thank you for the ride.”

She blew him a kiss. “I’m happy to have you ride me anytime.”

He stifled a groan and marched into the house.

“I’ve decided to stay for supper,” he told his butler. “Where is Henley?”

“Right here,” Hen said, walking out of the visitor’s parlor with a look on her face that revealed she had indeed seen him stepping out of Alexander’s carriage.

He was not going to apologize or try to explain when he’d done wrong. “Come into the garden with me and I’ll tell you what has happened to me, far.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Seems quite a bit has been happening.”

He ignored the comment, and also ignored the fact he recalled Alexandra’s expensive perfume. He recounted the progress made at the bank. “Lord Stockwell and several other directors are now interrogating the manager. Mr. Barrow has several of his runners inside the bank as we’ve been told. They’ll keep an eye out for any activity that appears suspicious. My son has retained his top barrister to bring suit to remove Stoke as your guest.”

However, he has made it clear to me that this may take a little more time than I expected.”

She nodded. “I knew this. You were the one who thought you could throw your weight around and skirt the judicial process. What you’ve accomplished in a day is amazing. But I never expected a miracle. No, you can’t undo the laws of England.”

She turned away to stare at the renowned Malvern House flower garden which had been supervised by his mother when she was alive and well, so, formaintained by his competent garden staff. He did not want to be fighting with Hen amid these vibrant red, gold, and pink blossoms.

He did not want to fight with Hen anywhere.

“Nor do you owe me a wedding, Cain,” she said, the heartbreak in her voice.

you and evident in her voice. “That woman who dropped you off is quite beautiful.”

“Yes, she is. But men are trinkets to her, and I have never been honored by her, whyever be anyone’s trinket. It was raining. I was about to get drenched. I was not even with the supreme mistake of accepting her offer of a ride home.”

“Was it a mistake?”

He groaned. “As I said, a supreme one. Nothing happened, Hen. I’m not even married, by the way. Even if she were not, I would have no interest in her.”

“She blew you a kiss.”

He gave a short, mirthless laugh. “Done purposely to rile you. I know Lady Alexandra is not a nice person, I can assure you. She takes pleasure in fomenting discord. Obviously, it worked. Turn around and look at me.”

She sighed and did as he asked, her expression still wary.

“I promise you, nothing happened between me and Alexandra. I was just a chance encounter and a lift home.”

She nodded. “If you say so, then I believe you.”

He cast her a wry smile. “That sounded pathetic, Hen.”

She shook her head and this time returned his smile, but it was not genuine and still obviously filled with doubt. “I do believe you.”

He placed his hands on her shoulders and stared down at her. “The bank are you upset? Is it because of our earlier discussion? I want us to be together. Lord help me, I crave it. More than you can ever imagine.”

“So do I,” she said softly.

He kissed her lightly on the cheek. “Your delicious body is what drew me to you first, but your heart is what led me to propose to you. It is the most beautiful thing imaginable. This is what enralls me most about you, this lack of cynicism. Your nature is to be honest and kind. My father taught me that while being a duke has its privileges, it also comes with responsibilities. Marrying a woman like Alexandra would only add to my burdens. She would plague me with her need for attention and in-

demands. But marrying you will be a delight. You’ll make me proud every day.”

Her genuine smile returned. “I wasn’t jealous of her so much because I was uncertain. It’s just that everything has been happening so quickly. You move with the speed of lightning, and I move like a snail.”

“We are a good fit. You slow me down, and I force you out of your shell.”

iful.” comfortable shell.”

r shall I “Yes, I suppose so. It is a good thing. I need to be challenged be
I madethink I can be too complacent at times.”

“You will never have that with me. I move like a rampaging bull.
matter how idiotic or irritating my behavior, I will never be unfaithful
. She isMy idiocy does not extend to that. I will never seek another woman
her.” pleasure, and that is a sacred promise to you.”

She groaned. “Now I feel like an utter shrew.”

1. Lady “Don’t. I knew Alexandra would try something, but I climbed in a
sure inAll I wanted to do was get out of the rain. She wasted no time in jum
” over me. Next time, I’ll walk.”

“And get drenched? I know you will hold to your vows just as I w
t was ato mine. Perhaps I was a little jealous, but not because I did not trus
was jealous of how familiar she was with you, and how she knew yo
enough to understand exactly how to rile you. Not that I would ever
rile you. But we are so new to each other. I look forward to the day
a weakunderstand you that well.”

“It will happen in time,” he said. “You should have heard some
en whyridiculous breakfast conversations my parents used to have with each
share amy mother telling my father not to eat the strawberry jam because he
break out in hives. He’d deny it even as the red splotches began to pop
face. *They’re not hives*, he would insist. She’d call him stubborn. He
rew meher meddlesome. They loved each other to pieces.”

weetest Hen laughed. “Yes, I hope we are just like that.” She grew pensiv
of guilemore as their laughter died down.

ght me “What are you thinking about now, Hen?”

es with “Speaking of your parents just made me think further about your
to myHow thoughtless of me never to ask. But somehow you struck me
cessantmythical being come down from Olympus to join our ranks. Do yo
d everybrothers and sisters? Your father never mentioned anyone but you.”

He nodded. “I have a half-sister who is much older than me. We sl
uch assame mother. Jennifer is married and lives in Aberdeen with her S
u knowhusband. He’s a good man, and they are happy together. They h
e are inchildren. This is one of the things I am most sorry about for myself, I
parents did not have the joy of knowing I was to marry you. My mot
of youralready passed when my father started building St. Austell Grange. I’

he had the chance to meet you. I know from his letters how much he craves your company and that of your sisters.”

“Cain, do you have any of his letters?”

But no. “I saved all of them. I ought to read through them again, especially ones where he mentions meeting the nieces visiting Moonstone Cove for my don’t think he ever referred to any of you by name, but it could just be I wasn’t paying attention to those passages. I’ll have to look again.”

“Where do you keep them?”

“Here at Malvern House.”

Her eyes brightened. “How lovely. Do you think we might... If it’s too personal for you?”

“You wish to read them?”

She nodded.

“All right. Let me get them, but we cannot make a night of it. I must seek to return to the bank one last time before I retire for the evening. Tomorrow when I be a busy day for us. I’ll come by to fetch you around ten o’clock morning. We’re to stop at Chiswell’s office first, then on to Cormac’s office to pay him a visit. I want you to meet him.”

“I’m sure he is curious to meet me, as well. Did seeing him this morning would relieve any of your worry?”

He sighed. “No, he’s in a bad way.”

“I’m so sorry. I’ll do my best to make him feel welcome if he decides to join us in Moonstone Landing.”

“Thank you, Hen.” He kissed her lightly on the lips, intending something short and sweet. But there was something in the feel of her mouth against his that he always found arousing. Perhaps it was the honey taste of her.

Or the crush of her soft body against his brutish own as he drew her against him.

He took it no further, reluctant to give his staff too much of a show. “That was nice, Cain.” She had that starlight look in her eyes again, and his soul seemed to take nourishment from and crave.

“Perhaps it is not wise for me to stay. You are too tempting, and I must go to my boat my best just now.”

“No, don’t you want to see the letters? Please, Cain. Spare a mother and read them with me.”

“Yes, all right. But then I must go.”

enjoyed “I won’t keep you long, but neither should you be attempting to climb something up in a day. Be careful. It may not be safe for you to be out at nightfall. From what you’ve told me, my cousin must now be awaiting to be brought to task. He has to be desperate and feeling trapped.”

“I can take care of myself, Hen.”

“I know. Just be careful, that is all I ask. You left him standing at the bank, pounding on the door. He will soon learn that the bank manager is under arrest and all accounts are now under review.”

“That ought to make for a fun confrontation between us and Fielding’s party.”

Hen shook her head. “That would be awful for so many reasons, the least of which is ruining the dear woman’s party. If my weasel cousin makes sense, he’ll run away from London this very night.”

“I hope he doesn’t.”

She placed a hand on his arm. “Promise me that you will bring him to task verbally and that is all. One solid blow with that big fist of yours homekill him.”

He arched an eyebrow. “That would take care of your problem, wouldn’t it?”

“Do not dare joke about this. I will not have you strike him. But I will about my horrid cousin. Let’s read your father’s letters.”

“Curious to see what he wrote about you?”

She tipped her chin up pertly. “Of course, and I’m sure he told you nothing lovely and wonderful I was and how you ought to marry me as soon as I get home.”

She spoke in jest, but Cain was suddenly not so sure what his father had said about her. It was not a stretch to believe this was exactly what he

It certainly would explain Cain’s asking Hen to marry him within minutes of their first meeting.

“Give me a moment to wash the stench of Alexandra’s perfume from my hair, then I’ll retrieve those letters. We’ll read them in my study. Meet me there.”

“All right.”

“Gad, I reek. Don’t I?”

“I think Lady Alexandra was trying to mark you with her scent just as a lion marks his territory.”

“Heaven forbid. I had better scrub myself raw.”

ose this He escorted her back into the house, then took the stairs two at a
ut afterreach his bedchamber.

re he is He marched down the hall, his curiosity now piqued.

He had always been close with his father. Even when they did not
on matters. There was not a day, not a moment, in his entire life when
outsidenot love the man.

ager is Had his father put this marriage idea in his head?

t Lady

OceanofPDF.com

not the
has any

him to
s could

would it

enough

ou how
as you

her had
e wrote.
utes of

off me,
here.”

ust as a

He escorted her back into the house, then took the stairs two at a time to reach his bedchamber.

He marched down the hall, his curiosity now piqued.

He had always been close with his father. Even when they did not agree on matters. There was not a day, not a moment, in his entire life when he did not love the man.

Had his father put this marriage idea in his head?

OceanofPDF.com



Chapter Eleven

HEN WAS IN tears as she read the letters Cain's father had written to his old man oozed love for his son. *My dearest son* was how he started letters. While this correspondence mostly revealed his father's thoughts and fears along with his wonderful character, it also showed glimpses of character and the close relation these two men had always enjoyed with each other.

These St. Austell men were bred to be honorable and never break promises. She understood now why Cain would not promise to have them live under the same roof. He was truly scared of what his dreams might bring and would rather see her safely out of his reach, even if it meant their living apart.

A warmth spread through her as she sat beside Cain and read the letters aloud to him. Too bad she hadn't gone through them before seeing his Lady Alexandra and watching her blow him brazen kisses. She would have understood what was going through his mind and known this woman was doing nothing to him.

Cain was stretched out on the sofa in his study, his hands clasped and propped behind his head and his eyes closed as she continued reading.

"I miss you, my son. Stay well and I shall continue to pray for your safe return. Your..."

Cain now opened one eye a crack. "Hen, you cannot cry over a letter."

"I cannot help it. They're so filled with love. It must have been unbearably hard for your father to endure having you gone all those years."

"I know it was, but he'd raised me to do the right thing, and that was to fight for my country. Leaving him and my mother behind, not being there when she passed, that was awful for me as well. My mother lost four children between Jennifer and me. Each loss was a heartbreak for them. By the time I came along, they were afraid to breathe around me for fear I would fall and die. But I was built like an ox and rarely got sick."

“Then you went off to fight Napoleon,” she replied. “Their marching into the heart of danger and rarely returning home in all years. A week, a month, an entire season would not have been enough for them to be with you.” She emitted a ragged sigh. “I don’t know how I would have managed to let go of someone I loved that much.”

“It was not their choice to make. They knew they could not hold their own. I was never one to sit on my pampered arse and enjoy the spoils of war while others were risking their lives for England.”

“Still, it had to break their hearts.” She had read three letters from her father and now opened a fourth. “*My dearest son,*” it started, just as the others had. “*The loss of your mother has been quite hard for me. I have spent my life with it by immersing myself in building St. Austell Grange. It started as a project for myself, but now I believe I was meant to build it for you. I have always found a quiet charm about the town of Moonstone Landing. The views of the sea from the Grange are breathtaking. I am convinced this place will call to your soul.*”

She glanced up at him. “I don’t think it has, but perhaps it will in time.”
He nodded. “This is why I ran there when I left London. I look forward to returning as soon as this nasty business with your cousin is over. But I would have liked to see you. Finish the letter.”

“I met my neighbor’s nieces today. The eldest is a little angel with brown hair and big green eyes that shimmer like starlight.”

Cain laughed. “And there you are. He called you an angel. He was right. You are my angel, Hen.”

“We’ll see if you still think so after we are married.” She smiled at him. “*She’s young for you yet, but she will be of age by the time you return home. I pray that you will make it home.*”

He sat up when he heard her suddenly gasp and begin to sniffle. “I’ve been crying.”
She took out her handkerchief to dab at her tears. “Oh, Cain. He knew you were here.”

“Let me see the rest of it.” He began to read the letter aloud to her. “*Son, do not think I am mad. But sometimes, one is struck with something so obviously right. I think my neighbor’s niece will bring her starlight into your life. I know the ravages of war and how it can darken one’s soul. You will meet this girl who sparkles with silver light. Her name is Henley, and she is a little mother hen not only to her sisters, but to me as well. I suppose I am getting old and now creak a bit as I walk. These old knees of mine*”

ly somewhat they used to be. Come home soon, my son. I need to see you before I reach the end of my life, and I fear that time is not so very far off."

gh time He paused, needing a moment to compose himself.

ow I Then he gave a raw, bitter laugh and ran a hand through his hair.

how he ends it." He cleared his throat. "If I do not see you before I find me. Ito reunite with your mother, promise me you will not forget what I Londonwritten about little Hen. Starlight is a rare thing to find. I love you, my

She settled beside him on the sofa, her heart beating so rapidly she could hardly catch her breath.

all the Cain's eyes were watery as he drew her onto his lap. "He was right. I've dealtI not told you that your eyes shine like starlight? My father believed as awell. There's an end to all doubt about having you as my wife. It has to be there isyou, didn't it?"

the sea She put her arms around his neck, inhaling the heat and sandalwood from him as she pressed her lips to the arch of his neck and burrowed

him. His shoulders were broad and all of him was divinely muscled. "I love you." goodness there wasn't another green-eyed Hen residing in Moorward toLanding," she teased.

go on, He chuckled. "There could have been a hundred and I would have chosen you out. The night skies may be filled with the bright light of stars, but you are a goldenrare thing to find in a person. You radiate with it."

He placed a finger under her chin and tipped her head up to kiss her. His kiss was soft, but she felt the raw feeling behind it. "I need you, Hen. I need you so badly."

nd read His hands roamed up and down her body as though competing to memorize the shape of her and feel each curve beneath his palms. She

into him when he cupped her breast and again when he began to lightly kiss her. "I love you?" it, for she now understood they were meant to be united as one.

ew." She gasped as heat coursed through her when he removed his hands from her. "My covering the swell of her breasts and dipped his head to kiss her there.

hing so "You are so beautiful." The words came with a wrenching ache that loosened the bodice of her gown and nudged the fabric aside to take the place of one fleshy mound between his lips. The little explosions she'd felt were nothing to the fiery burst she experienced as his tongue licked across the peak of her breast.

are not Every pulse in her body began to throb, and her blood was now

before Iriver.

She feared there would be nothing left of her because he consumed her completely. This great beast of a man could devour her whole, and she
“Listenlet him because she was in love with him.

love on She had always been in love with him.

I have Even before they had ever met.

son.” She loved him because of the way his father had spoken of him, his
e couldfilling with happiness and pride for his son. She loved him because
gentle he’d been when treating the cuts on her hand that first day. She
t. Havehim because he resembled a big, intimidating bear and not a pe
ed it aspeacock.

d to be She wanted to tell him, and was about to when the clock in hi
chimed the six o’clock hour. In the next moment, there was a knock
d scentclosed door.

against She froze in panic.

“Thank “Hen, it’s all right. No one will enter without my permission
onstonegroaned and gave her a soft, lingering kiss to the swell of her breast
helped her quickly put herself together. Obviously, he was adept at thi
pickedof thing. No doubt he had been caught in the middle of undressing wh
it it is ainappropriate places and at inappropriate times before.

He’d lowered the bodice of her gown and now raised it back up, s
ier. His the fichu atop it for modesty, and quickly tied the lacings. But the
. I wantnothing he could do about her face, which remained fiery.

Her hands were shaking, too.

lled to Nor could she catch her breath.

leaned Cain was grinning in a tenderly affectionate way. “Time for us to
y kneadfor supper. Too bad. I was quite enjoying my feast of you. Oh, Hen. You
completely undone.”

e fichu “I cannot help it. I’ve never...you know...”

“I do indeed, and so will everyone realize exactly what we were c
e as heyou walk out looking as you do.”

ie tip of “Oh, dear. Is my gown not on straight?”

before “Your gown is fine.” He took her hands in his when she continued
ver thewith her clothing. “It is your face that gives you away. Perhaps mi
too. You tasted so good, like the sweetest cream. I shouldn’t have do
a fieryto you, but you are temptation itself. Take a deep breath, love.”

Her eyes rounded in surprise.

It took him a moment to realize what he'd just called her. She would recognize it on his face an instant later. "Is this not what we had planned for our marriage to be? I should have held back, but how could I after we read your father's letters? We were fated to be together."

She slipped her hands out of his and put them to her hot cheeks. "I shouldn't say that."

"Why not?" He regarded her and frowned in obvious confusion.

"What I mean is...your father said the loveliest things about me, but I don't want you to be using terms of endearment because it was your wish. I want it to be your wish, no one else's."

He kissed her on the forehead. "No one tells me what to do, not even your beloved father. Is it not obvious from the letters? I do a thing because I want to do it."

"Perhaps, but the reason you want to do it is because it will make someone else happy."

"Hen, you are overly thinking things again. This is my fault. I wish I could go far with you, and you were not ready for it. But you really are an irresistible temptation. Come on, let's go before I lock the door and have at you again." "Wait. I'm not ready."

He sighed. "For dinner or my kisses? Perhaps you are ready for dinner. It was merely a jest, Hen. You look about to turn purple. Prudence must be exercised for us in the dining room. I'm not going to touch you again. You are distracting, and I must leave right after supper."

He escorted her out, holding her arm in his even though she desperately wanted to duck behind him to keep hidden from prying eyes. "Gad, you look like you never to partner at cards with you. We'll lose every hand," he teased.

"I am an excellent cards player," she insisted as he hurried her down the hall. "It is not at all the same thing. What we did was...um..."

He cast her a wicked smile. "Yes, it was."

She held him back as they were about to enter the dining room. "If you manage it?"

He quirked an eyebrow. "Manage what?"

"My body is in spasms and you look as calm as bathwater. How do you manage that?"

"Ah, you mean hide my feelings? It is something I learned in the duke's household."

early age. I can assure you, I am burning up inside.”

“You are? That is splendid,” she whispered as they entered the dining room. Prudence and several of the Malvern House footmen were seated there.

Cain’s chuckle was quiet but hearty.

“No, they said nothing more as they walked in and took their seats at the table. Hen remained pensive throughout the meal, finding it hard to keep his thoughts on the conversation at hand. It was mostly casual chatter,

but he paid closer attention when it turned to more serious matters. Prudence spoke of her father’s up about her situation after she’d learned of her husband’s death in battle.

Cain had been listening attentively and now spoke. “It is one of the things I hope to accomplish in the House of Lords. Something must be done to help the returning soldiers but for the families of those who do not return.

This is something the Marquess of Burness and I are quite passionate about. We have the support of other lords who fought in battle and understand the situation, but we are a minority.”

“Is there a way in which we can help?” Hen asked.

“Perhaps, but I’m not certain just how. Women do not have a voice in the House of Lords. It is especially difficult for them to be heard through to the members of the House of Lords. They like things just the way they are and have an aversion to any change. These stodgy lords are a great

impediment to progress, an immovable impediment. Only death or extreme measures ever get a peer tossed out. I don’t think a peer has ever

been stripped of his title, short of treason. Several have threatened to strip their wayward heirs out of inheriting their title a time or two, but few ever carry through on the threat.”

“And this is the problem,” Prudence muttered, nodding in agreement. “It is very hard to move a man off his position when he knows he has nothing to gain by a change and everything to lose.”

They pursued lighter conversation during the rest of their meal, but did not linger at the table once it was over.

Cain made a quick departure.

Hen and Prudence retired to what had been his mother’s salon for their tea. “All right, Hen,” Prudence said once they had been served alone, “what happened in the study? I ought to have insisted on being there with you, but those letters are such a personal matter. I did not feel I

right to impose. Nor will I ask about their content. But something had happened between the two of you. It is my fault entirely. I should not have trusted you already to be a gentleman.”

“Don’t say that. He has always been a gentleman.” Hen cleared her throat. “That is, he meant to be. For the most part, he was. We shared the table that got a little out of hand, quite minor in the scheme of things. I am deeply hurt but she is untouched in every important way, if this is what you are worried about. Prudence’s relief was obvious. “I know he is to marry you, but she remains unsettled. We can never be sure what our weasel cousin might do. I don’t want you to be left in a more vulnerable position than you already are. Things are not what they used to be.”

“Being under that horrible man’s thumb has been very difficult for me to return to. Did you know he was planning to toss me out of my own home? It is not actually mine. I never owned it, nor could I ever have, since it is entailed to the Stoke entailment. Your father offered to buy me a small house elsewhere, but I was foolish and did not take him up on the offer. My husband had died and I was not thinking clearly for myself.”

Hen cast her a sympathetic nod. “How could you do so when you had to get lost the man you loved?”

“I will not lie to you. Mr. Landers and I were not a love match, but we had a very good and happy marriage. We liked each other very much, and were very disappointed not to be blessed with children. However, when he died, I was relieved not to have given him any. They would have been a great burden for me. I cannot even take care of myself, so how could I have managed with small ones?”

