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THE
MOONSTONE
GOVERNESS

moonstone landing series

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The Moonstone Governess

Moonstone Landing Series

Book 4

by
Meara Platt



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Moonstone Landing Series
Book 4

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Text by Meara Platt

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About the Author



Chapter One

*Moonstone Landing
Cornwall, England
July 1823*

BRENNA ANGEL PAUSED in her early morning walk along the heights of Moonstone Landing to stare at the stranger she had seen at this very spot three days in a row now. He sat upon an exquisite black steed, sweeping his gaze across the meadow of red poppies that swayed in the gentle breeze. The meadow ended at the edge of the nearby cliffs. From his vantage point, he could see the quiet village in the distance and the expanse of crystal-blue water with their cove shimmering in the morning light beyond. “There is no finer view, is there? Don’t you think, sir?”

At first, the man appeared surprised by her presence and that she had spoken to him. But then he arched an eyebrow and dismounted to approach her. He was quite handsome and bigger than she’d realized, for he barely reached his shoulders now that he stood beside her. His shoulders were nicely broad, too.

“I was going to pass the same remark to you. Do you walk here every morning, Miss Angel? Or am I wrong in presuming you are the Brenna Angel?”

“I do enjoy a walk most days. Not in rain or snow, however. Would you, if I may be so bold as to ask? And what makes you say I have been so elusive?”

He laughed. “Other than the fact you have avoided me this entire week. Not to mention ignoring Mr. Priam, who happens to be Moonstone Landing’s finest land agent, or so he terms himself.”

“He is a persistent fellow, I will allow,” she replied with good grace, supposing it was time to take the measure of this handsome lord everyone in the village had been talking about. He was likely Viscount Claymore

was time to discuss what he wanted from her.

“So can I be persistent, Miss Angel.” His voice was cultured, but there was a determined edge to it. Although he was dressed casually, there was no mistaking his clothes were of the finest cut. Savile Row, no doubt. The lawn of his shirt was as crisp and white as a wintery snowfall. His breeches were a buttery color, and the material appeared as soft as the newborn fawn.

His eyes were as blue as the sea stretched out in glistening splendor before them. Since he wore no hat, Brenna had a full view of his dark hair, which appeared clean and freshly washed as the sun beamed down and the wind gently rustled through those lovely strands of burnished gold. Yes, this viscount, Lord Claymore—if this was indeed him—was a spot forgood looking, which put her more on her guard. He was a man used to doing his his own way by charm and seduction. She did not wish to be another prize and conquests, albeit merely of the business kind.

“I suppose you are one of the posh London set presently ensconced at your cousin’s hotel, the Kestrel Inn,” Brenna said, keeping her voice neutral although her stomach was now twisting in a knot. “Are you the viscount or merely his lackey?”

“Are you always so blunt?” He arched his eyebrow again, but then he approached her an engaging smile along with it. “I expect you know exactly what I mean. Do I look like any man’s lackey? Your cousin, Thaddius Anger was an excellent proprietor, and also an unmitigated gossip. Did he tell you anything to me? Or was it your uncle who tattled?”

“Which uncle? I have seven currently residing in Moonstone Lane,” Brenna replied. “I would be precise. But it was none of them. My family knows how to be discreet.”

“Are you suggesting they do not gossip?” He laughed heartily. “Can you give me some credit, Miss Angel. I cannot walk down the high street without being encountered by an Angel curious about my business, nor can I sneeze without the news being reported throughout the village within a minute of its occurrence.”

“Perhaps you are right. But in your case, it was Mrs. Halsey, the owner of the local tea shop, who was the one who was talking about you, my lord.”

“Warned you? What have I done lately to earn my bad reputation?”

“Lately? It seems you are constantly rubbing people the wrong way,” Brenna said. He frowned. “Other than an unfortunate mishap with my phaeton?”

was not my fault at all, what have I done to rankle anyone?"

at there "I think it is more what you have *not* done. By this I mean in was no yourself into our village life. You've been coming here for several ye e white and yet you and your elegant friends continue to hold yourself apa s riding everyone. Are you surprised the ill feeling has amassed over the co fur of a your visits?"

"I see you are well informed, but Mrs. Halsey's information is a li plendor of date. I no longer go by the title of viscount." He gave a sweepin k blond "Daire Claymore, formerly Viscount Claymore and now Duke of Clay vn on it "Oh, I am sorry," she said with sincere sympathy.

gold. "Sorry? What for?"

is quite "Your gain obviously means the former duke has passed on. I tho getting might be someone dear to you."

r of his She saw a shadow cross over his eyes as he said with un sup bitterness, "He was not."

d in my "Ah, I see."

bland, "No, I don't suppose you do."

ount or She had angered him, although she was not certain why a expression of sympathy for the former duke should rile him. Who und is time these London lords? She expected him to turn on his well-heeled bo / who I stride back to his horse now that he had taken offense.

l, is an Instead, he sighed and muttered, "Forgive my surliness. I have onl u about weeks before my infant nephew and meddlesome mother arrive, and yet to find a suitable house in which to deposit them."

ding, to Brenna wondered at that remark, as well.

eet." One deposited bottles. One *settled* loved ones.

ive me "Your mother might enjoy the Kestrel Inn for the lively compan without guests. But your nephew might not be as comfortable there, especial thout it likes to run around or squawk loudly, as infants often do. There are ma :." homes in the area, although I suppose very few of them are for sale o t in this Are you familiar with the Duke of Malvern? He and his family are se ned me St. Austell Grange."

He nodded. "We have met."

"But you are not friends? I suppose you have also met the Marq y." Burness at Westgate Hall and Viscount Brennan, who resides at Mo , which Cottage? By your expression, I gather they are also acquaintances

friends. Their wives are the Killigrew sisters, and you will not meet more welcoming ladies.”

“I do know them all, as you have probably heard. Is there a point in trying to make?”

“I am just trying to determine what sort of house might appeal to someone like you.”

“Someone like me?” That eyebrow of his shot up again, and he crossed his arms over his chest as he stared down at her. “Is it not obvious to you, Miss Angel, what sort of house I want? Yours, Miss Angel.”

If he thought to intimidate her, he had failed. “What is so special about your house that you must suddenly have it? Not a single home has met with my approval, despite three years of searching.”

“How do you know how long I have been searching? I do not believe I have mentioned it.”

She blushed, for not only had Mrs. Halsey gossiped about him, but Thaddius, numerous other members of her family, Mr. Priam—the local agent—and practically everyone else in the village. Indeed, she had not held a conversation with anyone since returning home that did not mention him in it.

“One hears things here and there. You do not look happy that your cousin is about to join you. Why is that, Your Grace? Are you irritated that they impose on your indolent style of living? Children and parents are a blessing, I should think. I wish... Well, never mind. You would not care to hear those dear to me.”

“On the contrary, Miss Angel. I am most eager to hear of your success since you are obviously leaping