“What about his relatives? We have been casting all the blame on them. It is Willis, but did the Landers family not feel any responsibility toward you?”

“No, as it turns out,” Prudence replied. “Mr. Landers had risen well above his family’s station in life, and we were helping them out as much as we could. But there was not much to spare on an army captain’s wages. After his death, I loaned them funds to help out. This is all they thought of apparently. I was a wealthy woman in their eyes, and they happily took what I had as willing to give. Perhaps they would have looked upon me more kindly had I been able to give Mr. Landers children. When the funds dried up, they were still in their affection.”

“I am truly sorry, Prudence.”

ppened She shook her head. "No, don't be. I was living in my own little w
ted him a cloud of fanciful dreams. My parents objected to Mr. Landers and
someone better for me. But I did not like the men they brought arou
red her Landers was handsome and kind. He treated me well and made me lau
d a kiss "That is important, I should think."

still... She nodded. "We eloped. It was quite the family scandal, but y
it." your sisters were too young to be told of it at the time. I never tho
: things myself as a stupid woman, but it turns out I was when it came to fina
ht do. I just assumed funds would always be there. Oh, never a huge amou
y are." enough for me to live out my life in modest comfort."

"My father set up all of our accounts to ensure this for us. Willi
or all of one who broke faith."

Well, it "I am going to sound waspish now, but Hen...you cannot
s a part someone will provide for you. Make certain the duke protects you fina
l place from the start. Attend to this matter now, while you are young and b
er. My and he desires you. This is the moment you hold the most power
certain he gives you sufficient sums outright so that you are never
ad just mercy of someone like Willis."

Hen smiled through clenched teeth. "I am not marrying him
t it was money. I understand your concerns, Prudence. But I don't need
l it was anything to him. He will protect me as he sees fit. No doubt he will be
r, when generous. What I hope to have is his love. It is not a question of pow
een too grab of his wealth."

would I "Oh, now you are angry with me. You must think I am a horrible

But starvation is not pleasant. I hope the duke can save us from what V
Weasel trying to do. But I plan to marry whether I have that income back or r
ou?" Weston seems to be a man of good character. I noticed how he was loc
l above me."

as we Hen nodded. "He is a good man."

s. Even "If he asks me to marry him, I will accept. He seems to be very ki
t of me, I will make him a good wife. Some women are strong on their own, b
ok all I not one of them. I like the idea of a man providing for me. I have n
kindly well by myself. Not only because of the lack of funds. I like ha
, so did companion and protector. I am simply not the sort who can scratch a
her way through adversity."

"None of us knows what we are capable of doing until our back:

orld. In the wall.”

wanted “I would rather not find out,” Prudence said. “I am not averse to
nd. Mr. but I like to be looked after. Perhaps you have more strength than I ev
gh.” Hen. You were prepared to fight our cousin with or without the
assistance. I think you would have done whatever was necessary
ou and yourself and your sisters.”

ught of “I would have. It eats at me that Cain is doing all the work. I do li
ances. I watch him close the noose around Willis’s neck. I hate that I am no
nt. But more, that I cannot do more. But my feelings for Cain have nothing
with his coming to our rescue. Whether he succeeds or not in re
s is the Willis as our guardian and restoring our funds...I love him.”

Prudence cast her a warm smile. “Have you told him?”

assume “No, not yet. But I think he must realize it, since I seem to have no
ncially to hide my feelings. He reads them very easily.”

autiful “Do not assume he knows it. This is one thing Mr. Landers and
. Makesaid to each other, and I am sorry we did not. I think over time we
at the care for each other deeply.” Prudence shook her head. “Neither of
raised to believe love was important. Perhaps this is what we had al
for his and did not appreciate this special feeling. Yes, I expect it was love. A
to say I eloped with him. And he never looked at another woman. There w
e overly me. When he kissed me...it was nice.” She shrugged and then she
ver or ahead. “If I do get a second chance, I will be more aware. I think i
nicest thing one person can say to another. *I love you*. It is a pe
person. sentiment indeed.”

Villis is “Yes, I agree.”

not. Mr. Hen had thought it was too soon to reveal her feelings to Cain, l
oking at was nonsense. They were already about to make the greatest leap poss
truth, they would have been married by now had her weasel cousin’s
not been required.

nd, and Yes, she would tell Cain of her feelings tomorrow.

ut I am Perhaps once he knew this, his nightmares would go away.

ot done Love conquered all, did it not?

aving a

nd claw

OceanofPDF.com

s are to

o work,
er had,
duke's
to save

ittle but
t doing
g to do
moving

o ability

I never
grew to
us was
l along
fter all,
as only
ook her
t is the
owerful

but this
ible. In
consent



Chapter Twelve

CAIN HAD THOUGHT perhaps it was possible to get through the night without those violent dreams invading his sleep, but they came on as strong as ever once again. He awoke soaked to the skin, the bedcovers twisted around him as if ever the familiar snake cutting off his circulation.

Since he was still alone in that private wing comprising the guest quarters, he knew no one had heard him. He sat up with a groan and slowly flexed his muscles as he peeled off the layers and uncoiled the sheets.

He'd gotten so caught up in the damn thing, it felt like bindings.

"Hen," he said in a whisper, "how can I do this to you?"

The sun was barely up, he noted once his body calmed.

He crossed the room to peer out the window. The streets were quiet except for the only movement that of a vendor pulling his wagon to a nearby square. He remained by the open window and allowed the morning air to dry his still-damp body.

More carts and wagons appeared on the street, their wheels groan and clattering on the cobblestones as they hauled their wares to market.

He knew the club's stewards would be stirring soon.

It was not long before one of them came up to take the clothes he had worn yesterday and freshen them. "Your Grace, you are awake."

"I couldn't sleep, Collin. Have a bath sent up and my breakfast."

"At once, Your Grace."

Cain took his time soaking in the tub and scrubbing himself down with the sandalwood soap provided. Although he had washed the scent of Alexandra off his skin last night, her perfume had remained on his skin and now permeated the room.

Perhaps this was why his dreams had been particularly unpleasant. He ought to have tossed every last garment into the fireplace and burned them. He was that irritated with her.

No, he ought to be irritated with himself for being so stupid as to

into her carriage when he knew what was likely to happen.

Thank goodness Hen believed him when he assured her there was no affair between him and Alexandra. He would not have blamed her if she had remained doubtful.

Despite the feelings he and Hen had for each other, it could have been overlooked that they still hardly knew each other. She had no reason to doubt him. Their conversation could have gone quite badly, and it would have been completely his fault. He knew what Alexandra was. Deceitful, petty, jealous, and as ever without and him, And he did not believe Alexandra was through with him yet. Relying on herself all over his body and then blowing him that parting kiss was no start to her game.

He rose from the tub, dried himself off, and called for one of the club's valets to shave his beard and trim his hair.

“Have a look, Your Grace,” the man said, his smile wide as he finished the task.

Cain stared at himself in the mirror, hardly recognizing the face looking back at him. His hair was now cropped and appeared more golden than light. His dark eyes still appeared tormented, but perhaps a little less so that Hen was in his life. He hoped so, for he did not want another day as bad as last night's.

Having seen enough, he turned from the mirror and dressed in preparation for the day. It took him a little longer than usual because he had a play to play. If he was to stand before one of the lord justices this morning he needed to look the part of a powerful duke who was never to be crossed.

He was also eager to know what Hen would think of his new look.

He strode out of his club and walked to Malvern House. The weather was warming but not yet unbearably dank. Nor were the streets too congested. It was a pleasant walk, and it did not take him long before he reached the steps of Malvern House.

His faithful butler opened the door. “Your Grace...”

Cain laughed as Dinsmore's mouth fell open. “Yes, the duke is coming once again. Is Lady Henley awake yet?”

“Indeed, she is waiting for you in your mother's salon.”

He marched directly to her, his heart melting the moment he caught sight of her. “Hen, you look beautiful.”

An understatement, for she was radiant.

The sun shone through the window and bathed her in a circle of light. Her hair was a gleaming honey-brown and her eyes held a starlit spark. Her gown was a dark amber, soft and elegant as it hugged her curves and undulated with her movements as she approached him.

"Thank you, Cain," she said, sounding a little breathless. "I recognize you."

But her smile was big and broad, so he hoped she was pleased with his. "What do you think? Do I pass muster?"

He surely did not deserve this beautiful girl.

Her eyes widened as she began to inspect him, her gaze slowly tracing up and down his body, and finally coming to rest on his trimmed and clean-shaven face.

"Well, Hen?"

She laughed and threw herself into his arms for a quick but firm embrace before stepping back to study him again. "You are hardly staring beyond words. I knew it. You even have dimples when you smile. I get enough of you."

"Better than the old bear?"

"No, I love that old bear. That bearded, wooly look suited you in perfection. But this is just as good. My heart is lost to you either way."

He took her hands in his. "Truly?"

She nodded. "I fell asleep thinking about your father's letters. I remember the way he was so open in his affection for you. This is how a family could be. Mine was, and this is how I am now with my sisters. This is how you and I shall always be with each other."

"We will, Hen."

She took a deep breath. "I have something to tell you. Something I've resolved to tell you. At first, I thought it was too soon. I'm still quite nervous but I must reveal it now because it is important for you to know."

"What is this thing that has you so unsettled?" He frowned, surprised and worried something had happened between last night and this morning. "I am ready to listen."

She took another deep breath. "I suppose it is no secret, since I'm incapable of hiding any of my feelings. They show on my face like a light upon a dark shore."

"Hen, has someone hurt you?"

ght. Her “No.” She shook her head. “Well, here goes...Cain...”

le. Her “Yes.”

res and “I want you to know that my heart is yours whether or not you suc
removing Weasel Willis. My affection for you is not conditio
hardly anything. It just is.”

He wasn't certain why she felt it was important to tell him this n
th what he was relieved her distress was caused by nothing more serious.

He knew what she felt for him. He'd always known. First of all, he
expression revealed what was in her heart. Also, a sweet girl like her
aveling never allow just any man to slip the gown off her shoulders and put his
air and on her breasts.

That was her declaration of love to him.

He'd known it yesterday and treasured her for it.

ardent “What I am trying to say, rather ineptly...is that I am in love wit
andsome she continued. “Not just in love, but deeply in love. You have m
cannot happier than I ever thought possible. Thank you for giving me this feel

He wanted to let her know he felt the same, but his butler came in
that moment to report that the Malvern carriage had been brought arou
you to “Hold that thought, Hen,” Cain said. “We will pick up this dis
later.”

She cast him a forced smile and tried to pretend she was not disap
adored he did not say it back to her.

ought to How could he in front of his staff?

I hope And now Prudence had marched downstairs to see them off. “I h
goes well. Did Hen tell you she has the loveliest gown selected for
Fielding's party? But she neglected to bring a suitable wrap for herse
g I am evening grows chilly. I'll have to stop by her modiste, but I'll take
afraid, your footmen along with me for protection. And...Your Grace, may I
purchase on your account?”

uddenly Hen was about to protest, but he cut her short. “Yes, she must h
g. “Tell very best. Prudence, add whatever you need for yourself.”

“Thank you, I will.” Prudence darted off before Hen could count
e I am his instructions.

beacon “You are frowning again,” he said, wanting to kiss her temptingly
lips. “It is my pleasure to provide for you and your family. Especi
you.”

“It isn’t right. You and I are not married yet. I don’t want you to am after you for your wealth.”

“A shawl, Hen? Seriously? You are the only woman in London who need oncares. I would give you the world if I could. If it were in my power, I give you everything your heart desires.”

She placed a hand on his arm. “You have, Cain.”

He silently kicked himself for being such an idiot when it c r everywomen. Until now, of course. He and Cormac had treated them as play : wouldboth of them attracted to the “easy” ones. These were the elegant *to* s mouthwho were quick to bed, bought cheap, and often were married, so th no question of promises made and no chance of being forced to the alt: Alexandra was that sort of woman.

Even before she was married, she was easily bought and quick to b h you,” But she would have been an expensive, demanding wife. She wou ade mehad his eyes bulging at the size of the bills run up at his expense.

ing.” He helped Hen into the carriage and climbed in after her. “Ready 1 at justthe day, Hen?”

nd. “Eager for it. I felt useless just waiting around yesterday. You l cussioneverything while Prudence and I sat in your garden and read our books

“You will always stand out, make your own mark, because you pointedempty-headed and will never be a mere appendage to me. You cal impatient, wanting to flout the laws, but in your own way, I think you as impatient. You won’t accept that there is nothing you as a woman iope allabout your cousin’s misdeeds. The law does not even recognize yo r Ladyseparate being.”

If if the “It is ridiculous and unfair.”

two of “But it is presently the law. So let me take the lead in this and do put thedaggers at me because I am doing so. I am on your side.”

“I know. Haven’t I told you how grateful I am?” she asked.

ave the “Yes. But you, my lovely Hen, are also a little resentful.”

“Never of you, just of the way men seem to control everythin ermandirrelevance in the eyes of the law just galls me.”

“Once you are my duchess, you can set about changing that.” I pursednothing more as they rode in silence. The laws were not going to ally forovernight, and he did not want to bring up the matter of her love declar

She had given him her heart.

think I He was giving her a man with uncontrolled nightmares who physically harm her if she got too close.

to even Perhaps it was a mistake to hold back his admission of love, for I would love her deeply. But he was starting to understand Hen. If he told her loved her, she would do everything in her power to keep him safe. *His* he needed her to look out for his well-being.

ame to In truth, she was probably already determined to put him first. ythings, But she was the one who needed protecting, especially from his 7 ladies nothing was going to interfere in his purpose to keep her safe, not ever ere was As they rode to Chiswell's bureau, he began to point out sights of i ar. They were in the open carriage making their way through the now London streets, and he made a point of stopping to greet *ton* acquaint ed. they happened to encounter.

ld have Others, ordinary men and women on their way to work or 1 errands, also recognized his family crest and shouted greetings. A few to face up to their carriage with a word of appreciation for his saving one rel. another. This caught him by surprise, for he truly had not considered impact on these strangers.

is.” Hen squeezed his hand. “You are everyone's hero.”

are not “Blessings to ye. Ye saved m'brother, Yer Grace,” someone called led me “Ye saved m'husband,” a woman said, sounding quite weepy. are just people around her cheered.

can do “I did my duty, just as any other soldier.” Cain acknowledged ou as greetings with a smile or a nod or a wave of his hand.

More people came up to him when his carriage drew up in front of Inns of Chancery, and he descended with Hen. He was about to put Hen n't toss around her and rush her through, but she did not appear to be intimidated by the crowd forming around them. Instead, she made a point to greet each person and ask them how they were doing.

She introduced herself as Lady Henley, his betrothed. “But my name. My calls me Hen. So does His Grace. He thinks I squawk at him too much.” “And what do ye call 'im, m'lady?” one gentleman called out.

He said She cast a knowing grin at the ladies in the huddle. “Nothing I dare change public. The man is gorgeous, as anyone with eyes can plainly see. I must call him ‘my darling,’ and he is indeed that. A kinder gentleman will never meet.”

might He led her inside before the crowd around them grew too large charmed them as you have charmed me.”

he did “Nonsense. I made a few jests. You saved their families.”

that he Chiswell quickly ushered them into his office. Hen did not appear n. As if ruffled by the exchange they’d had on the street. As for Cain, he’d s faces as she spoke to each man and woman, and did not doubt she h them over.

m, and As Chiswell stepped out a moment to call in his clerks, Hen tu i her. Cain. “Why did the crowds start forming around you today? I nterest. approached us yesterday.”

r-busier “Perhaps because I no longer look like a snarling bear.”

ntances She laughed as she settled in one of the chairs in front of Chiswell “Yes, that must be the reason.”

running He sank into the one beside her. “In fact, it is probably true. This w came the reason I waited to shave until this morning. The bank manager ative or fainted when he saw me yesterday. This is what I meant to do, put f red his him. I hope it worked. By the way, you handled yourself beautiful there.”

out. “I enjoyed meeting all your admirers. They were so grateful to you you’d done. How could I possibly turn up my nose at them?”

Several He thought of Alexandra again, taking a moment to compare t women. Alexandra would have called them a rabble and shown noth ged the disdain when they approached. Hen behaved like a true duchess. “Th likely be reported in the papers. Certainly the gossip rags. Everyone w t of therefer to you as Lady Hen.”

his arm She laughed. “I do not mind. But how will you feel to be referre : at all my rooster?”

point to Likely he would be called her big cock, because it was the aim c gossip rags to be crude and titillate their readers.

family They spoke no more about it as Chiswell and his clerks returned .” Stockwell delivered the bank manager’s signed confession, along affidavits from himself and several of the board’s directors,” Chiswell

e say in “Do you not require my affidavit?” Hen asked.

think I “No, Lady Henley. Lord Stockwell’s affidavit is sufficient and wi an you more clout.” He cast her a sheepish look. “It is the way of things, m However, I have prepared an affidavit for His Grace to sign.”

2. “You Cain quickly read through it, making certain to hold it so that Henley read along with him. “You are grinding your teeth.”

“I cannot help it. He stole from *my* account, and yet I am content to let it all be shoved aside.”

“Getting worked up about it will not accomplish anything. The Lord and Lady Henley will hear the matter and is not going to be swayed by anything of this.”

He then signed his affidavit.

They were left alone once more in Chiswell’s chambers as the clerks scampered off to deliver these documents to the barrister.

Henley’s jaw remained tightly clenched, but after a moment she spoke. “Ignore my pouting. I am grateful to you and everyone you have brought to help. Extremely grateful.”

“But you feel you do not exist, because despite this problem being almost about you and the women in your family who were preyed upon by your cousin, you are not asked to provide anything. I understand your frustration, Henley. Just know that you are quite real to me, and I will not ignore you.”

“I do know this, but you are not the problem.” She cast him an amused smile. “Every other man is.”

He shook his head. “It is a constant amazement to me that you are allowed to handle anything, considering how badly we seem to manage every blessed thing we touch. Well, you will have quite a bit of power now you are my duchess. People will listen. Ah, Chiswell returns.”

The barrister carried an armful of documents. “I have also prepared a betrothal contract in accordance with the terms provided by Lady Henley’s solicitor, Mr. Garrick. He has also sent over copies of the designation of these resignation documents. Would you care to read through them, Your Grace?”

“Yes, Lady Henley and I would like to do so.” Cain took them one by one. “Lord and Lady Henley held each up for them to read together. “What do you think, Henley?” she asked when they were done.

“They all look fine to me. As for the betrothal contract, the terms are more than fair. Now all we need is for the Earl of Stoke to sign it. I cannot bear to call him that. He is such a horrible man, nothing at all like my father, who was the kindest, most decent man to ever live. It is a bitter stomach to watch his legacy so quickly destroyed.”

n could Cain gave her hand a light squeeze. "It is all fine, Chiswell. See
copy off for Garrick to hold. We will be visiting the Marquess of I
pletely next. Send word to me there if something develops at court within t
hour. Otherwise, we shall be at Malvern House."

he lord Outside, Cain assisted Hen into his carriage, and they rode off.

ig short "Do you think there is the chance of a ruling today?" Hen asked.

He shook his head. "No. Our solicitors have said it is quite u
We've done all we can for now."

and his She was nibbling her lip again, a sign she had come up with
reason to fret.

sighed. He sighed. "What is it, Hen?"

ught in "After we visit your friend, do you think it is possible for us to pa
on Stoke? After all, he may be willing to compromise now that he kn
eing allis found out."

by that "I am not bringing you to him. I do not want you under his roof
id your still your guardian and can hold you there against your wishes."

I never "He wouldn't dare if you are with me," she said.

"We cannot be certain of it. He is not a clever man, as you well
impish And Hen, I will maim him if he attempts to keep you captive in his

You said you did not want violence. I can assure you, there will be
ren are that if I put you within his grasp and he dares lay a hand on you. I dor
uck up to be forced to hurt him, but I will."

er once "Point made. Forget I suggested it."

"Besides, there is no reason for us to go to him. He will take it as
pared a of weakness when our position is not weak at all. If anything, he is
enley's who needs to come groveling to me."

ion and Her cheeks reddened. "I'm sorry. You are right. I can see it was a
ace?" idea."

by one "It is not stupid. I hope to force a compromise, and we will confro
en?" he But on my battleground and at the time of my choosing. It will li

tonight at Lady Fielding's party, where there are witnesses to con
ms are behavior...and mine. He is new to the *ton* and obviously eager

Ugh, I accepted. But as news of my desire to marry you becomes known, v
like my you think will happen if he dares deny me?"

rns my "Other than your breaking his fingers?" she said with a wry smile.

"All of his dirty dealings will come to light. He will be shunned.

and one will know him as a coward and a thief. He will not be extended any Burness nor will he or his wife be permitted into any elegant salons. I know he next not seem like much to you, but it means everything to that grasping pair were happy to be banished to Moonstone Landing. This little weasel society's acceptance. His wife perhaps desires it even more than he do a cudgel to hold over their heads."

unlikely. "I don't know that it will work. He loses too much in giving me up. "He has lost you anyway, Hen. You are only a few months shy of another twenty-first birthday. Not that I intend to wait that long to marry you, I told you, I will take you to Scotland if it is necessary. Once we are in Scotland he will lose the rest of it, for I will be the dragon breathing down his neck. He dares take a step out of line. If he attempts to take your sisters from you, I will burn him to ashes. The best he can do is negotiate something for himself."

f. He is The carriage drew up in front of the Burness townhouse. "Ah, we have arrived," Cain said.

"Is your friend another one like you?"

I know. Cain grinned. "I think Cormac is worse. Dear Lord, I hope he's home himself presentable."

exactly They were expected and immediately escorted into the family's parlor. Lady Stockwell, a fluttering bird of a woman, scurried in to greet them. "How delightful to see you again, Malvern. I shall have tea brought for us. Although I expect you would prefer a heartier libation."

s a sign "No, Lady Stockwell. Tea is fine for me." He introduced Hen to the ones who silently prayed Cormac would arrive soon, because Lady Stockwell's nerves were already getting on his nerves.

a stupid Hen was as gracious as ever and seemed to sense his impatience. "My husband, Lord Stockwell, is chairman of the Bank of West London, is very helpful to me and my family. You may be sure I am very grateful to him. I cannot tell you how helpful he has been to me and my family. You may be sure I am very grateful to him. I cannot tell you how helpful he has been to me and my family. You may be sure I am very grateful to him."

control his "Dear me, I am," Lady Stockwell said. "He is a very good man, always very kind to me and our daughters."

what do Hen nodded. "How is the Marquess of Burness feeling today? I hope he is well enough for visitors."

Lady Stockwell's hand fluttered to her throat, and she tittered again. "I am sure you do not know how he is doing today, or any other day. Burness shuts his door on everyone."

credit, does not see fit to allow any of us in. Well, he does allow Lord Stockwell and my dear husband and you, Malvern, are the only ones he ever allows in. You close."

Hen cast the woman a sympathetic look. "Men are often terrible people. They refuse to admit they require assistance and then whine like babies and howl like banshees when it is not immediately forthcoming."

"Yes, and then they resent your help," Lady Stockwell said with an exasperated laugh.

Cain had always regarded her as a timid bird of a woman who felt uncomfortable maintaining a polite distance. She was not a bad person, but excruciatingly dull and simpering...at least, he and Cormac had thought so.

Cormac's brother adored her. The reason why still eluded him.

He supposed she was different around him, more her natural self. She had never intimidated, as she seemed to be around him and Cormac. Still, her flighty manner made him itchy.

Cormac had to be going out of his mind. Yet he had to be as nervous as a cat on a hot tin roof, blaming his fate when none of it was his fault.

Lady Stockwell's fault, and she was only trying to help. Cormac's behavior was disruptive even when on his best behavior. He must have turned into a bellowing tyrant, unmanageably enraged by the loss of his arm.

Cain's visit yesterday may have calmed his friend down somewhat, but only time and acceptance of his situation would ever bring Cormac peace. Where was he?

Cain would strangle his friend if he was made to wait any longer. He was not in the habit of being kept in abeyance. He turned to Hen for help. "Your conversation with Lady Stockwell was one of the most boring I have ever heard of. Your chores are unimaginable. Given the choice of an hour chatting with her or an hour of extraction, that tooth was getting pulled."

Hen immediately took up the gauntlet, complimenting Lady Stockwell on her gown, which immediately led to talk of the best London modistes. Other conversational topics he found excruciatingly dull.

Hen had a manner that put everyone at ease.

Even Lady Stockwell stopped her incessant fluttering and seen. "I do relax, laughing pleasantly a time or two, a great improvement over her birdlike twitters."

well in. As the minutes passed, Cain grew restless and was about to permit himself to march upstairs and haul Cormac down when the man strode in.

Cain was relieved to find his friend clean-shaven and decently combed. But he knew Cormac had purposely kept him waiting for nearly half an hour in the company of Lady Stockwell just to rile him.

It was a small price to pay for insisting Cormac make himself present to meet Hen.

He and Cormac could be coarse at times, but he would not tolerate just his friend being rude to his betrothed. He tossed Cormac a warning glance always. "I am not going to eat her alive, Cain," Cormac said with a surprising genuine smile. "Besides, you would not have brought Lady Hen around here if you thought she could not handle me."

Hen could not have overlooked Cormac's missing arm, but if she was repulsed by it, she hid her feelings well. However, Cain knew Hen would not hide her feelings at all. Everything showed on her expressive face, and now she was smiling at Cormac with sincere pleasure.

Cormac bowed over her hand while they were properly introduced. "I was surprised to see why Cain did not stand a chance with you. I'm sure his heart was torn into a moment he set eyes on you, Lady Hen."

His sister-in-law pinched her lips. "She is Lady Henley." Hen's cheeks turned pink, but she kept her tone light. "It is quite all right, Lady Stockwell. I do not mind at all. This is how I am known among my friends, and I do hope we shall all become good friends. As for my relationship with the duke, I'm sure I was the first to lose my heart. The feeling was mutual, I assure you."

Cormac sank into a chair beside them and picked up the teapot and a cup for himself.

Cain was relieved his friend did not go for the brandy instead. But the next moment, he wanted to throttle Lady Stockwell when she gasped and tried to grab the teapot out of Cormac's hand.

When Cormac resisted, because he was more of a stubborn dolt than she was, the woman became overset and began to flutter around him. "Excuse me, I need a better place to pour. You are not trained to do it."

"It is my home," Cormac shot back. "No one sets rules for me here." "Lady Stockwell," Hen said sweetly, "do come sit beside me. I must

excuse your recipe for this delicious treacle cake. As for the men, why should they let them fend for themselves? They will never learn to appreciate what we do for them if they do not occasionally make the effort to do what we do. I am certain a man as clever as Lord Burness knows to remove the lid from an hourpot before he tips it over to pour the tea into his cup.”

“That I do,” he said with a smirk at Cain, “but I do appreciate the reminder.”

While Hen patiently listened to Lady Stockwell chatter about her late husband, Cain leaned forward and whispered to his friend, “You are such a little arse.”

Cormac chuckled. “I know. That lid would have crashed right onto the cup and shattered it. I thought women held the pot in one hand and the lid down with the other just to look charming. I had no idea it had a purpose. He was wrong. Deliver my thanks to Hen later.”

“I will.” Cain’s own gratitude to Hen was not merely because of a favor she had done for him. That Cormac had come out of his room, suitably dressed, and was ready to pour a cup for himself was a huge gesture on his part, an attempt to show he was learning to manage without his arm.

Hen once again interceded with a comment meant to distract Lady Stockwell when the woman began to flutter again. “I understand you have two daughters. Would you mind bringing them down? I would love to see them all right, them.”

“Why, yes. If you wish. They are a bit excitable, but do forgive me for meeting them. They are still young. However, they are such little dears. Excuse me, I must fetch them.”

She scampered out of the parlor.

Cormac groaned. “That woman will be the death of me. I don’t understand what John sees in her, but there must be something I am not seeing. Thank you for getting her out of here, Hen. You did that seamlessly. You are a lucky man. You wouldn’t happen to have a sister, would you?”

Hen laughed. “I have two. They are quite happy at Moonstone Lodge, but I dare not put them in front of you. Especially not Phoebe.”

“Cain is my best friend. You are to be his wife. I would never insult you by—”

“Oh, you mistake my meaning,” Hen said, her eyes aglitter with mischief. “I worry about Phoebe. She will manage herself. I worry about you.”

we not readily.”

He laughed. “I doubt anyone can. But good for Phoebe for having confidence to stand her ground even at her young age. Any progress from the your problem?” he asked. “Cain told me all about what the new Earl has been doing to your family. John filled me in as well. He wasted time in getting that manager to confess his misdeeds. I must say, I am impressed by how quickly he rallied the other directors to pay attention. I did not expect my gentle brother had it in him to take charge like that.”

Hen nodded. “Other than Cain, I think his actions have been the most helpful so far. Without him, my horrible cousin would still be dipping into my hands in our funds unchecked.”

“Uncle Cormac! Uncle Cormac! You are finally out of your laziness!” Two little girls bounded toward him and began to quack like ducks.

He let out a whoop of delight, set aside his teacup, and lifted the teapot. He placed them onto his lap. “My little ducklings!”

His joy at seeing his nieces completely transformed him.

“Let me introduce you to my friend, Cain, and his lovely Lady Hen. I am sure she would be pleased if you quacked her a greeting.”

They immediately did so, to their mother’s horror. Gad, Cormac took so much pleasure in goading the woman.

Hen clucked a greeting back to the girls.

They burst into giggles, certain it was the funniest thing they had ever heard.

Lady Stockwell sighed and bustled out of the room on some near errand.

“What sort of name is Hen?” the elder girl asked, scooting off Cormac’s lap to draw closer to Hen. The other one followed after her big sister. They were so little and light that they amounted to the weight of a feather.

Cain rose and motioned for Cormac to join him by the window where he was entertaining the girls.

“She’s a gem, Cain,” Cormac said. “Seriously. Grab hold of her tight. Do not ever let her go.”

“I know.” Cain glanced at her. “But what about you? Thank you for pulling yourself together today.”

Cormac nodded. “It was time I got my arse out of that bed...my lair, as the girls called it. No doubt this is what they heard their mother call

lazy lay-abed.”

ing the “Do not be too hard on Lady Stockwell. She seems painfully shy ss withthan the ignorant dimwit we see. Hen put her at ease, as she seems to f Stoketo do with all of us effortlessly, and the woman was actually bearabl no timeyou marched in and she turned back into that prattling peahen. You pressedway of rattling everyone.”

ot think “That is not likely to improve,” Cormac said. “I hate everyone rig save for you and my brother. I suppose I’ll have to get back in ie mosteventually, but it’s all changed for me now. I cannot bear the way th ing hiswill look at me.”

“How can you know what they will do? They aren’t all going to y bed!”Lady Seline.”

“Too many of them will be.”

two of “This was true long before you ever lost your arm. The elegant ba were always filled with young women hoping to grasp what they cou only need to find the pearl among the grains of sand. She is out en. I’mpromise you.”

Cormac shook his head. “I am not like you, Cain. I don’t see h ook too woman can ever satisfy my every need. All the worse if she truly lo and wants a real marriage between us. If I vowed to be faithful, I woul break my word. But that would leave us both unhappy, would it not?”

ad ever Cain folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the v might have agreed with you as little as a few weeks ago. But this is ade-upway love works.”

“Oh, you are the expert now?”

ormac’s “Hardly, but I can tell you how my feelings have changed since r. TheyHen. Love isn’t about your happiness. It is about finding the one who more to you than anything else in the world. The true joy comes in ile Henher happy. The amazing thing about it is that when it is right, it all effortlessly.”

ght and “Well, I’ll keep this in mind. I am not as optimistic as you are ab success. My fault, of course. I was always more of an arse than yo you forwere. Perhaps I will become a recluse.”

“You? Doubtful,” Cain said. “You are a natural leader and peop zy bed,always flock to you. You just have to stop encouraging friendships v me...aworst sort.”

“They are diversions, never friends. The men are easy to beat at cards rather than the women are just easy. Seline’s sexual pleasures were fairly cheap to be able to enjoy. Not anymore, though. You should have seen the disgust on her face when she told her I was losing my arm. I suppose I can find a few who will serve me without disgust showing on their faces. Some will do anything for the right price.”

“Cain tried not to lose patience with his friend. “You need to join the society at Moonstone Landing. Remaining here is not healthy for you.”

“Ah, but it is so much easier to destroy myself right here.” Cormac shook his head. “I will right myself in time. Do not fret for me, Cain.” He felt like he was over at Hen and his nieces. The girls were chattering up a storm with him. “It will be all right because of those little girls. My ducklings. I think they are the only thing keeping me sane.”

“All the more reason why you should join us at—”

“I am sure as hell not going to live under the same roof as you and your mother-in-law when you are newly married. Having me around will be worse than having your mother-in-law breathing down your neck. But I might just buy a small stretch of land on the water and build a house near yours. What do you think of that?”

Cain smiled. “I think it is the first smart thing out of your mouth since you got here. I’ll keep an eye out for just the right property. You’ll like Moonstone Landing. It will be good for your soul.”

He and Hen ended their visit soon after and returned to Malvern House. To his surprise, they had company.

“Your Grace, I’ve put the Earl of Stoke in the visitor’s parlor to meet you,” his butler said. “I informed Mrs. Landers about his arrival, but she means to refuse to come down. I did not know whether to turn him away, but I would give me no instruction.”

“You did well to allow him to wait. I shall see him. Have tea brought for us in the visitor’s parlor. He does not set foot anywhere else outside my house.”

“Understood, Your Grace.”

“I’ll join you,” Hen said, tipping her chin up and daring Cain to come and see her.

He wasn’t going to send her away. As far as he was concerned, Fanny had an extraordinary ability to handle herself with grace under the

ards and situations. He would need her voice of reason to keep him from smashing his fist into Stoke's face. "Fine."

when I Her eyes rounded in obvious surprise. "Fine?"

vice me He cast her a wry smile. "Yes, Hen. I want you with me."

ie right "Well then..." She handed her hat, gloves, and reticule to one of the footmen. "I wonder what he's come here to do. Surrender? Or threaten

me at

OceanofPDF.com

c shook

glanced

her. "I

are the

nd Hen

aving a

lovely

ou think

all day.

onstone

ouse.

o await

but she

as she

ught in

in this

ntradict

len had

! worst

situations. He would need her voice of reason to keep him from smashing his fist into Stoke's face. "Fine."

Her eyes rounded in obvious surprise. "Fine?"

He cast her a wry smile. "Yes, Hen. I want you with me."

"Well then..." She handed her hat, gloves, and reticule to one of the footmen. "I wonder what he's come here to do. Surrender? Or threaten?"

OceanofPDF.com



Chapter Thirteen

CAIN HAD NOT met this new Earl of Stoke and was curious as to the purpose in coming to Malvern House. He did not think it was to suit unless something had happened in court that he had not yet heard Chiswell would have immediately sent him word.

He took a moment to question his butler before entering the visitor's parlor. "No, Your Grace. No messages for you. But I shall alert you at any come for you."

"Yes. Please do." Cain took Hen's hand and placed it on his arm. "Are you sure you want to see your cousin?"

"I am not a coward," she said, "especially when I have a big, grizzly bear at my side. Yes, I must see him."

"All right." He led her into the visitor's parlor. "Stoke, to what do you owe the pleasure?"

The man's hands were curled into fists, and he clearly appeared angry. Hen and her sisters had referred to him as a weasel, and he looked like one. An angry weasel, for his eyes were dark and beady, his hair thin and slicked back, and his nose came to a pointed snout. He was a thin man with a high-collared coat, and he dressed like a popinjay.

Cain wanted to chew this little man up alive.

Hen was also angry that he could feel the tension in the touch of his hand upon his arm. She was aching to take a poke at her cousin. He would not allow it, for the man might hit her back. Then Cain would be forced to defend her from him.

He made certain to keep himself positioned between Hen and the contemptible cousin. She was built of soft curves and lacked the physical brawn to defend herself if Stoke was demented enough to strike her.

"You know why I'm here," Stoke said. "Do not play coy, Malvern. We have no right to interfere with my family."

"I beg to differ. They will be my family soon, and you have been s-

from them.”

“Is this what she’s told you? And you believed her lies?”

“Careful what you say, Stoke. She is my betrothed, and I will call you a liar if you dare utter a word against her.”

Stoke glared at Hen. “Seduced him, did you? Has he gotten you pregnant? Too bad for you, I will never give my consent to marry him. Any child will be born a bastard, and—”

“The man’s name is Cain, and he will render me a visitor’s once if I do not about trust. For that matter, I am aware of the terms established by her father. Each of his daughters must turn the age of twenty and one. Lady Henley reaches that in a couple of months. There is nothing you can say or do to stop her from claiming the funds.”

“Are you sure?” The weasel seemed shocked.

Cain could see the panic in Stoke’s eyes—and then quick recalculation. His gaze once more settled on Hen. “But I control your sisters, and I can do nothing you can do to take them out of my guardianship.”

“We owe nothing to them. Dare to try, and I shall shoot you.”

Cain held her back, not wanting her within the scoundrel’s reach. “The trapped creature was not to be trusted. ‘Bring those girls into this area, and they shall not walk out of here alive,’ he said. ‘I shall dismember you piece by piece. Am I clear? You little gnat, I’ll squash you if you dare lay a hand on Hen or her sisters. Nor will you ever get your hands on anyone’s trust again. It is over, you fool. The best you can do is beg for their mercy, but I shall show you none. You are done. Exposed as a thief. You and your family shall be pariahs among the *ton*. It is only a matter of days before all I have will be yours to kill from you.”

“All?” Stoke suddenly appeared confused. “How can you take my land from me? My entailed properties?”

Cain shrugged. “I cannot, but the Crown has the power to do so. There is unrest enough in the country, resentment seething for the privileged few who are living fat while the ordinary man struggles. What do you think the regent will do when he hears you have been stealing from children, a widow, and elderly women? And he will hear of it. I dine with the

regularly.”

“I don’t believe you.”

you out Cain shrugged. “That is your mistake. The grant of your title is the pleasure of the Crown. I can assure you, every member of the royal family will be incensed once they hear of your behavior. I do not need to tell you of your campaign against you within the House of Lords. The royal family will bring you down themselves.”

cotland Sweat began to bead on the man’s brow.

of her Cain had taken the measure of Stoke and knew he was not clever. For truth, he was a fairly ignorant man who did not calculate the consequences of his actions. Nor was he familiar with his legal rights and powers. He had never even known that Hen’s funds were to be turned over to her when she was coming of age at twenty and one whether or not she married.

Had he bothered to read a single document? Or did he not care because he planned to steal it all anyway and thought he was untouchable?

ation as “We can attend to this quietly or I can hang you out to dry,” Cain said. “What is it to be, Stoke? You have ten seconds to decide. The count is down now. Ten. Nine.”

mile of “Wait! What are your terms?”

“Sign all control over to me. By that I mean for all the women in the family. Hen, her sisters, Mrs. Landers, and the maiden aunts. You are to give me your consent to Hen’s and my betrothal, which I shall announce tonight at the piece by Fielding’s party whether you comply or not. You and your wife are to give up your claim on the funds you stole. You and your wife are also to leave London. Slip out of the hole from whence you sprang. I will not have you sullying our name, for I have no connection with your unacceptable behavior. I am doing you a favor by demanding you both leave. Your wife is reckless at the gaming table and will bankrupt you within the month if you do not bring her under control.”

The weasel fidgeted and began to reach into his jacket pocket.

ny title “Eight. Seven. Six.” Cain prepared to lunge for Stoke if he withdrew his pistol, but the man merely drew out a handkerchief and began to wipe his forehead.

ew who “If I agree to this, you will leave me alone?”

the prince “Yes. Five. Four. Three. Two.”

, a war “All right! I will go home now and tell my wife.”

th him Cain clamped a hand on Stoke’s shoulder when he attempted to

“No. You come with me first. There are documents for you to sign.”

“But my wife—”

“Do not take me for a fool, Stoke. You do not get to go home until your family are signed. Then you can flee wherever you like...on your own funds. I have already gone away, I’ve had Bow Street runners following your every move since before you were born. You will be cut off and arrived in town. I know everything about you and Lady Stoke. You cannot sneeze without my hearing about it.”

He called for his carriage to be brought around and had his footman open the door for her. Inescort Stoke to it. “Hen,” he said, taking her aside a moment. “I cannot have you in the same carriage as that man. I dare not have you in the same carriage as that man who had notdesperate, and I have no idea what he might do in this situation. Let me reach the enraged bull and have this ugly affair finished.”

She nodded. “Yes, do what you must.”

But he saw the disappointment in her eyes, for she had been seen once again as he brought the hammer down on her cousin. She was silent for it, he knew. But she was also feeling insignificant and useless.

He did not know how to explain her importance to him and how much he needed her. He knew she had strength. It wasn’t physical strength. He needed her to smash a fist into a man’s face. “I’ll return in time to take part in the Lady Fielding’s party.”

He kissed her, a chaste peck on her cheek, and left.

As he reached his carriage, he thought about going back inside and restoring Hen he loved her.

No, he dared not spare the time.

He shook his head and climbed in.

Her cousin was restless, and every minute’s delay gave that man time to think. Cain could not risk having him regain his courage and resolve.” to sign the papers.

Cain had brought two of his best footmen along with him to maintain a show of force. Besides, they would also prove useful if Stoke tried to slip away. But the man seemed docile enough despite his obvious anger and thwarted.

When they arrived at the Inns of Chancery, he sent one of the footmen to fetch Hen’s solicitor, Garrick, and bring him to Chiswell’s bureau. He brought the other along for no reason other than a continued display of intimidating muscle.

Cain strode into Chiswell's office.

And held his breath until all signatures were set on the documents.

He knew he'd done the right thing in bringing Stoke straight over

By thefor his wife clearly ruled him with an iron fist and would have stopp
fore wefrom capitulating.

cannot In truth, the weasel seemed relieved to have all control taken ou
hands.

ootmen Hen and her family were now safe.

ot take It did Cain's heart good to know he was free to marry her. But this

l. He isHen would also be about to face her greatest challenge...him.

me be Would his night terrors destroy their chance at happiness?

OceanofPDF.com

et aside
grateful

nuch he
did not
you to

l telling

n extra
efusing

intain a
l to run
it being

nen off
au. He
play of

Cain strode into Chiswell's office.

And held his breath until all signatures were set on the documents.

He knew he'd done the right thing in bringing Stoke straight over here, for his wife clearly ruled him with an iron fist and would have stopped him from capitulating.

In truth, the weasel seemed relieved to have all control taken out of his hands.

Hen and her family were now safe.

It did Cain's heart good to know he was free to marry her. But this meant Hen would also be about to face her greatest challenge...him.

Would his night terrors destroy their chance at happiness?

OceanofPDF.com



Chapter Fourteen

HEN SPENT THE remainder of the afternoon writing to her sisters and settling in the Malvern library to read. But she could not decide on what to read, so she began to pace across the large room that held a thousand volumes all neatly aligned upon the polished mahogany shelves. “Why isn’t he here yet? Should he not be back by now?”

Prudence smiled as she joined her. “You know it is still far too early to have brought along my embroidery to occupy my time while we await the duke. You are going to wear a hole in his elegant carpet if you do not settle down. Have you ever seen a more magnificent home? And it will soon be yours to live in with that handsome man. Honestly, Hen. Why are you frowning? He has won a brilliant victory for us.”

“I know.”

“You ought to be more appreciative of his efforts. I certainly could not have accomplished any of this ourselves. We are not as intimidating as he is. Weasel Willis is a coward who only responds to the threat of a thrashing. He always was a whimpering, scheming brat even as a child.”

“You knew him better than we did. I don’t think we had met him more than once or twice. Of course, he always put on a false face to us.”

“He had every reason to appear charming, especially toward my family,” Prudence said. “Your father would never have put him in charge of so much as his kennels if he knew the true nature of the man. Hen, stop pacing. Do you think Malvern will like these handkerchiefs I am embroidering for him? I wanted to do something to show my gratitude for his help.”

Hen sighed. “Yes, he will enjoy them.”

“Why don’t you sit beside me and embroider something nice for him? He will appreciate these thoughtful gestures from his duchess. What he does not appreciate is your sour expression,” Prudence said with a teasing grin.

Hen laughed. “You are right, of course. But no sewing for me. C

the wizard when it comes to that. I am all thumbs. I'll read." She grabbed a book off a nearby shelf. The leather was soft beneath her hands, binding slightly cracked. "Oh dear."

"What did you pick out?"

"It is a poisoner's handbook. Well, I suppose it suits my temperament. I truly wanted to do Stoke in for all those months of torment he gave us. He is such a horrible man." She settled in one of the tufted chairs and put her mind to reading. But she merely skimmed through the books, some of which were illustrated with drawings of plants, and some with drawings of jewelry designed to hide deadly powders.

She had not heard of this before, but apparently it was a popular practice among the Italians to include a compartment in a locket, amulet, or ring which to hide their poisons. She told Prudence about it. "And look at this ring."

Her cousin set aside her needle and thread and joined her to study the drawing. "It is quite a distinctive design."

"I remember seeing one just like it in a jeweler's shop here in London. This was shortly before my father died and Weasel Willis kicked us out of the house," Hen said.

"The rings themselves look quite beautiful," Prudence mused. "I think most jewelers must carry them. The Italians are known for their artistry. I wonder if they were made here or in Italy and imported. Goodness, I think the ones you saw in the London shop had a secret compartment which could be put to such use?"

Hen shrugged. "I never thought to ask."

"I'm sure they would never be used for such purpose now, even if they were designed into these rings. What a medieval notion. But they could be used to hold a lock of a loved one's hair or a miniature portrait."

As the hours passed, Hen closed the book and went upstairs to prepare for Lady Fielding's party. She wanted to look particularly nice for Cain, whether he chose to announce their betrothal or not.

However, she knew this was what he intended to do.

Warmth spread through her, for it was a very good feeling to be loved and especially by such a fine man as Cain. He had come through for her, saving her and her family. She only hoped she would be as successful as he was with her. "I am sure he will not let me down," she thought. "I am sure he will not let me down."

abbed a Prudence had not been invited to attend this soiree, but being left and its nothing to dampen her excitement. She flitted around Hen like a butterfly bed of flowers, and chattered incessantly while Hen bathed. “One think I was going to marry the duke,” Prudence said. “My heart is t currentwith joy for you. This suddenly feels quite real. He’s done it, Hen. F nent heus from those fiends, and now he’s going to marry you. How can yo l chairs calm?”

pages, Hen laughed. “I am not in the least. My heart is in a wild flutter ie withfeel as though I am walking in a beautiful dream.”

Once her hair had dried, the lady’s maid assigned to attend Hen b r thingstyle her hair. “Molly,” she said when the young woman finished, ‘ ring indone an excellent job.”

at this “Thank you, m’lady.”

The girl was obviously talented and had worked effortlessly to br udy thetwist her curls to create this soft but intricate chignon.

Prudence nodded. “Yes, a job well done.”

.ondon. “Shall I help you with your gown now, m’lady?” Molly asked.

is out,” “Yes, please.” As the fabric slid over her curves, Hen felt like a p in gossamer silk. She was glad Phoebe had had the presence of mind ’m surea suitably elegant gown for her along with her other clothes. This was tistry. Iher finest, meant to be worn as she entered her second Season, a pe do youwith a small train of aquamarine tulle that floated and swirled whene ent thatwalked.

Her father had died as the season was about to open, so she ha worn it because the family had gone into mourning.

if they Prudence suddenly gasped. “Oh, Hen. We’ve overlooked th ould beimportant thing. You have no necklace to wear.”

“Oh, but I do. A lovely pearl necklace—”

pare for “On the night of your betrothal announcement? No, you mus ’s sake, something exquisite. Nothing as ordinary as pearls for you. How foolish not to think of this earlier.”

Molly softly cleared her throat. “I’m sure His Grace intends to j wanted, one of his family pieces for you.”

for her, Hen laughed. “You are more clever than both of us, Molly. Of cou sful foris what he intends.”

Prudence’s smile returned. “Yes, the duke knows his duty. You a

out did—he will never overlook this detail. Do you think he has the exact p
fly in amind for you? Shall we go downstairs and wait for him?”

would They were just descending the stairs when they heard a carriage dr
oursting Dinsmore hurried to the door. “Your Grace.”

rescued “Good evening, Dinsmore.”

u be so Hen drew in her breath as Cain strode in, for he looked splendid
formal attire. The black of his jacket enhanced the broadness of his sh
r, and Iand the fine taper of his body. It also brought out the burnished gol
hair.

egan to He looked up and saw her. “Hen, you look incredible.”

‘you’ve She hurried down to him with a joyous laugh. “So do you. Con
and utterly magnificent.”

aid andevening.” He grinned. “Sorry I’m late. I had to stop by my club to prepare

“Did everything go as you hoped at Mr. Chiswell’s office? I b
worry,” she said, tucking her arm in his as they walked into the f
private parlor along with Prudence, who was just as eager to hear his n

princess “Yes, surprisingly smooth. The man capitulated, as most cow
to packwhen confronted with the inevitable. He must have seen the constabl
; one ofthe bank manager off to prison, and panic set in that he’d be next. He
arl silkwith hardly a whimper. The ink had yet to dry on the parchment
ver sheChiswell sent the documents to the barrister to file. Your Mr. Garri
present and had your cousin sign the ones he had prepared, which in
d nevermy designation as his successor and his resignation. Lord Stockwell
board of directors were also informed. All relevant affidavits are now
e mostthe lord justice.”

Hen was delighted.

“Our betrothal contract is also signed and locked in Mr. Chiswell
st haveMr. Garrick has a copy. You can look it over with him at any time. B
sh of usmake any adjustments to it after we are married. I just wanted
signature on it now.”

provide “Yes, that was most urgent.”

“Afterward, I took Stoke to the parish house at St. Martin’s Ch
rse thissign for the marriage license.” He patted his breast pocket and cas
smile that reached his eyes.

re right His dimples were also on full display.

piece in She had never seen him so unguardedly content. He looked exceptionally handsome. His entire demeanor lightened as his smile turned endeavored up. boyish.

“Are you doing anything tomorrow, Hen?” he asked.

Prudence leaped out of her seat and squealed. “Not a thing! Her mouth is completely open. She’ll be ready. What time will you come by to take a walk under the church?”

Hen laughed. “It cannot be early enough for me. I will not sleep tonight. As it is, we’ll get home quite late from Lady Fielding’s party and I’m an early riser anyway, so I doubt I’ll manage more than an hour or two of completely sleep.”

“Do announce your betrothal early in the evening,” Prudence suggested for the Cain nodded. “It is all arranged with Lady Fielding. You needn’t worry about Hen. Our hostess is delighted that the formal announcement is being made at her party. She will gush over us and gloat to her friends and family’s. They’ll find her insufferable, which will make her triumph all the sweeter.”

“You seem to be a master at manipulating the *ton*,” Hen said. “The cards do mean it badly. You know their rules and exactly how to play within the rules. His expression softened. “Tactics have always been my strength. I cannot control everything. For this reason, I dare not wait to marry before. Although Stoke has signed off on all of it, he may yet decide to check back in his mind. Especially when that shrew of a wife lays into him. He has the power to overturn these documents, but he can still create enough of a ruckus and a storm to cause delay.”

She nodded. “I would not put it past him to do such a thing. I am sorry for him now, having to face that woman and tell her what he did.”

Prudence huffed. “He deserves none of your pity. The man is stupid. Unlike your husband-to-be, who is heroic in every way.”

Cain cleared his throat. “It will be a simple ceremony. I’ve asked Lord Stoke and Lord and Lady Stockwell to join us. Prudence, you’ll attend, of course. The Fieldings, if they are not too exhausted after their party. Lord and Lady Ashbrook as well, if he is fit enough to step out. I know he and you are church tower best friends, and it would mean a lot to you to have him present at her. We shall return here for our wedding breakfast.”

Hen nodded. “Sounds perfect. That is very thoughtful of you.”

It was more than kind of him to think of Lord and Lady Ashbrook

edingly her heart still hurt knowing her sisters would not be present. She squaringly her disappointment, knowing to delay would risk having their vict away. This posed the greatest danger to Phoebe and Chloe. M tomorrow was the best thing she could do for them.

day is Still, it hurt.

ce us to They had been through everything together.

Well, she would sit down with them once they returned to Mo a wink Landing, and the three of them would plan a special celebration.

y. I am Cain caressed her cheek to regain her attention. "My lovely Hen."

two of "I am fine, I promise. What happens next—I mean, now that our has resigned his trusteeship?"

ested. "Next step is to transfer all the accounts and place them un t worry authority. That is the simple part. Cormac's brother, Lord Stockwell, s to behas it underway. The official transfer of guardianship over your sister l night. can only be done by judicial order. The sooner we are wed, the quicke eter." happen. Otherwise, it could take months to finalize."

'I don't "You need say nothing more to convince me," Hen replied. "I am em." our exchanging vows as soon as possible. Not so much for fear of w i. But I cousin will do, but, as you pointed out a moment ago, for what his wif ry you, goad him to do. I would not put it past her to work up a scheme hersel nge his cannot persuade him to do her bidding."

sn't the Prudence nodded. "It takes a certain coldness to toss out one h of a family."

"And deprive them of food and shelter, steal their money, all so : ost feel indulge her gambling vice," Hen added.

"I cannot wait for you to slam the door in their faces, Your ineless. Especially hers. Well, you two run along and enjoy Lady Fielding's have my embroidery to occupy me. I think I shall sew a commer Cormac pillow, one depicting two weasels sitting on a powder keg with a course. about to blow them up."

id Lady Hen laughed. "Prudence! That is awful! Terribly satisfying, b r father awful."

t. Then "Remind me not to run afoul of you," Cain said. But after a mon their laughter subsided, he ran his knuckles along Hen's throat. "We c be going, but first come upstairs with me and select a Malvern neckl ok. But yourself."

“Something outrageously expensive,” Prudence insisted. “Hen, don’t try to slipchoose something plain and spoil His Grace’s pleasure. He intends to carry you off. Come along. We’ll pick out something dazzling together, something bright and blinding. I will never be a duchess, but I can certainly enjoy becoming one.”

They followed Cain upstairs, and he had them wait in her bedroom while he brought in a large box. “Only the Duchess of Malvern makes these pieces. You will be that by tomorrow, Hen.”

She understood the importance of presenting herself as his soon-to-be cousin duchess. With Prudence’s help, she selected a small tiara, which helped to properly secure to her curls. She also selected a delicate necklace of diamonds with an aquamarine stone in the center to perfectly match the already of her gown. “I think these will do.”

Prudence nodded. “Yes, nothing more is necessary. We mustn’t have it looking as though you raided a jeweler’s shop.”

Cain said nothing, but looked quite pleased. His dark eyes glinted with amusement.

After returning the other heirlooms to his chamber, he escorted her downstairs and helped her into his waiting carriage. He settled in the seat opposite hers, stretched his long legs, and eased his back against the cushions.

“My big bear is smiling,” Hen teased. “You look quite satisfied with yourself.”

He laughed. “Why shouldn’t I be? I am escorting the prettiest girl to the party. You look breathtaking, Hen.”

She blushed. “Molly did a good job of fixing me up.”

A soft smile played on his lips. “It’s all you. You are a little bit of a starlight. I never tire of looking at you.”

His eyes crinkled slightly at the corners and his gaze simply burned through her. She liked this lightness in him, for she did not think he was a happy man by nature. Frowning bear was a more apt description, tonight.

He looked so handsome when he smiled.

That she had the power to make him happy was not something she would ever take lightly. In truth, it still amazed her.

“I have been trained for this,” she said as their carriage wound

do not through the London streets. "I was raised as an earl's daughter and I know how to run an elegant household. I spent a year out in Society, and yet I have butterflies in my stomach. It is just a party, not even a ball. One day you think it was my very first Society affair. You look so calm. Are you really?"

"Yes."

Hammer She laughed. "Does nothing scare you?"

Why wear His smile slipped, and he leaned forward. "Only my dreams. They are the prey on my mind."

Don't be "Oh, Cain, forgive me. I never meant to make a jest of it. I know I'm a little afraid of hurting me while in the throes of one of those bad dreams. But we'll work it out. We are together in this fight, and together we shall conquer everything."

He took her hands in his.

Give you She thought it was a good opportunity to remind him that she loved him.

He did not appear inclined to say it back to her, and she was not going to press him. He would tell her whenever he was ready. A man such as Cain would not admit his affection easily.

And then To confide in her as he had about his dreams was proof enough of the trust and affection he held for her. She knew he valued her. He had called her "love" a time or two, and it was no small thing. He was not going to sort to casually spout endearments.

And with He was still leaning forward and holding on to her hands when the carriage drew up in front of Lady Fielding's residence. The townhouse was aglow, candles blazing in every chandelier in the house, the dazzling lights reflecting off the polished crystal.

Liveried footmen were in attendance, present everywhere one burst of Some stood out front as the carriages drew up. One of them, hardly more than a boy, dressed in the Fielding livery that seemed a little too big for him, and wearing a powdered wig, assisted her down.

There was a Others were in the garden, silent guardsmen positioned besides but not massive torches that lined the borders. More footmen bustled about in the garden, carrying silver trays laden with glasses of champagne.

This was to be a late evening, for supper would not be served until midnight. Of course, there was still plenty of food and drink to go around.

"Follow me, Hen." Cain grabbed two glasses of champagne and took them by its way for a quick turn about the garden as the sun was setting.

The air had not yet cooled, but soon would now that it was turning
When they found themselves alone for a moment and hidden be-
tree, Hen rose on tiptoes and kissed him on the lips. "I love you."
"Hen—"

"No, you do not need to respond to me. Lady Fielding's foot
coming toward us. She probably wants us to join her now on the re-
ey still line. It was not well done of us to slip past her without so much
greeting."

"I would have taken you back in a moment."

"Well, we are being summoned now. Let us enjoy the evening.
need you to say anything to me. I know how you feel about me."

Music filled the air as they entered the elegant townhouse.

Lady Fielding motioned them over. "Come, my dears. Stand beside
ed him. They took their places and dutifully greeted her guests as they pa-
oing to the queue. Hen noted the party was small compared to most *ton* affair
as Cain about eighty guests present for a night of supper and dancing.

This was how exclusive these grand dinner parties were. To be in
of the was a mark of honor.

Lady Fielding turned to her with a bright smile. "Has Malvern me-
the glib that you are to open the dance along with me and my son, the cur-
Fielding? Immediately afterward, Malvern will announce your betroth-

Hen was quickly learning that Cain left nothing to chance. "elegant perfect."

He approached even this soiree with military precision, his battle
place before a single note of the orchestra was struck or the first g
turned. champagne passed around.

"Stay close to me tonight, Hen," he whispered as the last of the
im still, entered the ballroom.

"Why? Are we still in danger? Have you seen Stoke? Neither he
ide the wife were in the queue who streamed past us. But I know they were in
ndoor,

He laughed softly. "No, not that sort of danger. But I am goin-
accosted by every young woman of marriageable age and their
before mothers. I need you to protect me from them until our betroc
nd. announced."

She rolled her eyes. "Honestly, you are having too much fun
Admit it, you adore the attention heaped on you."

dark. “No, you have no idea how aggressive some of these women can be behind a She glanced around and quickly saw that he was garnering even notice. They were quickly surrounded by other guests. Some of them familiar to Hen from her first Season, and she engaged them in conversation.

But her smile slipped when the woman who had dropped Cain at Malvern House the other day approached them.

Lady Alexandra.

The elegant society creature did not look pleased to see her beside Cain, and made a point of treating her as invisible when she spoke to him. “Darling, you must dance with me tonight.”

Hen thought of her as a cat because of the way she purred and the way she tried to rub against him as they spoke.

There was no warmth in this woman’s eyes, just envy. Was she interested in loving anyone but herself?

Cain did his best to back away, but there was little room to move included to avoid her unless he wished to topple the large potted ferns immediately

behind them. “No, Alexandra. I’ll only be dancing with Hen tonight.”

Though the lady wore gloves, Hen saw her claws come out.

“Then perhaps I shall tempt you in other ways,” she said with an annoying purr to her voice. “I remember how possessive you once were to me. You could not keep your hands off me. And you would never allow any other man to approach.”

“I don’t recall it that way, but if you say so. It is a good thing you are engaged to me long enough to marry.” Cain frowned when she did not move on.

“Introduce me, darling. It is impossibly rude of you to hide me from the guests’ latest distraction.”

“Give it a rest, will you? As you well know, this is Lady Fenwick, not his Killigrew. Hen, love, Lady Fenwick is an old friend.”

“Lovely to meet you, Lady Fenwick,” Hen said. “I’ve heard so much to be about you. Indeed, quite an earful about you from the duke. By the way, I’m eager to thank you for bringing him home to me the other day.”

“I hope you didn’t mind his riding alone with me in my carriage that is Alexandra replied. “After all, he and I have a history. We were quite together at this at one time.”

“Yes, but that is old news. Very old. I gave it not a second thought

e.” Cain glanced at her once Lady Fenwick moved on. “Why, Hen, wa
ryone’s bit of wicked sarcasm on your part? I did not know you had it in you.”

m were “That was awful of me. I think this is why I did not mind leav
in easy London social whirl for Moonstone Landing. People here can be dispa
always ready to step on others to climb to the top. And look how e
1 off at brought out the worst in me. How much better off we would all be
manipulative schemers put their efforts into something useful?”

“True, but it will never happen,” Cain replied. “Alexandra is a fru
tanding angry woman. Her husband is a decent sort and could have given her
greeted marriage had she allowed it. But she is petty, always wanting wha
hers, and never content with all she has in front of her. She’ll
e feline understand that she’s brought the misery on herself.” He took Hen’s ha
led her onto the dance floor behind Lady Fielding and her son.

capable “She thinks she still has a claim on you.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Even as an idiot boy, I understood what s
n order Trouble. She never had a serious claim on me and never will. Enoug
ediately her, Hen. Our hostess is about to open the dance.”

Tingles shot through her the moment Cain put his arm around he
and took hold of her hand to begin the waltz. These affairs were not
ith that opened with a waltz, but she was not complaining. There was nothir
re over than being in his arms. He had a way of conveying his feelings with
ow any touch, his hold protective and at the same time exciting.

There was the promise of love in his touch.

escaped And yet she could still sense his torment. It was like a ghost circlin
perhaps silenced at times, but always close and threatening.

m your Well, her strength was in knowing how to put people at ease, a
would do all in her power to help Cain escape its menacing grasp.

Henley The room was large and had been cleared of all furniture to all
dancing before a late supper was served. The walls were a cheerful
o much trimmed in white, and the ornate ceiling had cherubs painted on it
ie way, plump, childlike angels played their instruments in an Italian countrysi

Cain led her through the steps of the waltz with surprising ea
rriage,” movements fluid and graceful. “You are very good at this,” she sa
he itembothering to hide her surprise.

“Did you not know? Bears can dance.”

.” She laughed and missed a step in her distraction, but he so quick

is that flawlessly guided her back that she doubted anyone noticed her mistake.

As soon as the dance ended, Lady Fielding gave the nod for her friends to resume serving champagne. She welcomed her guests and then glided through the dining room over to Cain, who wasted no time in announcing their betrothal.

They were immediately surrounded by a crush of well-wishers.

Hen noticed a few in the background who did not look pleased, disappointed debutantes, and Lady Alexandra, who had her back arched that of a hissing cat.

She shrugged off the woman's animosity. The night was a beautiful dream, and she was not going to let anyone ruin it for her.

Odd, how quickly life changed.

A few weeks ago, she was worried about having to mortgage Moor Cottage. She and her sisters were scrimping on everything. Now, she stood in an elegant ballroom, about to become Cain's duchess.

It felt quite nice to be officially betrothed to him.

He grinned as he received everyone's good wishes, that smile sincerely warming her insides as she watched him enchant everyone.

She was also smiling and quite enjoying herself—until she spotted her usually cousin and his wife.

"Cain," she whispered, her heart shooting into her throat because a mere presence rattled her. She had not believed they would attend. In truth, she had hoped they would pack up their belongings and run from London when the news of their misdeeds broke.

"I see them." He put a hand to the small of her back to reassure her.

Lady Alexandra's irritating behavior no longer seemed important, and she was never concerned about Cain's feelings for his old paramour. He obviously had none. But Stoke and his wife were a danger and would follow her until she and Cain married.

He drew her closer. "Don't leave my side, Hen."

"I have no intention of it. What shall I do if they approach?" Since she had taken care of dealing with her cousin since their arrival in London, she had sought to take her guidance from him. She did not want to make a mistake and undo all his good work.

"Be cordial, nothing more. I'll whisk you off for a dance if they take the hint and move on. He is fortunate I do not toss him over the balcony and into Lady Fielding's thorny roses."

e. To Hen's dismay, the pair approached them a moment later.
ootmen She felt Cain's grip tighten around her waist to draw her close.
ave the "Stoke," he said, his manner aloof, "I expected you to be on your way
Staffordshire. Did you not have urgent business which required your
departure?"

several Lady Stoke tipped her head up in defiance. "Nothing so urgent would
ied like not attend Lady Fielding's soiree and share a drink in celebration of
betrotal to Stoke's ward."

autiful "It is not necessary," Cain assured her. "Lady Fielding has already
the announcement and everyone has toasted us."

onstonedrink to your and Lady Henley's good health."

ere she "No. Make your apologies to our hostess and leave before I have
both thrown out."

"You wouldn't dare." Her lips twisted in a cruel smile as she g
ere and Hen. "Will you deny your own family a toast on your impending nupti

"Indeed, I will." Why was she making such a fuss over a drink? A
ted her the horrid woman was staring avidly at the Malvern necklace around
throat. Hen noted the twitch of her hands. Itchy fingers. Fortunately
se their necklace was double clasped and quite secure.

ith, she But Hen saw the calculation in her eyes and knew she was figuring
before how much she might get if she slipped it off Hen's neck and stole it.
desperate she must be to look at everything as a means to feed her voracious
: appetite for gambling.

not that Cain kept a protective hold on Hen as he once again addressed her
our. Her relatives. "Do not test me, Lady Stoke. You are new to this game, but
remain born to it and will outmatch you at every turn. I do you a kindness
exposing your husband's venal behavior toward the family he was sworn
to protect."

ce Cain Lady Stoke sputtered, but held back her outrage, since it would
on, she the image of cordiality she and her husband were trying desperately
mistake maintain.

"Stoke," Cain continued, his voice lethally calm, "the late earl left
do not state in excellent condition. Do not allow your wife's grasping nature
on balcony your laziness to undo it all. Apply yourself and you will live
comfortably. Now, go."

The pair moved on with feigned joviality.

er still. Cain turned to Hen as she let out a breath of relief. “Are you a
back to Hen?”

· abrupt She nodded. “Was it not the oddest exchange? What was she ho
accomplish? But you handled the situation perfectly.”

e could “So did you.”

of your “You are only being kind. I burrowed against you like a coward.”

“You still have reason to be wary of those two. Another day and y
y made be out of their reach. Once you are my duchess, your weasel cousin
shrew of a wife will fade into the background and become irrelevant
do not Care for another dance? I believe this is the last waltz before supper.”

“Yes, I would love any excuse to be in your arms.” She wanted
ive you him fiercely, loved how ably he rose to every challenge. In her e
seemed infallible, but she knew he was not. He hid his torment so w
azed at this did not mean it wasn’t there, simmering beneath the surface.

als?” Stoke and his wife were just taking their leave by the time th
nd now ended. Footmen were scurrying about, and the aroma of succulent
l Hen’s wafted in the air. Hen expected the dinner bell would soon ring, and
ely, the would be asked to the dining room for the evening’s featured repast.

A footman approached Cain with a brandy in hand. “Complimer
ing out friend, Your Grace.”

it. How “What friend?” Hen asked, uncertain why a tingle suddenly shot
racious spine.

“Forgive me, Lady Henley. I did not catch the name.”

odious “Oh my goodness.” She held Cain back as he was about to drink.
it I was put it to your lips. How could I have been so stupid?”

by not He frowned, more confused than angry when she remained in
pposed “What’s wrong, Hen?”

“I happened to be reading a poisoner’s handbook earlier today.”

destroy He burst out laughing. “Should I be worried?”

itely to “Cain, the Italians designed rings with special compartments t
poison powders. It struck me as odd...Lady Stoke was so insistent on
you ana drink with us. Did that not seem strange to you?”

ure and “A little. But irritating, for certain.”

e quite “Then she was staring at my necklace, so I stared back and took
her jewelry. She had on one of those Italian rings, an exact replica of

I saw illustrated in the book.”

“All right, Hen, is that not a stretch to—”

“She is desperate.” She put a hand to the necklace at her throat. “I’m hoping to be sure she meant to grab this Malvern heirloom. Did you not notice the way she salivated over it? I am sure she is up to something because she needs to break her gambling habit, and now we have cut her off. Or should I say, you cut her off. But with you out of the way, she may believe her husband and you will reclaim control of all he has just signed away.”

and his He glanced at the drink in his hand and then back at her. “You think to you. think they mean to harm me?”

She nodded. “I think she does, because she cannot get at our trust to hug while you protect me. I’m not sure about my cousin, though. I don’t think he has the spine for this sort of thing. For his sake, I hope he is ready to sell, but back to Staffordshire and give up on all his grand plans. But there is a way to find out. Take the drink to him and offer it with your apologies. I was being curt earlier. Let’s see if he hesitates to take it. More important, I don’t want to see if Lady Stoke knocks it out of his hand.”

Cain cast her a wry grin. “You do realize if this is poisoned, then you have saved my life. See, I told you I needed you. Stay here, Hen.”

“Not a chance. I’m coming with you.”

“All right, but stay close and let me do the talking.”

She nodded.

He ordered another brandy from a passing footman. When it arrived, he led Hen over to the pair, who were still standing beside their host. “Don’t appear to be boring her to tears as they lingered over their departure.”

Well, if she was right about Lady Stoke tampering with Cain’s drink, they were likely stalling to see what would happen next.

Those rotten fiends.

“Lord Stoke, a moment,” Cain said, extending the hand that he had earlier delivered to him. “You asked to share a congratulatory drink with me before taking your leave. Here, take this one and we shall share family bonds.”

Stoke eyed him warily, but was about to drink from the offered glass when his wife knocked it out of his hands. Some of the drink spilled onto the floor. “Oh, my dear!” she said.

“Do forgive me. We must leave right away and attend to the stain.”

it sets.”

Cain’s eyes bored into her, his glower seeming to immobilize her.

“I was there for an instant. “No, Stoke. Hold a moment.”

Hen’s cousin appeared genuinely confused. “Well, all right. What is all this nonsense about?”

His wife paled and grabbed his arm to tug him away. “We must go now.”

A footman appeared to clean up the shattered glass.

“Stoke, we really must go,” his wife insisted.

“But, my dear... Oh, Lady Fielding, I do apologize. I think my wife is feeling well.”

“She’ll feel worse in a moment,” Cain growled. “Hand over your keys to Lady Stoke.”

She shrieked and knocked Hen over as she sprinted out of the room.

Lord Stoke chased after his wife.

Lady Fielding shook her head in confusion. “What in heaven’s name happened?”

“Hen, are you hurt?” Cain did not bother to go after the pair. Instead, he knelt beside her and carefully lifted her in his arms.

“Just winded,” she managed to say as she regained her breath. “I’m bruised, I think. But nothing broken.”

“Lady Fielding, I need to take her somewhere quiet.”

“The poor dear! Yes, follow me.” Lady Fielding led Cain to the library, nudging her curious guests out of the way to forge a path out of the room.

“I didn’t hit my head,” Hen muttered, sensing his concern. “I’ll be right in a moment. But I got it.”

“Got what?” Frowning, he entered the library and gently set her down on the leather divan. “Blast it, why did you try to stop her? She’s twice your size.”

“Look.” She smiled up at him and held out Lady Stoke’s ring. “I got it off her hand when she tried to push me over.”

“Tried? She did push you over. You are a little thing, Hen. No matter her size and brawn.” He emitted a groaning laugh. “I don’t know whether to hug you or throttle you. She might have hurt you.”

“Any bruises will fade in a day or two. Let’s get the powder in the ring analyzed.”

Lady Fielding gasped. “Powder? Ring? What was the horrid

trying to do?”

both of Her son now joined them and must have heard a few moments of exchange. “Shall I call in the constables?”

It is this Cain shook his head. “No, James. It may all be nothing. You see, I was reading a book on poisons earlier today, and I think—hell, at least I think—her imagination got the better of her. Someone sent over a brandy and when your footman could not recall who—”

“Oh, Lord. That was me. I sent over the drink and asked him to identify it. It is not anonymous. I can assure you, the Stokes were never near that glass.”

Heat shot into Hen’s cheeks. “They weren’t?”

“Well, I don’t think so. I...wasn’t watching him the entire time, surely...”

Hen glanced at Lady Stoke’s ring in dismay. “But she has a compartment in it. And look, here are the remains of a powder. Oh, here, here, here.” Cain and Lord Fielding examined the powder.

Lord Fielding cast Hen a mirthless smile. “Seems she is an opium addict, eh?” “In addition to her gambling problems,” Cain muttered. “At worst, she tampered with my drink, the opium might have made me giddy for a little while. A little. There isn’t enough in here to do a man my size any permanent damage. She probably used it herself before coming to the party.”

“What a sad thing,” Lady Fielding said with a shake of her head. Hen sat up, now utterly confused. “But she behaved as though she was guilty. Why knock the drink out of her husband’s hands if she hadn’t planned to do it? All this bit of mischief and thought we’d caught her at it?”

Cain had been on his haunches beside her and now moved to sit on her on the divan. “Because she thought we were going to poison *him*.”

“What?” Hen’s breath caught in her throat, and she stared at him wide-eyed. “How could she ever believe such a preposterous thing? You’ve just grabbed the most noble man who has ever existed. As for me, I could not harm even one who needed a good swatting.”

Cain’s lips twitched at the corners in the flicker of a smile. “The French expression, *honi soit qui mal y pense*—shame on anyone who thinks evil of it. She may have been dreaming up plots of revenge to poison her husband. She knew about these Italian rings, since she used the compartment in hers for her own powders. She was thinking evil thoughts about us and then assumed we were doing the same when I handed

brandy to her husband.”

of their Lord Fielding laughed. “She believed you were trying to poison her husband?”

ae, Hen Hen was beside herself in dismay. “But we never would!”

t I hope “Of course *you* would never do such a dishonorable thing,” Lady Fielding intoned. “But she is a low creature and imagined you were capable because she was not above attempting it herself.”

keep it “Oh dear. Then there was nothing wrong with the drink. What was done?” Hen buried her face in her hands.

Cain took her hands in his and drew them away from her face. “Hen, look at me. Your suspicions were understandable. And they may yet be true, although I don’t know if we can retrieve the glass now. It has probably been taken away to be washed.”

avens.” “So we’ll never know for certain,” Lord Fielding remarked.

Cain nodded. “The pair did not think twice before getting their hands on your inheritance. Lady Stoke had to know it would all catch up to her someday. She just hadn’t expected it to be this soon. Given another plan, she might very well have acquired a lethal poison and done me some damage. I’m sure she did pour some of her opium into the brandy Lord Fielding’s father was delivering to me, hoping it might be enough to fell me. It would have taken no more than an accidental bump into him, a moment’s distraction, and they were accomplished the task.”

planned “You are only saying this to make me feel better.” She shook her head and laughed along with the others when she realized how ridiculous her next words sounded. “You know what I mean.”

“I do, love. Thank you for worrying about me and likely saving me from a wide-a-night of painful cramps...or worse.”

are the Lord Fielding still held the ring. “Shall I turn it over to the magistrate? It’s a fly...” Cain glanced at it. “I’ll hold on to it for now, then Hen and I can decide what to do about the Stokes. What do you think, Hen? Shall we see if there is a magistrate after them?”

o thinks “Without the glass, how will we ever prove their dastardly intentions to you or said.

secret “As for Lady Stoke’s ring, is there a point to holding on to it? I thought Fielding asked. “She would be deprived enough to accuse Lady Hen of stealing it.”

Her son agreed. "I'll have it delivered to her tomorrow, along with her informing her we are cutting off all association with her and her husband. I will advise our friends to do the same."

"Yes, this is exactly what we must do. I heartily agree." Lady Fielding took her son's arm. "Our guests must be wondering what is going on. Let's feed them. That ought to distract everyone. Shall I make excuses for you, my dears? I will understand if you wish to leave early."

Hen's cheeks were ablaze with embarrassment as she looked up at Fielding. "Would you rather we left? I cannot apologize enough for this horrendous incident. That woman has had me so on edge ever since my mother died. And reading that book on poisons, then seeing her ring... Well, we probably never know for certain whether she had touched that drink. Still, I have put a tether on my imagination."

Lady Fielding cast her an affectionate smile. "Nonsense, my dear. You sticky had every reason to be wary of her. Their perfidy is exposed now, but it has already been rampant about that pair. A disgrace to your father's title for a day to decency."

"Everyone in London will be begging my mother for invitations to her dinner party," Lord Fielding added with a grin. "Do come join us. Cook has outdone herself. You are a slight thing and probably eat like a mouse. But Cain must be famished and ready to eat the furniture."

Hen laughed. "You are far too kind to me. I am happy to stay here if you wish it."

Cain took her hands in his. "Are you certain?"

She nodded.

He smiled in obvious relief. "Good. This bear is starved and needs to be fed."

"ate?"

"decide

end the

it?" she

"Lady

nley of

Her son agreed. "I'll have it delivered to her tomorrow, along with a note informing her we are cutting off all association with her and her husband and will advise our friends to do the same."

"Yes, this is exactly what we must do. I heartily agree." Lady Fielding took her son's arm. "Our guests must be wondering what is going on. Come, let's feed them. That ought to distract everyone. Shall I make excuses for you, my dears? I will understand if you wish to leave early."

Hen's cheeks were ablaze with embarrassment as she looked up at Lady Fielding. "Would you rather we left? I cannot apologize enough for this horrid incident. That woman has had me so on edge ever since my father died. And reading that book on poisons, then seeing her ring... Well, we shall never know for certain whether she had touched that drink. Still, I had better put a tether on my imagination."

Lady Fielding cast her an affectionate smile. "Nonsense, my dear. You had every reason to be wary of her. Their perfidy is exposed now, but gossip was already rampant about that pair. A disgrace to your father's title and his decency."

"Everyone in London will be begging my mother for invitations to next year's dinner party," Lord Fielding added with a grin. "Do come join us. Cook has outdone herself. You are a slight thing and probably eat like a bird. But Cain must be famished and ready to eat the furniture."

Hen laughed. "You are far too kind to me. I am happy to stay if Cain wishes it."

Cain took her hands in his. "Are you certain?"

She nodded.

He smiled in obvious relief. "Good. This bear is starved and needs to be fed."



Chapter Fifteen

CAIN BREATHED A sigh when Cormac arrived at the church with Lord and Lady Stockwell shortly before noon the following day. They had been through the worst of times together, and he wanted his friend to now be in Cain's best day. He was glad their friendship was solid enough to pull him out of the cocoon of misery in which he had wrapped himself since losing his arm.

The Fieldings, mother and son, had also been invited to their wedding, and they had been more than gracious to him and Hen. Despite the late start to their dinner party, the pair arrived all smiles and looking none the worse for wear.

Lord and Lady Ashbrook sent their regrets, for he was too frail to leave his sickbed. Cain was disappointed for Hen's sake, for the Ashbrooks had a close link to her parents, and she would feel their absence.

"Where's Hen?" Cormac asked, giving him a playful nudge to shake him out of his thoughts. "Has she come to her senses and run off?"

Cain shook his head and laughed. "No, you arse. I just saw her at Mr. Garrick's House, but I came on ahead to greet our guests. Her solicitor, Mr. Garrick, was escorting her in my carriage. She wanted him to stand in place of her father. He's a good man. They should arrive at any moment."

He had no sooner spoken the words than his carriage drew up. His ebullient cousin, Prudence, stepped out first. Garrick came down next.

Cain drew in a breath as Hen descended, her gown a honey-color that brought out the tawny hues of her hair and delicate green of her eyes. "She's beautiful, isn't she?"

Cormac nodded. "Am I permitted to tease her about last night? Garrick was rampant this morning about Hen tackling Lady Stoke and wrestling her to the ground."

"Blessed saints, is that what they're saying?" Cain laughed. "Actually, Lady Stoke barreled over her when Hen tried to stop her."

running off. Hen went flying. Fortunately, she's only slightly bruise ought to have accepted Lady Fielding's invitation and seen Hen in ac yourself."

"Next time."

Which was Cormac's way of saying he wasn't ready to join the whirl anytime soon.

Cain resolved to talk to his friend about it, but not today. Th
ord and
d been
partake
o draw
lf since
ing, for
ness of
orse for
o leave
were a
stir him
Malvern
rick, is
father.
Hen's
red silk
er eyes.
ossip is
r to the
again.
er from

Cormac was going through was no light thing, and could not be ad within a matter of minutes. It was no splinter that could be drawn out c palm and easily cleansed. He knew and understood.

Their bond had always been strong, but had gained in strength ove past few years because each understood what the other was going t Their demons might not be exactly the same, but they were cap destroying them each in their own way.

However, now he'd found Hen.

The girl with starlight in her eyes.

Cain forgot everyone and everything as his beautiful bride stood the carriage and thanked the footman who handed her the small bou were a flowers she was to hold when marching to the altar.

This was her strength, this ability to put a smile on someone's face kind word or nod of appreciation.

He strode forward to escort her into the church. "I cannot take n off you."

She cast him a glowing smile. "You are quite magnificent y Ready to get leg-shackled, Your Grace?"

"Eager for it. Ah, here's the minister. I had better take my plac Hen's kissed her lightly on the cheek. "Meet you at the altar."

The ceremony proceeded smoothly.

Cain felt proud as he listened to Hen repeat her vows. She spok with such sincerity and so much love in her heart.

He hoped to convey the same with his vows, for he wanted their m to succeed.

It had to. It would destroy him if he made Hen unhappy.

Before Cain knew it, the minister declared them husband and wife.

He kissed Hen and then whispered, "I love you."

She looked at him as though she'd heard wrong, but he knew he ha

ed. You clear. This was the right time to tell her, as they stood at the sacred altar. They pledged themselves to each other.

Hen was a miracle delivered to him when he needed it most.

Their friends cheered and surrounded them to express their good wishes. Prudence giggled and addressed her as *Your Grace*.

Hen was effusive in her happiness.

Cormac patted him on the back. "I've never seen anyone happier."

Cain nodded. "Yes, she's radiant."

"I meant you," Cormac said with a chuckle. "You haven't smiled so freely since we were children."

"I'm relieved she is now out of danger from Lord and Lady Stoke."

Cormac nodded. "That is no small thing. They will not dare put their hands on the Duchess of Malvern. If only our problems could be so easily resolved. Perhaps yours will be. Hen could very well be the magical cure you need."

"I hope so, but I doubt my night terrors are going away anytime soon. They've grown worse since the war ended. It makes no sense." Cain tried to keep the frustration out of his voice, but probably failed. "I know Naer has been defeated and will not escape exile this time. But my soul does not seem to realize it yet."

"You understand the war is over, but you haven't come to terms with your surviving it pretty much unscathed when so many of your friends did not," Cormac said, his manner no longer lighthearted. "Just as I have come to terms with losing a limb. I seem to have lost my heart along with it. These events haunt us. Destroy us. Leave us raging because we cannot do anything about them. You married well, and you know I do not say that lightly. In time, your Hen will calm your anger down. I know she will for I see the way you look at each other."

Cain nodded. "I hope you find the same someday."

"Perhaps someday." His friend grinned and glanced upward toward the heavens. "My perfect woman will have a tougher task with me than you are likely to have with you."

A few moments later, Cain escorted his new bride to their carriage.

His bride.

Hen was now his.

It felt good to have her to himself as they made their way back to the House for the wedding breakfast. Garrick rode with Cormac and his while Prudence rode with the Fieldings.

Hen snuggled up to him. "You look awfully morose for a bridegroom."

He raked a hand through his hair. "I am happy."

"You were as we exchanged our vows. But you have since moved are planning ahead. Tonight worries you."

He muttered a lame denial.

"I don't think this is something you can approach with battle tactics advanced strategy, Cain. This pain comes from somewhere deep within their soul."

"I've lived with it for a while now. But you haven't, love. Hurting me is all I worry about."

"You won't ever hurt me. I think your need to protect me is also deep inside your soul, and it will win out."

"Perhaps, but what if it does not?" This was what worried him especially since he knew Hen would push his limits.

"Time will tell, but I am fairly confident of the answer. Love conquers all."

It does, Cain. I believe this with all my heart. Did you mean it when you said you loved me?" She cast him a gentle smile. "I wanted to leap into your arms and smother you with kisses. But the minister seemed eager to get on with the ceremony. So was I. Not to be your duchess, but eager to be your wife with it, you too."

"I know, Hen. I see it in the way you look at me, the way you light up such a glow when I approach. Dealing with me will take every ounce of that love."

"We'll start with little steps," she said. "I understand we need separate bedchambers for now. Nor must we answer to anyone but each other. We'll have the house to ourselves for the next few nights, since Prudence is staying with Lord and Lady Stockwell. Whatever happens will be between us. Nor does anything need to happen. We need not have a wedding night...I mean...nothing needs to happen until—"

"Hen, I am not holding off." He cast her a wry grin. "Don't pat me as though I am a little boy. I'm not worried about what I do while I'm awake. Blessed saints, I'm going to devour you. You'll like that part, I promise you. I have no intention of holding back." He kissed her softly on the

Malvern “However, you are going to lock your door and keep me out before my family goes to sleep. I want your promise on it.”

She nodded with obvious reluctance. “We’ve already had this discussion. Yes, you have my promise.”

The rest of the day passed smoothly, and Cain found himself surprisingly at ease by the time the guests left and he was finally alone with Hen. It was not very late, only eight o’clock in the evening. But they’d eaten all the food they had gotten little sleep the night before, so they were both ready to turn in.

Hen’s maid was waiting for her in her duchess’s quarters. His valet awaited him in his ducal chamber.

Cain dismissed them both, then opened the door between his bedroom and Hen’s. “I’ll claim the privilege of undressing you tonight.”

Hen gave a laughing snort. “You haven’t seen the clasps and laces on your gown. It might take you a while.”

He shrugged out of his jacket and waistcoat, then took her in his arms. “I won’t. I shall approach your delectable body as I do a battlefield,” he said, easily undoing the laces and distracting her with soft kisses along the curve of her neck. “Surveying all the obstructions and deciding where to charge.”

She cast him an impudent smile. “Shall I do the same with yours?”

“Have at me while I have at you?” He arched an eyebrow and gave her a wicked smile. “Go ahead, give it a try. I’ll do my best to distract you.”

She began to fumble with his shirt.

He distracted her by licking her throat as he removed the necklace. Next came the tiara. He removed it and gave her a feather-suck on the lips.

Then a deeper kiss.

Her eyes were now closed and her breaths came quicker.

He easily undid the rest of her gown and soon had it off her. She will be wearing nothing but her corset and shift.

“You are falling behind, Hen. You have yet to undo a single button on your mine.”

She opened her eyes, her expression wondrous as she laughed. “Your tactics are completely unfair. You trailed your tongue along my neck and now I cannot concentrate.”

He planted a steamy kiss at the base of her throat. “Shall I stop, love?”

She closed her eyes again and licked her lips. “No, that’s heavenly.”

you fall my..."

He tossed her corset aside, but did not immediately remove her corset. Instead, he unbuttoned his shirt and slipped it off.

Her eyes were open again, and he liked how avidly she watched him rise of his muscles along his bare arms and chest. In return, he noted the rise of her breasts as she anticipated what was to come next. He took her back in his arms, liking the warmth of her skin again and her light blush.

Soft light filtered into her chamber, casting her in the gentle twilight. A golden light.

He removed the pins from her hair and watched the intricately braided twists come free and her curls tumble loosely over her shoulders and down her back. "You look so pretty, Hen." He buried his fingers in her hair and drew her close for a deep, lingering kiss.

The last of their clothes were shed by the time he carried her to the bed. He began to tease her with his kisses, explore her with his caresses. He had been aching to see what lay beneath the layers of clothing, suspecting he would find skin as soft as cream and silky to the touch.

She stole his breath away. Truly, she was perfection. He stared at her lovely breasts and their dusky rose peaks, then he took one into his mouth.

She gasped as he began to suckle her. "Cain," she whispered, clenching his head and emitting several breathy moans.

"Close your eyes, love. Feel each sensation." He was atop her as he now lay on her back on the bed, but he was careful not to put all of his weight on her slight frame.

He was feeling each sensation as well, for in all his experience, he had never imagined anyone could be this beautiful, this soft and warm and captivated so softly. She tasted as sweet as honeysuckle.

Her hair was drawn off to one side so that it tumbled over one shoulder and the tawny curls partially hid one breast. He moved those tresses with a caressing brush of his hand and then lowered his lips to this peak. "Oh...mound and flicked his tongue across its hardened peak. "I cannot get

of you, love.”

er shift. She was ready for him by the time he moved his hand lower to str
intimate spot between her thighs. Ready and responsive, clutchi
he playshoulders and moaning as her passion built, eager to take him in w
ise and entered her.

His senses were roaring, for she was deliciously hot and delightin
inst his every touch. But he moved slowly, holding back the rutting boar in
him because he dared not lose control when it was her first time.

aura of He did not rush their coupling, but took his cues as to her readine
the lick of her lips, the soft pucker of her mouth when she moaned, th
on her expressive face.

r styled An odd feeling came over him as he watched her respond, as h
own here embedded himself inside her and claimed her as his own. He’d expect
fiery build as their bodies joined, the pulsing heat and throbbing pleasu
ngering he had not appreciated the intensity of this marital bond now forged b
him and Hen.

oed and The act of love was physical and pleasurable, but with his every
ad been also came a promise to protect her, to love her, to always cherish her.

o would These were promises he meant to keep.

She was easy to love, for she had a beautiful heart and an outraq
glorious body. Her smile was sunshine.

Her purrs and breathy moans were a delight, her passion so exq
cupped honest and unrestrained that he could not get enough of watching her
she tipped over the edge and found her pleasure, so did he.

utching His seed spilled into her, but the act meant so much more
moment’s gratification. With it, he was pledging his love. He would l
she lay always, for this was the only way he could ever be with Hen.

on her “Cain,” she said, wrapping her arms around him as they lay t
afterward, their hearts still pounding and their bodies damp with the s
e hadn’t their sex. “I had no idea this is what people meant when they spo
ating. wedding night.”

He chuckled. “This is why parents guard their daughters like hawk
houlder “It felt splendid. How was it for you?”

s aside “Better than splendid, love. Powerful. Perfection.” He kissed her
creamy on the lips. “These feelings were a first for me, too.”

enough “I’m glad.”

He shifted her so that she lay atop him, for he wanted to see her face
soak in her smile. Her heart was still racing; he could feel its rap-
ping his against the wall of his chest. He could also feel the fullness of her breasts
when she rested atop him, and felt aroused once more. "I cannot get enough
of you."
Hen."

g in his Her tawny curls cascaded over her shoulders and onto his arms
as he brushed her hair back and then drew her forward for a deep, lingering kiss

"Does this mean you won't leave me yet?"

ss from "Do you want me to go?" He frowned, knowing he ought to return
to his bedchamber, but he wasn't nearly ready yet. In truth, he would not
be ready to leave her side.

re fully However, this was her first time, and she was not used to this intimate
contact. "No, I would love for you to stay. Is there any harm in your holding
me for a little while longer?"

between "No harm, love." He stroked her hair, loving its rich, lustrous feel.
truth, I wasn't anywhere near done yet."

y thrust She inhaled lightly. "There's more?"

"Yes, but not if you are too sore. There are other ways to pleasure you."

"There are?" She was like a little sponge, seeking to soak up
as much information as she could. "Will you tell me?"

"It is better if I show you," he said with a soft, bearlike growl
as he rolled her back under him and gently parted her legs. "Any objection
now? When

OceanofPDF.com

than a
love her

together
scent of
like of a

s."

lightly

He shifted her so that she lay atop him, for he wanted to see her face and soak in her smile. Her heart was still racing; he could feel its rapid beat against the wall of his chest. He could also feel the fullness of her breasts as she rested atop him, and felt aroused once more. "I cannot get enough of you, Hen."

Her tawny curls cascaded over her shoulders and onto his arms. He brushed her hair back and then drew her forward for a deep, lingering kiss.

"Does this mean you won't leave me yet?"

"Do you want me to go?" He frowned, knowing he ought to return to his bedchamber, but he wasn't nearly ready yet. In truth, he would never be ready to leave her side.

However, this was her first time, and she was not used to this intimacy.

"No, I would love for you to stay. Is there any harm in your holding me for a little while longer?"

"No harm, love." He stroked her hair, loving its rich, lustrous feel. "In truth, I wasn't anywhere near done yet."

She inhaled lightly. "There's more?"

"Yes, but not if you are too sore. There are other ways to pleasure you."

"There are?" She was like a little sponge, seeking to soak up all the information she could. "Will you tell me?"

"It is better if I show you," he said with a soft, bearlike growl before rolling her back under him and gently parting her legs. "Any objections?"



Chapter Sixteen

MOTHER IN HEAVEN.

Hen had no idea a man could put his mouth *there*.

She had never realized such pleasure could exist, and had not a objection.

Nor had she ever imagined such a powerful bond could develop experiencing these intimacies. Cain now knew all of her, for there was an inch he hadn't explored, touched with gentle hands, or tasted with soft lips.

She responded passionately, for he seemed to know just what to do and how to touch her in ways that made her shatter.

"Hen, love...I had better go," he said after bringing her to pleasure a second time with the touch of his mouth.

He was now holding her in his arms; their bodies were wrapped around each other like clinging vines as she recovered her composure.

He had called her beautiful several times, but he was the one with the truly magnificent body. His was a masculine beauty, big and rugged. He had a few scars, but none too serious, or so he insisted when she ran her fingers lightly along each disfiguring mark. The one at his back was particularly prominent and puckered pink. The one above his ribs was mostly hidden in the shadow of a spray of gold hair along the span of his chest.

She inhaled his scent, that heady mix of sandalwood and male musk she had found impossible to resist. She was not ready to have their night end, but dared not protest and add to his already increasing tension. "All right, Cain. It was nice, Cain."

He cast her a wry smile. "Hell of a nice way to fall into bed. I'll see you in the morning, love. Make sure you lock that door between us."

"I will." She rose with him, trying her best to hold back her tears but she did not want him to see her crying. First of all, this had been a joyous and an even more joyful night. She was not unhappy about any of it, but having to part from him now.

The sadness was for him, not for herself.

She loved having him beside her. But he was the one who truly needed her, a need that sprang from a deep, dark place, from an emptiness within his soul. She'd felt his desperation as he claimed her and inhaled the scent she memorized each curve of her body.

Well, he was her bear.

Big, golden, and beautiful.

She kissed him and wished him sweet dreams, then hid her heart by she barred her door to him and climbed back into bed. After a moment she realized he had left his clothes behind in her room.

Perhaps this was his way of assuring her of his return.

She stared at the thick oak door between them.

He wasn't coming back tonight.

Sighing, she slid back under the sheets and fell asleep holding tight to the pillow carrying his sandalwood scent.

Sometime in the night, she heard him cry out.

She wanted to go to him, but he had been adamant that she was not to go near him or ever open that door between them.

Having given her sacred promise to him, she simply held tight to the pillow and tried her best to stem her tears.

His cries died down soon after.

She awoke just after sunrise, not quite as refreshed as she would have liked.

It was still early in the morning, and she did not think her maid would come in to attend her for another hour or two. Wondering whether

she might also be awake, she donned her robe, then gathered his clothes and knocked lightly at the connecting door between their chambers. "Can you get me up?"

She heard nothing, so she knocked softly again. "I guess not."

She had just resolved to return to bed when she heard his muffled voice. "You can unlock the door, Hen."

She quickly turned the odious lock and swung open this unwanted door between them. Well, he wanted it, mistakenly believing it was his protection. Perhaps he was right, but she felt to the depths of her soul that no one would ever hurt her.

"Good morning," she said.

He cast her an affectionate smile that had her insides melting. "Good morning, Duchess. You're awake early." She nodded, her heart doing little somersaults as she looked at him. "I enjoyed last night."

He laughed lightly as he took his clothes from her arms to set them on the nearby chair. He had just washed up and shaved, for his hair was damp and she caught the refreshing scent of lather on his skin. He wore nothing but a towel wrapped around his hips and looked simply divine. "So did I. Shall we continue where we left off?"

Her eyes rounded in surprise.

His smile turned naughty as he led her to his bed. "Come, my beauty. Let me see you need corrupting. Yes, Hen. We can do this in daytime, too."

"But what about your valet?"

"He knows not to come up unless I ring for him. Same for your valet. I gave strict instructions we were not to be disturbed." He lifted her in his arms and carried her to his bed.

She thought he would now remove his towel and her robe, but he only lay down beside her and took her into the circle of his arms. She was fascinated by the sculpted strength of his arms and the breadth of his shoulders, the way his muscles bunched and corded with an easy, effortless grace.

He kissed her on the forehead. "I suppose you heard my dream last night."

"Yes." She swirled her fingers in the dusting of hair across his chest.

"The attack wasn't as bad as usual."

She emitted a shattered breath. "It sounded awful."

"Last night was mild in comparison, but do not make too much of it. I had hoped these bad dreams would go away for once and allow me to sleep soundly. We were tired, and last night's activities left us both well satisfied."

She caressed his cheek. "Were you truly satisfied?"

He groaned. "Hell yes. All I can think of is you and your luscious lips. You are going to turn me into a wanton. But I suppose it is a good thing for a wife to crave her husband's touch. So you say these um... activities can also take place in daytime. Such as now?"

"Yes, love. Shall I show you?"

"Please do." She held her breath as he shifted their positions so that

“Goodwas once more under him and he atop her, with his elbows propped on side of her to absorb the bulk of his weight.

him. “I Her hair was unbound and now splayed across his pillow, but he to like this untamed look. His eyes turned dark and smoldering, and he m on ato kiss her, one deeply erotic kiss that involved lips and tongue mp and conquest, followed by lighter kisses down her body.

g but a She thought he would now slip the robe off her, but he merely t Care to her through the thin overlayer of fabric, something she found surpr arousing. Perhaps it was the slight lacy friction against her breasts to b

Whatever the reason, her senses were now exploding.

eauty. I He peeled the garment off her shoulders with smug confidence smiled as her breasts were now revealed. At the same time, he slid t upward so that she was exposed to her waist. He teased her as he maid. I sliding his hand up the inside of her thigh, finding her core with his th

is arms She was gasping and eager for relief by the time he entered her, v

him and lurching her hips forward to take him fully inside her. She c merely softly when he caught the tip of one breast between his lips and teased he was “Cain...oh, my...oh!” She clutched the sheets, and then clutched of his she tumbled, shattered. Starlight burst all around her.

flowing She cried his name.

His own release followed soon after, no less explosive although j ons lastless noisy. He collapsed onto his back, breathing heavily and la

“Hen,” he said, emitting a sexy growl as he took her back in his arm st. was spectacular. I would have married you within a minute of my r you had I known just how incredible this was going to be.”

She laughed along with him. “You must have had a hint, since you it. I hadknew me an hour before you proposed.”

o sleep He kissed her on the forehead. “Yes, my heart knew.”

sfied.” They lay quietly in each other’s arms for a while, then Hen b fidget with her robe. It was still hiked up around her waist while the b oody.” it was still off her shoulders and her breasts were spilling out.

nd thing “Don’t, love.” Cain put a hand over hers. “I like the way you look.

.marital He was naked beside her, having tossed his towel to the foot of sometime during his kisses that left her breathless and mindless.

She blushed. “I think we would shock Molly and your valet hat she walked in on us now.”

n either He grinned. "Oh, Hen. This is still fairly tame. Just wait. There's s
more."

seemed Her face turned fiery, for if he considered this tame, then she da
e began imagine what else was in store for her. "There is?"

ies and "I am going to enjoy showing you. But no more this morning. This
to you, and your body will be sore if we overdo it. Just let me hold you
ouched arms. I like having you close to me, feeling the warmth of your body
risingly mine."

lame. "I like it too, Cain."

ice and
he hem



did so, THEY FOLLOWED THE same routine each night and morning for the entire
mb. By the end of the week, they'd received confirmation that guardianship
wild for sisters had been officially transferred to Cain. He now controlled the
ried out accounts and them.

it. Hen did not view it as control, but rather as freeing her and her
him as from their awful cousin and his wicked wife.

A great weight was now off her shoulders. Her sisters were safe, a
meant everything to her.

perhaps All the emotions she had been holding back now came flooding
ughing fore. As the dam she'd built inside of her burst, tears of relief spilled o
s, "that Cain was there to wrap her in his arms. "Hen, love. They can't ev
needing any of you again."

"I know. I was so worried. I cannot wait to tell Phoebe and Chloe."

hardly Since they had accomplished all they'd hoped to achieve w
London, she and Cain were now ready to return to Moonstone Landi
journey would take several days by carriage. This was a topic Hen ne

egan to raise with him, especially since Prudence would be traveling with them
som of Her cousin, who had returned to Malvern House yesterday, was n
shopping for some gifts for Hen's sisters. Hen had remained behind
" she and Cain had gone shopping for them days earlier.

the bed She was glad for the privacy, since she had an important topic to
with him.

if they He was in his study, reading over some documents concern

o much Malvern holdings. “May I interrupt you for a moment?”

“Of course, Hen. I am never too busy for you.” He set aside the red notand came around his desk to stand beside her. “Shall I close the door? You look troubled. Is something wrong?”

“I should have raised the matter sooner, but now knowing Prudence is in my room with us on our journey home...it is about the sleeping arrangements. I will know something is wrong if you and I take separate rooms.”

“Ah, that bothers you?” The door clicked softly as he shut it behind him.

“Not for myself. I just don’t want her asking questions. Everything is on my face. It is none of her business what goes on between us, but I’m afraid of giving something away.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and regarded her thoughtfully. “The week you are asking is to sleep with me. No, Hen. It will be worse if my room is haunted and you wake with a bruise on your face. Everyone at the air trust will see it and think I beat you. But I have given this problem consideration as well.”

“Of course—I should have known.”

“You’ll share a room with Prudence. She is a woman alone, and since we are traveling without lady’s maid or valet, I think it is best for you to share a room with her.” He arched an eyebrow when she did not immediately respond. “I thought it was a good plan. Do you not like it?”

She groaned. “What I don’t like is being away from you. But never hurts sensible. Completely logical and will not raise any suspicions.”

He tucked a finger under her chin and raised her gaze to his to give her a light kiss. “I know you are disappointed, love. But this is the safest option. We’ll see how it goes once we’ve settled in at St. Austell Grange. You know I still have bad dreams, you know I do, since you’ve heard them. She frowned. “Have you had them every night? There was a night when all seemed quiet, but I wasn’t certain. It could have just been me sleeping soundly to awaken.”

“Yes, love. You were sleeping too soundly. I’ve had them every night. But they aren’t as severe as they have been in the past, and that is a considerable improvement. However, we are not testing anything out while traveling. We will push ourselves into anything once we are back home.”

She smiled at him. “Moonstone Landing is home, isn’t it? It felt like I was home to me and my sisters immediately upon our arrival.”

He shook his head. "No, Hen. Let me modify that statement. papers beautiful village, and St. Austell Grange is a grand manor. But *you* or? You home. You hold my heart."

She walked into his outstretched arms. "You make it impossible for me to ever be irritated with you. It is most frustrating, you know."

She said, "Give me a kiss, love. We are still too new in the marriage to squ

Just wait until we have children. They will give us headaches galore."

She said, "Children..." She shook her head and laughed. "You are thinking of shows again. Is this how your mind always works? Never just in the moment?"

She said, "The only time I am ever in the moment is when I am in bed with you. I can think of nothing but you. As for everything else? My brain does not

She said, "What off. Yes, this is how I look at everything. Like a chessboard. Knowing the moves I need to be and figuring out how best to arrive there. I have to see the game before me and let it play out in my head. This is how I have always been, even as a child."

"Fascinating. You were probably able to outsmart your parents and the entire Malvern staff by the time you were the age of three."

He shook his head and emitted a hearty chuckle. "Just because I can share how a game would play out does not mean I always won. Nor does it mean immediately my game was clever. I often thought up stupid things and regret

the consequences. Never anything really serious. Mostly stupid boy things like knocking a beehive out of a tree and then realizing I had miscalculated and could not outrun that angry swarm."

She said, "Oh no."

She said, "Well, I did manage to escape them by diving into a nearby pond. I cannot hold my breath underwater for as long as possible," he continued. "I remember myself, but ruined a pair of brand-new boots. Then there was the time I decided to test whether a trellis would hold me up as I climbed up to the bedroom window in the wee hours of the morning. I was only slightly stinking drunk, and did not want my parents knowing I had been out all night carousing. Of course, casting up my accounts on my bedroom carpet was a marked dead giveaway. So was the fact that my clothes reeked of stale perfume. Nor was my mother happy that I destroyed her beautiful roses as I climbed the trellis."

She had been smiling with mirth, but now eyed him in confusion. "I like that you have thorns."

She had been smiling with mirth, but now eyed him in confusion. "I like that you have thorns."

She had been smiling with mirth, but now eyed him in confusion. "I like that you have thorns."

She had been smiling with mirth, but now eyed him in confusion. "I like that you have thorns."

She had been smiling with mirth, but now eyed him in confusion. "I like that you have thorns."

She had been smiling with mirth, but now eyed him in confusion. "I like that you have thorns."

It is a He nodded. "Fortunately, I was too drunk to feel them gouging my
are my However, they tore up my hands so badly, they had to be cleans
bandaged. Shall I go on with more of my idiotic boyhood misadventur
or me to "Well, you've managed to survive them all." She could not suppi
giggles. "I think my sisters and I were angels compared to you. We
uabble.gave my parents cause to worry."

"That's because you are sweet girls. The sort idiot boys like me
g ahead marry in order to keep us out of trouble. Are we all right, Hen?"

"Yes, of course. I'll share quarters at the coaching inns with Pr
1 you. I and hug my pillow pretending it is you if ever I get lonely." She reac
not shut on tiptoes and gave him a kiss. "I'll leave you to your work."

"No, love. I'm just finishing up. Is there anything you'd like to
e entire your last day here?"

"Well, the weather is lovely. I've already said my farewells to La
Lady Ashbrook. We could take a stroll in the park. In fact, I think w
and the to stop by the home of your friend, the Marquess of Burness, and see
like to join us with his little nieces. I can watch them while the two
I knew talk. Perhaps we can stop for ices at Gunter's afterward."

"Well, look at you." He shook his head and chuckled. "Who's p
ted the ahead now? I like that idea. Give me ten minutes to send off my last n
gs, like I'll be ready."

She nodded. "I'll have the carriage summoned in the meanwhile."

The plan turned out to be a good one, for Lady Stockwell was ho
small dinner party that evening for her husband's fellow bank direct
nd and needed the girls distracted. Hen knew she also needed the marquess
'I saved her hair because he was still behaving like an unruly child.

His nieces and Cain coaxed him to leave the house and join them.

"Yes, Uncle Cormac, we shall have ever so much fun together," th
fifteen, girl, Ella, said, looking up at him with her big, innocent eyes and plea
en ousher sweetest voice.

"I've looked after my sisters for years," Hen assured him. "It
ne. Nor nothing for me to look after your nieces."

The marquess cast Hen a wry smile. "Well, let's hope you don'
it."

"Oh, I have the easier job. Cain is the one who is charged with
after you, for you are the one who growls at the world and has no inter

ly skin, behaving.”

ed and He took her teasing in good nature. “I can be nice when I want to l
es?” knelt and tickled Ella. “Right, duckling?”

ress her The younger sister, Imogen, jumped on him. “Me too! Me, too!”

e rarely He soon had his nieces running around him and shrieking as he pl
grabbed at them and roared like a lion. No wonder their poor mother
need to looked so frazzled. He probably took a bit of wicked delight in upenc
household.

udence, Both girls were now leaping on him as he knelt on one bended
ched up hug them. “All right. You win, my ducklings! I surrender.”

The five of them climbed into Cain’s open carriage and headed
do on park. The marquess maintained a look of amused detachment as th
bounced in their seats and squealed in excitement. He’d agreed to cc
ord and for them, but mostly for Cain. Their friendship was as deep as could p
e ought be, and Hen imagined this was the marquess’s way of letting Cain k
if he’d would walk through fire for him.

of you Of course, they were not going to do anything more than take a rid
park. But Hen knew he was in turmoil beneath his casual exterior, fi
lanning was the same way, and she recognized the subtle hints.

ote and They rode slowly through the park and then took another turn ar
This time, Cain and his friend stepped down and walked on ahead of
order to speak in private. Hen had expected this would happen and wa
osting ato entertain the girls while the men discussed their own weighty matter

ors and She ordered the carriage brought to a halt near an area wher
out of children were playing. Some boys were floating their boats in a smal

A few children were flying their kites. Most were merely running arc
the finely manicured lawn while watched by their hawk-eyed nannies.

e eldest Hen realized she was out of place, for there were very few parer
iding in with their children. But she knew how to take care of young ones as

any nanny and wasn’t in the least daunted. Perhaps she had a bit of th
will begirl left in her, because she enjoyed running around with Ella and I

squealing as loudly as they did while they chased each other in circ
t regret finally fell dizzily onto the soft grass.

The three of them were out of breath from laughing by the tin
looking returned to the carriage.

ation of The men were waiting for them, genuine smiles on their faces as

approached. Cain helped the girls scamper up and then circled his
be.” He about Hen’s waist and helped her in. He settled beside her. “Your cheeks
pink, love.”

The girls giggled. “You called her what our papa calls our mama.
playfully Ella said. “And then he gives her smoochy kisses.”

always Cormac climbed in and settled the little one, Imogen, on his lap
ling his looked up at him with worshipful eyes. “What is it, little duckling?” he
“I’m sad.”

knee to He glanced at Hen, obviously pleading for assistance.

She reached over and took Imogen’s hand. “I thought we were here
l to thenice time. We’ll be going for ices next. Why are you sad, sweetling?”

the girls “Because Uncle Cormac doesn’t have a lady to love or kiss.”

me out Cormac cleared his throat. “I have plenty of ladies for that, Imogen
possiblybe sad for me.”

now he She nodded. “But Papa says they are all horrible.”

Hen could not contain her snort of laughter.

e in the Cormac laughed, too. “He is right, they are all horrible. But I’ll find
or Cainnicest lady one day. Don’t be sad for me, little duckling. She is out there
just not looking for her at the moment.”

ound it. They rode on to Gunter’s.

them in While Hen helped the girls choose their ices, the men settled in the
is readyat one of the desirable corner tables, their backs to the wall so they
s. view of the entire parlor. The pair looked every inch the powerful lord
e othercaught the notice of everyone in the place. Several elegant lords and
l pond.came up to them and engaged the men in conversation.

ound on Hen looked after the girls and made certain most of their ices went
their mouths instead of ending up on their chins or down the front of
its herepretty frocks.

well as She had just finished moistening her handkerchief to wipe the sti
he littleoff their hands when Lady Alexandra appeared with two of her
mogen, equally unpleasant ladies. The one called Lady Seline seemed to
les andhistory with Cormac. Hen could sense the icy tension between them
cruelty in her regard.

ne they These were beautiful women, but so haughty and disdainful, she
see how anyone could tolerate them.

the trio “Well, is this not a quaint domestic scene? Are you bored to te

handsdarling?” Alexandra said, addressing Cain and sparing not even a glance at Hen. “Come visit me tonight if you find married life too tedious.”

She then turned to Cormac. “And you, Burness? You are choosing Love,” rather young these days, are you not?”

Hen saw the anger rise in Cormac. If he were a teakettle, the steam would be pouring from his ears. Hen gripped the edge of the table, afraid to ask. The marquess would say something awful in front of his nieces.

Cain was also furious and about to get to his feet when Imogen looked at Lady Alexandra and said in all her beautiful innocence, “Uncle Cormac, is he one of the horrible ladies?”

Both he and Cain were momentarily speechless, and then grinned wide on their faces. “Yes, my little duckling. She is. And so are her friends. Don’t

Her eyes were still wide and innocent as she said, “I thought so.”

Lady Alexandra and her friends strode off in a huff.

Cormac lifted Imogen onto his lap and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “You are priceless.”

Ella hopped on his lap and demanded a kiss, too.

Hen’s heart did a little flip, for this man was at his best with these girls. But she could tell by the look in his eyes that he was not yet ready to let them down. He was angry, and anything could set him off...save for his presence in their seats.

Perhaps Cain was the same, a powder keg of a man whose fuse would be lit by anything at any time, and this was what he feared most. He did not want Hen near him should it go off. He could control himself while awake but did not trust himself while in sleep.

After finishing their ices, they dropped Cormac and the girls back into their Burness townhouse, and returned to Malvern House. They said nothing about the incident at Gunter’s, instead listening to Prudence as she talked about the incident of her shopping finds. But once they had all retired for the evening, the friends opened the door between their rooms and settled on the bed beside each other. Cormac had a stretch of his large frame next to her.

She had changed into her nightgown, but he was dressed in shirt and trousers. Although the shirt was undone and fell open on his chest, he did not think he meant to couple with her tonight. That he was also frowning slightly was another indication he did not intend to touch her. “What’s wrong, my love?” she asked.

nce for “I’m sorry about Alexandra.”

Hen couldn’t help but grin. “That horrible lady, as Imogen call
g themShe was rude and haughty, everything awful in a person. I was afra
were going to bodily toss her out of Gunter’s.”

1 would “I wanted to. More to get her away from an enraged Cormac. He
aid thenever strike a woman, but I wasn’t sure what else he might do. It is or
to taunt him, but to bring his nieces into it was a foolish and dangerou
oked upThis is what Lady Alexandra is all about, laying hurt, miser
mac, iscondescension on others. I didn’t want Cormac rising to the bait and
the little girls.”

s broke “Well, Imogen saved you both.”

ends.” He laughed. “She did at that.”

She propped herself on one elbow and turned to face him. “You
troubled.”

κ. “You “More kicking myself for ever attaching myself to someone like h
I knew I was never going to propose to her. But I wonder if ever I v
insufferably haughty and unfeeling toward others. I wonder if my fat
se girls.that behavior in me and was disappointed.”

o settle She nestled against him and sighed as he wrapped his arms arou
recious“He loved you and saw you for the fine man you are. It is eviden
letters.”

ight be “I hope so.”

did not “I’m going to miss this when we travel.”

o awake He nodded. “So will I. But we’ll be back at the Grange soon e

Hen, do you want your sisters to come live with us? There’s certainly
k at theof room for them.”

o more “I thought about that, too. But I’ll let them decide. We all adored l
ld themMoonstone Cottage, and I’m not sure they’ll want to leave it. They’l
g, Cainright if they decide to stay. Mr. and Mrs. Hawke will look after them.”

le Hen, “Yes, I expect they will manage. But how will you feel being
them?”

irt and

she did

owning

wrong,

ed her?
aid you

e would
ie thing
s thing.
y, and
scaring

are still

ier. Oh,
vas that
her saw

nd her.
t in his

enough.
r plenty

iving at
l be all

without



Chapter Seventeen

HEN'S SISTERS RAN out of their cottage the moment they heard Cain's c rumble through the gate. They were obviously excited, hopping up an as the driver brought the team of horses to a halt in front of their home

Hen could not subdue her joy either. She poked her head out the v and waved to her sisters.

Cain helped her down first, and then Prudence, and the pair trampled him in their enthusiasm to greet Phoebe and Chloe.

Prudence, although invited to take up residence with him and Hen Grange, had declined. "Ask me again in another month," she said asked. "You don't need a widowed cousin underfoot before you've chance to settle in yourselves."

So they had stopped at Moonstone Cottage to drop her off and for see her sisters, who were now smothering her with kisses and both tr embrace her at the same time. She was tugged in two directions but seem to mind at all, since she was laughing and just as eager to e them.

Her sisters began tossing questions at her, giving her no time to before they peppered her with more. "Mr. Weston told us you were m. Chloe said. "Is this true? And is Wicked Willis no longer our guardia we saved?"

"Yes, yes. We are all of us saved. Cain is now your guardian."

They rushed to hug him. "You did it!" Chloe said. "How can v repay you for all you've done for us?"

He glanced over at Hen and cast her a tender smile. "I got Her bargain. It is the best reward any man can have."

Chloe squealed. "We knew it. Did I not tell you, Phoebe? He sim to love her!"

Phoebe was all smiles.

They finally made their way into the house, still chattering all at or

Cain declined when Phoebe asked if they would stay for tea. “Come to the Grange and have tea with us this afternoon.”

Prudence nodded. “Yes, we’ll do that. Right now, I am eager to get out of these dusty travel clothes. Phoebe, I assume I am to have the guest chamber as on my earlier visit?”

“Yes, we have it freshened and ready for you.” Phoebe then turned in dismay. “I just realized! You’ll be moving your things to the Grange

carriage
and down
window
Hen placed a comforting arm around her sister. “Yes, but not today get around to it over the next few days. There’s no rush. I have what I the clothes I took to London. We also wanted to talk to you and Chloe moving to the Grange with us.”

almost
n at the
d when
had the
Chloe shook her head. “No, Hen. We couldn’t impose on you like
Phoebe agreed. “We discussed the possibility while you were
We’re very comfortable here, and you are right next door if we even anything. We’ll see you every day, so it really will be very much the same even if it does feel terribly upsetting for us right now.”

Hen to
ying to
did not
mbrace
Cain had expected Phoebe and Chloe would decline to move, at least the present time. It seemed everyone thought a newly married duchess ought to be on their own to acclimate to married life. Perhaps that was true for most couples, but not for him and Hen.

He’d felt the rightness of their match within moments of meeting. They did not need to get used to each other so much as learn not to whenever they were apart.

answer
arried,”
in? Are
hard.
He could feel Hen’s disappointment as they left the cottage and carried back into the carriage, for this separation from her sisters was hitting hard.

Cain settled beside her and took her hand. “The offer is always open to them. We’ll make sure they understand we will always welcome them.

ve ever
along.”
She cast him a wistful smile. “Their minds are set. I think I knew that along.”

1 in the
ply had
“Sorry, love. As their guardian, I could require them to live with us
“No, I don’t want to force them. They love Moonstone Cottage so much and are very happy there.”

He nodded. “Will you be all right?”

ice.
“Yes, more than all right. I’m excited to start married life with you. I know my sisters will manage without me, and as Phoebe said, I’ll be

ie up to them every day. We'll take Chloe in when Phoebe marries, but she's
years off from that yet."

change He and Hen received an effusive greeting upon arriving at St.
ie same Grange. The staff lined up to formally meet his new duchess, and F
him proud, just as he knew she would.

to Hen Weston stood beside the door, waiting his turn to welcome them ho
e."

7. We'll them. "We've invited the Killigrew sisters and their cousin to t
need in afternoon. You're invited, too. Be patient, Weston. You'll see her then
e about Weston grinned. "Am I that obvious? Don't answer. I'll leave y

Duchess Henley to settle in. I've left documents on your desk fo
that." review, but nothing that cannot wait until tomorrow."

away. Footmen carried their trunks upstairs, and Cain's cook had refres
er need sent up for them. Baths were also ordered.

same... He made sure Hen was comfortably settled in her adjoining du
quarters before he went into his bedchamber and attended to himself
east for he did not attend to himself so much as have his valet fuss over hin
ike and brace of footmen walk in and out while bringing up the tub and water,
aps this of his trunks, and a tray of tempting delights prepared by his efficient c

The door between his chamber and Hen's was closed for the mom
ng her. he could hear his housekeeper and maids fussing over her. Hen wa
to ache independent and not the sort to enjoy being cosseted, but all fine ladies
expected to have a lady's maid, and his staff would be offended if she
climbed choose one from among them for the role.

ing her He knew Hen would take care of the matter without his need to r
it. Although her manner was warm and unaffected, she had a strong s
pen for duty and knew what was expected of a duchess.

" She took her responsibilities seriously, probably had a hundre
w it all whirling in her head about the running of the household—some
would gladly cede to her—and whatever charities or projects she
s." needed attention.

o much They were similar in their desire to make a difference in the l
others, for he never took his title as something that came only with pri
and little responsibility.

you. I He eased back in his bath and allowed the warm water to soak i
seeing bones.

s a few Yes, life with Hen would never be dull or ordinary.

Austell
Hen did



CAIN WAS NOT surprised when within a month of their return to Moonstone. Landing, Hen had organized and flawlessly pulled off a garden tea party on the grounds of the Grange for the entire village, now to be turned into a tea house for this annual affair. She had also organized a wedding breakfast to celebrate the marriage of his estate manager, Charles Weston, to Hen's cousin, Prudence. In between, she had hosted several charity affairs to promote the cause for widows, orphans, retired soldiers, a new church roof, and wild ponies.

They were now going on three months home, and the cooler October winds had replaced the hot summer breezes. The sunlight hours were also getting shorter, so Cain made certain to send a carriage out at sunset to collect her whenever she visited her sisters at Moonstone Cottage, which she did often. Well, "Who do you plan on saving next?" Cain teased that night, entering her chamber through their adjoining door and taking her in his arms, the last also become their nightly ritual.

She smiled up at him. "You, of course."
"Me?" He'd thought at some point the starlight gleam in her eyes would fade, but it hadn't. And he never tired of looking at her, for there was something so alive about her features that he always found something new in her expressions to fascinate him.

"Yes, my love. I think it is time we set aside your barricades. It pains me to see you here. I cannot bear it when you leave me to retire to your own chamber."
He raked a hand through his hair. "Hen..."

She emitted a ragged sigh. "I know I am asking much of you. If you are not ready yet, I will understand. I suppose I can put my efforts toward saving the dolphins, puffins, and sea turtles. I've made quite a bit of progress with the wild ponies. But I would rather save you. Are you still having those terrible dreams?"

"Yes, although they are much less ferocious. There was a night when I was even certain I'd had them."

"I thought you seemed more at peace with yourself lately. What has changed? Do you think you are ready?"

would be a distraction to everyone if I walked in. But I heard your speech filled with passion and conviction. I saw how you swayed the audience how much they believed in you.” He sank onto the mattress beside my life, love you, Hen. I believe in you, too. I always have. I also believe in the strength of these feelings we have for each other.”

“This is why I know you will never hurt me, not even while in sleep,” he said. “You recognize me. I am in your blood and in the air you breathe. I know my scent. My body. This is how deeply you are aware of me.”

He emitted an agonized sigh and rubbed a hand along his face. “Allow me to wake you. Let’s try this. I’ll never forgive myself if I hurt you.”

“You won’t hurt me.” She cast him a stubborn look.

Perhaps she was right, not only about how deeply she had been embedded in his soul, but about his own progress in overcoming his demons. He had come to realize the past could not be undone. The friends he had lost in the battle would never return. Their loss would always be unfair. But if he held on to his anger, rage, and frustration, then he would be doing himself a great dishonor. Their sacrifice would have been for nothing.

“Thank you, my love,” he said.

Her eyes captured the glow of candlelight from the tapers around the room.

They spoke no more as he kissed her.

She fell asleep in his arms.

He took longer, perhaps needing to fight off the last vestiges of doubt. But he loved her so deeply.

She was right. How could he ever hurt her?

However, the demons of doubt overcame him as he began to drift to sleep. He quietly tossed off his covers and moved to his own bedchamber. This way it was cheating, for he awoke just before dawn and then returned to Hen’s bed in time to watch her stir awake come morning.

She was not quite arisen yet, merely purring as she curled up beside him. Her eyes closed and lips slightly parted. Her cheeks were pink and her hair was in a glorious tumble.

His heart tightened.

He’d wanted so badly to make it through the night without being punished by the torments of hell.

But not tonight. He was still too uncertain.

each, so Perhaps next week he would try again.

nce and But he had made some progress, having left the door open between her. “I chambers. It was a start, and although that feeling of suffocation had in the him sometime during the night, the dream had been mild and passed quickly.

He kissed her when she began to insistently burrow against him, “p,” she the warmth of his body. She mumbled something unintelligible, so he re. You she might be awake enough to hold a conversation. “Good morning, love.”

She sat up and opened her eyes, an eyebrow tipped in question while ll right. realized they were together in bed. “Did it work?”

He told her the truth.

“I see.” She could not mask her disappointment. “Will you try to become tonight?”

anger. He shook his head. “No, love. I will do no more than keep the door lost in between us. I am no longer worried about climbing out of my bed to help f all he And I will stay with you until you fall asleep, as I have been doing the them a nights. If I pass a few more peaceful nights in this fashion, then next will try again.”

She was clearly disappointed but agreed and cast him a delicate smile and his lit up the room. “All right. Small steps.”

He immediately thought of his father’s words. *You need to meet the one who sparkles with silver light.*

He returned her smile with a tender one of his own. “How did you sleep. “Quite soundly. I did not even realize you had left my bed in the Thank you for telling me the truth, even though it is not what I had heard hear. But we will get there, I know we will.”

“Then you are all right, Hen?”

She nodded. “Always.”

He turned to



He turned to

de him, ANOTHER WEEK WENT by, and he did feel as though they were making progress for the door between their bedchambers remained open, and he had a fallen asleep holding her in his arms a time or two. Yet he’d quickly a plagued and left her side to return to his own bed.

He did the same the following week.

As they faced another night apart, Hen cast him a lost puppy stare that shot straight to his heart. "All right. We try again tomorrow night." It was important for him to work harder and take this next step of spending the entire night by her side.

He retired to his own bedchamber and had been lying alone in his thoughts for several hours, lost in thought, when Hen suddenly cried out, "Cain! Love." Cain!

Hen sprang out of bed, his heart pounding as he forced himself to get up for it was the wee hours of the morning. Why was she crying out and sounding in pain. He raced to her side. "Hen, love. What's wrong?"

She was clutching her stomach and crying. "I think I am losing the child." "What?" He quickly lit the candle by her bedside to cast light upon her while he set aside the covers to see what was happening. His brain hurt to wrap around what she'd just told him until he saw the crimson stain on her sheets.

His heart stopped. His head began to reel. "Love, you're bleeding." He frantically tugged on the bellpull, calling for Mrs. Chiltern's head butler, Manton, and probably rousing the entire household in a hurry. "Get Dr. Hewitt here right away," he told Manton, who had his girl dressed only in his nightclothes.

"At once, Your Grace! Dear heaven!" He ran off faster than Cain ever seen him move.

Cain then turned to Mrs. Chiltern, who had almost collided with him in the doorway. She had also rushed up, sparing a moment to toss a robe over her nightgown. Her mobcap was askew and she had clips in her hair.

"Bring me clean cloths, fresh water," Cain ordered her. "As fast as you can, Mrs. Chiltern. Wake whoever you need to assist you. I'll wait here with my wife until the doctor arrives. Blessed saints, do you have any idea what to do in the meanwhile?"

"Yes, Your Grace. Please do not fret."

Hen put a calming hand on his forearm when he reached over to grasp her hand. "I am all right. It is the child leaving my body. It happens, my love." But he was devastated. "How far along do you think you were?"

"No more than two months, if that. I was going to wait another week before I shared the news with you because I still had my doubts. It's happening so fast. I'm so sorry, Cain."

are that “Don’t ever apologize to me. This is not your fault.” But no won
It washad wanted him to share her bed and had been making an issue of it a
ing the long. What would have happened if the door between them had been
he could not hear her soft cries?

bed for She needed him to be a husband to her in every sense. He resolv
Oh no, and there never to fail her again.

He stayed by her side, refusing to leave or let go of her even w
ertness, doctor examined her or while Mrs. Chiltern washed her and put
it? Shenightgown on her.

Once things calmed, Cain carried Hen into his bed, since she co
baby.” remain in hers with all the blood on the sheets. She claimed it looked
pon her than it was and she was in no physical pain, but this did not mollify
d yet to all.

f blood It was almost dawn by the time they were finally alone ar
comfortably settled in his bed. She was too overset to fall back to sleep
, carefully settled her on his lap. “I will never leave you alone again, lo
and his said, wrapping her in his arms. “From this night forward, we sleep to
in his Every night for the rest of our lives.”

run up She put her arms around him and hugged him tightly. “This is al
wanted, to sleep next to my big golden bear.”

ain had He gave a pained laugh. “As I will enjoy waking to my starlight.
mentioned you have the most beautiful eyes?” He kissed her. “And
Mantontold you how much I love you? We shall try for a child again when e
be over are ready. But first, you must let that exquisite body of yours heal.

your promise, Hen. We must not rush this, and I do not ever want you
as you pressured. I will wait until you are ready. I will wait for you forever
you to you and I am not going anywhere.”

ave any She finally fell asleep in his arms.

He was true to his word.

They shared a bed from that day forward.

asp her Despite all his concerns, her prediction had proved true.

ve.” He slept in peace knowing she was by his side. The warmth of h
sweetly curled against him, the touch of her hand upon his chest. F
r week breath against his neck. All of these little things brought him a peace
It is all lost during the war years and thought he would never regain.

She was embedded in his soul.

der she
ll week
shut so

She was his balm, and he could never harm her.

OceanofPDF.com

ed then

hile the
a clean

uld not
l worse
him at

nd Hen
p, so he
ve,” he
gether.

l I ever

Have I
have I
ver you
I want
to feel
. I love

er body
fer soft
he had

She was his balm, and he could never harm her.

OceanofPDF.com



Epilogue

Moonstone Landing
February 1816

WHEN THE CLOCK on the mantel of his study chimed one o'clock, he realized he had gotten lost in the pile of documents atop his desk, probably keeping Hen awake, since she always waited up until he joined in bed.

He had expected her to be drowsing off or perhaps reading a book in wait for him, but he never expected to find her crying. She was a weepy sort, and the last time he'd found her crying was that awful night months ago when she miscarried.

He groaned. "Hen, your tears are torturing me. What's wrong, love?"
"Nothing is wrong." She threw her arms around him when he sat on the mattress beside her.

"Hen?"

She buried her face against his neck. "Do you like my body?"

"What a question to ask," he remarked with a light laugh. "It is exactly as you well know, because I can never keep my hands off you. Have I not told you often enough? It is perfect and divine. Why are you so over-sensitive?"

"My body will not be all that exquisite much longer. Soon, there will be a lot of me."

He tipped her chin up and stared at her, unable to speak for the sudden pain in his heart. "Hen?"

"In about seven months there will be a little something else. I hope you know what I am talking about."

Warmth flooded through him.

Joy overwhelmed him.

No wonder Hen had seemed to be putting on weight and yet eating so little. This also explained her sudden sensitivity to everything and why she

been clinging to him tightly every night this past week.

What a dolt he was not to suspect her condition.

She needed him more than ever now.

He was ready, not only to be a proper husband, but a devoted father as well.

“It is early days yet, Cain. It may be a false alarm. But I am almost months late in my courses, and that has never happened to me. I am ridiculously punctual. Have you noticed the subtle changes to my body?”

He nodded. “Great fool that I am, I merely thought you were putting on a little weight. I liked it. You seemed to glow.”

“It is too soon to make any announcement. I dare not even tell my mother yet.”

“There’s no rush, love. Although I’m sure they will suspect.”

“I wanted to tell you last night, but you were so busy poring over estate documents and I did not want to distract you. Also...I am scared to lose this one, too.”

“Hen, whether we do or not is in the Good Lord’s hands. Whatever happens, we are in this together.” He caressed her cheek. “Together as one step. Whatever happens. No blame ever cast. There is nothing you can do to disappoint me. You simply don’t have it in you to be other than kind and compassionate. I love you beyond anything imaginable.”

He meant those words to the depths of his soul, for he had come to Moonstone Landing to heal his wounds.

He had found his miracle cure in Hen.

A lifetime of paying her back would not be enough to express his gratitude for the happiness she had brought into his life.

He told her so, and let out a breath when she graced him with one of her dazzling smiles.

The wind was howling outside their window, and there was snow on the ground. The nights were colder and bleaker now, far colder than the miserable October night when they had lost their first babe. Something had changed in him that night. He could not explain it, nor did he understand his subsequent transformation, but despite their sadness, his weight had also lifted off him. He knew in that moment he had conquered his demons. Those violent dreams would never terrorize him again because she needed him to be her safe harbor, her anchor no matter how rocky the sea.

plight.

Since then, he had been a proper husband to her and would always

On that October night, he had given her an oath. “I shall stay wither asevery night for the rest of our lives.”

He’d kept that vow and always would.

ost two “Hen, love. Are you feeling a little better now?”

. I am She nodded and cast him a look of aching tenderness. “Yes. I’m a r?” truly. I just needed to get that good cry out of me. I love you so much,

ng on a He kissed her on the lips. “We are each other’s comfort and the p each other’s soul.”

r sisters Now smiling, her tears no longer falling, she placed a hand to h and brought his hand to rest on hers. “Even our hearts beat together though we are one.”

er your He cast her a wicked grin. “Love, if you keep my hand on your d we’llswollen breast much longer, I am going to do something quite naugh it, and by extension, with you.”

hatever She laughed. “I am trying to be sentimental and romantic. We ha it everyhad a miraculous breakthrough. Are you not happy? Imagine, we are g an everhave a little golden bear just like his father.”

n warm “Or a little girl with eyes of starlight, just like her mother.” He think his heart could hold so much love, but he was wrong. It was exp fled toby leaps and bounds to take in the news of their growing family.

This time truly felt different.

ess his



e of herAND IT WAS.

Hen stayed healthy throughout her term.

r on the The months flew by, winter coming to an end, then spring, an an theAugust was drawing to a close, and with it summer. Hen delivered t ing hadboy and a girl. The midwife had swathed the babies, who were now as e quite the adjoining duchess’s bedchamber that Hen now only used for ten a greather personal grooming and dressing, for Cain’s bed was the one they ered hisshared.

ise Hen He was eager for another peek at his children—Lord, his b y their

children—who were under the supervision of the capable midwife, be. was not going to disturb them until he heard their little squawks.
ith you Hen slept with him in his bedchamber, as she had every night since October. She looked exhausted, utterly drained, but so delicately enchanting that he could not take his eyes off her. The hours when she agonized in delivery had been sheer terror for him.

ll right, He'd worried about losing her, feeling so helpless to prevent it. Even Cain." knew of the dangers of childbirth. This was a common enough occurrence to and his greatest dread. But she was strong and persevered.

He now held her in his arms, achingly aware of her still-fragile heart condition. "Are you happy, Hen?"

ther, as "Yes, love. What beautiful babies we have."

"They are, indeed. But no one is more beautiful than you." He had a lovely, faith in the strength of their love and conquered his night terrors. The anxiety with not completely gone away, but were leashed now. He was in control of it but only because Hen put his heart at peace.

ave just He awoke shortly after daybreak the following morning to an clear, bright August sky. The drapes had been left open, so he lay in bed beside her, watching the warm but blustery wind push gathering storm clouds across the cove.

standing He quietly left the bed and walked over to the window and its view overlooking onto the cove. The grayness of the day did not bother him. Although he was concerned, it was the best and brightest day he had ever seen.

He heard not a peep from their babies in the adjoining room. Of course the door was closed, so he was not likely to hear anything unless they started wailing. He would check on them shortly, for he was eager to hold the little bundles.

He was a father.

and now Their father.

Wins, a Nothing was going to temper his joy today.

sleep in He turned to gaze at Hen, who was still nestled in his bed and smiling soundly.

always Yes, demons conquered.

Vanquished.

Beautiful Pounded to dust.

He turned back to the window and watched the tide roll out of the cove.

but heThe waters were more roiled than usual because of the oncoming

There was no sun to glisten upon the aquamarine waves, and yet...w
nce lastthat glow?

te and “Cain,” Hen said in a whisper, joining him by the window.

ile she “Love, you should not be out of bed.”

“I’m fine. You know I am sturdier than I look.” He thought of h
veryoneshe had come to him that first day, a lost mermaid almost swept out
urrence“Oh, the tide is low.”

“We’ll have rain today.” He wrapped his arms around her and di
delicateup against him so that her back leaned against his chest.

“It certainly looks like it, but I don’t mind. Do you see the moo
shining beneath the surface of the water? Look closely, Cain.”

put his He kissed the top of her head. “I do. They’re beautiful. I never
ey hadthem before. Is this why the village is called Moonstone Landing? A
f them,your ghost sea captain called his house Moonstone Cottage?”

“Yes, but do you know what those moonstones represent?”

vercast He shook his head. “I haven’t heard that lore. But you are grinnin
len andkitten fallen into a tub of cream, so I think there must be sor
ross thesentimental and romantic to the story you are about to tell me.”

She cast him a beautiful smile. “How brightly do you see them?”

scenic “They’re very bright. Like sparkling gemstones. Almost blinding
s far asbrightness. All right, tell me. What do they signify?”

She turned in his arms and reached up on tiptoes to kiss him on t
course,“True love, my handsome golden bear. For only those who truly love
y werethem with such clarity and brilliance.”

ose two He laughed. “Then I am found out. I shall never win an argume
you or ever be able to deny you anything now that you are aware how
need and love you.”

“I knew it all along, but it is nice to have the lore confirm it. I h
sisters get their moonstones, too. As for me, I can also see them wit
leepingclarity and brilliance. So I think we shall be a pathetic pair, always t
of the other and wanting to make the other happy.”

“Is that so bad?”

“Not at all.” She huddled against him and remarked on his war

“But I am cold. I think you had better take me back to bed.”

e cove. “With pleasure, my love,” he said with a soft growl.

storm. He looked forward to waking to her smile and the noisy wails of
that was children every day for the rest of their lives.

The End

er, how
to sea.

Enjoy an excerpt from [The Moonstone Marquess!](#)

OceanofPDF.com

rew her

nstones

noticed
nd why

g like a
nething

in their

he lips.
can see

nt with
much I

ope my
h equal
hinking

m skin.

He looked forward to waking to her smile and the noisy wails of their children every day for the rest of their lives.

The End

Enjoy an excerpt from [The Moonstone Marquess!](#)

OceanofPDF.com



Chapter One

Moonstone Landing
Cornwall, England
July 1818

CORMAC STOCKWELL, MARQUESS of Burness, stumbled out of his acquired seaside home in Moonstone Landing, his throat parched and shirt unbuttoned. He groaned as his gaze met blinding sunlight and seared through his brandy-soaked head. “Blast it, Melrose. Why did you summon me out here at the break of day?”

“My lord,” his head butler said in a tone that revealed his disapproval of the orgy that took place last night—and was still going on, if one could see the naked bodies littering his parlor—“it is noon.”

“Have you no shame?” A young woman with a melodic voice dismounted her horse and strode across the courtyard toward him. Without so much as a greeting, she launched into a diatribe. “You are a disgrace. How could you be so depraved...*wonk, wonk, wonk*...debauched...*wonk, wonk, wonk*...v

He blinked his eyes and tried to focus on the little harpy with an effort of will, but it was hard to do while she was talking so fast and his head was splitting. He could hardly keep up with her words. It was all a buzzing

“Never, in all my days...*wonk, wonk, wonk*...amazed you still have a functioning organ left in your body...*wonk, wonk, wonk*...”

He glanced down at his trousers.

Well, *that* organ was working perfectly fine.

Not that he intended to advise her of that fact.

Indeed, it was a wonder he had managed to properly button his shirt, something not easily done when drunk and functioning only with one eye. For his shirt, a formal one for evening wear, he’d merely tossed it on and left it open and untucked to flap in the wind. It was the best he could do to draw notice.

If she did not like it, she could leave.

He blinked again, intending to move his gaze upward to focus on her as they stood in the brilliant sunshine, a soft sea breeze whirling around her while she continued to excoriate him for his bad behavior. But it took too much effort to move his gaze off her breasts when they were so magnificent as she continued her scathing rebuke.

“Reprehensible...*wonk, wonk, wonk*...vile...”

She was repeating herself now. He was certain she had already referred to him as vile.

So what if he was? What business was it of hers how he chose to refer to himself?

Who was she, anyway? Miss Temple of Virtue?

Well, she did have the body of a goddess.

Finally, as the sun disappeared behind a passing cloud, he managed to get a good look at her face.

Blessed saints.

Not only the body of a goddess, but the face of one as well.

Softest pink lips. Eyes a glistening bluish-green...or were they green or blue? Well, it did not matter. They sparkled and were the color of aquamarines, exquisite eyes to steal any man's breath away. Her hair was dark, and several curls had blown loose in the wind to flick upon her blushing cheeks.

No, she wasn't sweetly blushing.

She was mad as hell and looked like she wanted to punch him.

She took another deep breath into her magnificent lungs. “And never...mark my words...ever...*wonk, wonk, wonk*...”

Gad, would she never stop railing at him?

“...your nieces...and—”

He immediately jerked to attention. “What about my nieces?”

“Oh, so the mindless marquess does have a voice after all.”

“Who are you? Chairwoman of some society for the prevention of immorality and general moral perversion? Why did you mention my nieces?”

“Because they are here, you dolt.” Her hands were clenched into fists, and her eyes were still blazing.

“Here?”

“Yes, they arrived in Moonstone Landing this morning. Did you remember?”

your brother's letter? The one that was waiting for you when you mailed it last week? Or have your satanic rituals taken up so much of your time that they never bothered to open it and read what he wrote? Now, the little girls are here, thinking they are to stay with you for the summer."

He wanted to shake his head, but it was pounding too hard and heavy to move. "No, there must be some mistake."

"Obviously a lapse in judgment on your brother's part. But you erred to send them back. They are too upset and already in tears. They are convinced you want them. I will have you know, they will not set foot in your home until your lascivious friends are gone and the house is scrubbed from attic to cellar to rid it of the vermin no doubt brought in by them. That is impossible to remove once they infest the woodwork."

Did this gorgeous creature never stop talking?

"Nor will I allow you to set foot in Moonstone Cottage. It is my home and—"

He drew her up against him.

Lord, her breasts felt good against his chest. "You live next door to Greenish-Moonstone Cottage?"

"Yes, if you were ever sober enough to find out and pay a proper price to your neighbors."

"Who are you?"

"Let go of me and I shall tell you. Did you bathe in a barrel of piss? You reek of it." She pushed against him.

He released his grasp, but not before he had nuzzled her neck to catch her scent. Of course, she smelled wonderful. A hint of lavender and night breezes.

"Ugh! I rue the day Squire Westgate sold this beautiful place to you. If I knew you would turn his manor house into a brothel, I would have bought it out from under you. How in heaven's name does Cain consider you a friend?"

"You know the Duke of Malvern?"

She nodded. "He is married to my sister, Henley."

"You are one of the Killigrew sisters?" His heartbeat quickened. "Are you Chloe or Phoebe?"

She tipped her chin up in defiance. "Phoebe. That's Lady Phoebe. Not read although I would much prefer you never address me at all."

oved in “Phoebe,” he repeated softly, a smile spreading on his lips. “So
ne, you the little lioness.”

girls are She obviously had no idea what he was talking about. “Stop starin
so stupidly. Can you do something other than gape? Good grief, now
urt too smiling. I forbid you to smile at me. And I am a woman, not a jungle

Speaking of which, I’ve seen jungle animals cleaner than you. If you
cannot see your nieces, you had better wash up. And sober up. Dress
y seem gentleman and try acting like one. Can you do this for an afternoon?
in yoursay four o’clock this afternoon? Against my better judgment, I am i
ed from you to join us for tea.”

ey’ll be “I’ll be there.”

Her beautiful eyes narrowed. “Sober?”

He nodded.

r home, “And groomed?”

He sighed. “I shall be presentable.”

He cast her another rakish smile that worked on most women, b
oor? At made her roll her eyes. “You are hopeless,” she muttered. “So help me
dare take a step out of line while at Moonstone Cottage, I will shoot
call on full of holes you will look like a shredded pincushion.”

She turned and strode to her horse, but he followed and stopp
before she could climb back up. He drew her up against him once
brandy? “Phoebe—”

“That’s Lady Phoebe to you.”

take in Did her eyes always blaze so magnificently?

meadow She opened her mouth to lambast him again.

“Enough,” he said, and kissed her with all his heart.

ou. Had For this, he was rewarded with a punch in the nose.

bought Her hand was little and his hide was thick, so he barely felt a thi
: you probably did more damage to herself than him.

He kissed her again, crushing his lips to hers and knowing he was
lost to this girl with aquamarine eyes and a honey-sweet mouth.

She punched him again. “What is wrong with you? Have you no
d. “Are How could you... Why did you... Well, what do you have to
yourself, you unmitigated clot?”

to you, “Two words.”

She looked up at him, utterly befuddled. “Two words?”

you are “Yes.” The clouds had passed and the sun shone down on her once
By heaven, she was an angel, and he was not letting her go.

g at me “Pray tell, what might those two words be?”

you are He wanted to kiss her again, was not nearly done exploring the
animal mouth of hers. But she was impatient for his answer, and he did not wish
to launching into another diatribe about his failings.

like a He knew what he was and what he needed...her. “Marry me.”

Let us
inviting

Get [The Moonstone Marquess](#) now in eBook or in paperback!

OceanofPDF.com

ut only
, if you
you so

ed her
e more.

ng. She

utterly

shame?
say for

“Yes.” The clouds had passed and the sun shone down on her once more. By heaven, she was an angel, and he was not letting her go.

“Pray tell, what might those two words be?”

He wanted to kiss her again, was not nearly done exploring that soft mouth of hers. But she was impatient for his answer, and he did not want her launching into another diatribe about his failings.

He knew what he was and what he needed...her. “Marry me.”

Get [**The Moonstone Marquess**](#) now in eBook or in paperback!

OceanofPDF.com

Also by Meara Platt

FARTHINGALE SERIES

[My Fair Lily](#)

[The Duke I'm Going To Marry](#)

[Rules For Reforming A Rake](#)

[A Midsummer's Kiss](#)

[The Viscount's Rose](#)

[Earl Of Hearts](#)

[The Viscount and the Vicar's Daughter](#)

[A Duke For Adela](#)

[If You Wished For Me](#)

[Never Dare A Duke](#)

[Capturing The Heart Of A Cameron](#)

BOOK OF LOVE SERIES

[The Look of Love](#)

[The Touch of Love](#)

[The Taste of Love](#)

[The Song of Love](#)

[The Scent of Love](#)

[The Kiss of Love](#)

[The Chance of Love](#)

[The Gift of Love](#)

[The Heart of Love](#)

[The Hope of Love \(novella\)](#)

[The Promise of Love](#)

[The Wonder of Love](#)

[The Journey of Love](#)

[The Treasure of Love](#)

[The Dance of Love](#)

[The Miracle of Love](#)

[The Dream of Love \(novella\)](#)

[The Remembrance of Love \(novella\)](#)
[All I Want For Christmas \(novella\)](#)

MOONSTONE LANDING
[Moonstone Landing \(novella\)](#)
[Moonstone Angel \(novella\)](#)
[The Moonstone Duke](#)
[The Moonstone Marquess](#)
The Moonstone Major

DARK GARDENS SERIES
[Garden of Shadows](#)
[Garden of Light](#)
[Garden of Dragons](#)
[Garden of Destiny](#)
[Garden of Angels](#)

LYON'S DEN
[The Lyon's Surprise](#)
[Kiss of the Lyon](#)
[Lyon in the Rough](#)

THE BRAYDENS
[A Match Made In Duty](#)
[Earl of Westcliff](#)
[Fortune's Dragon](#)
[Earl of Kinross](#)
Earl of Alnwick
[Aislin](#)
Gennalyn
[Pearls of Fire](#)
[A Rescued Heart](#)
[Tempting Taffy](#)

DeWOLFE PACK ANGELS SERIES
[Nobody's Angel](#)

[Kiss An Angel](#)
[Bhrodi's Angel](#)

[OceanofPDF.com](#)

[Kiss An Angel](#)
[Bhrodi's Angel](#)

[OceanofPDF.com](#)

About the Author

Meara Platt is a USA Today bestselling author and an award winning Amazon UK All-star. Her favorite place in all the world is England's Cotswold District, which may not come as a surprise since many of her stories are set in that idyllic landscape, including her award winning, fantasy romance Dark Gardens series. If you'd like to learn more about the ancient Fae project that is about to unfold in the Dark Gardens series, as well as her more lighthearted, international bestselling Regency romances in the Fart series and Book of Love series, or her more emotional Braydens please visit Meara's website at www.mearaplatt.com.

OceanofPDF.com

About the Author

Meara Platt is a USA Today bestselling author and an award winning, Amazon UK All-star. Her favorite place in all the world is England's Lake District, which may not come as a surprise since many of her stories are set in that idyllic landscape, including her award winning, fantasy romance Dark Gardens series. If you'd like to learn more about the ancient Fae prophecy that is about to unfold in the Dark Gardens series, as well as Meara's lighthearted, international bestselling Regency romances in the Farthingale series and Book of Love series, or her more emotional Braydens series, please visit Meara's website at www.mearaplatt.com.

OceanofPDF.com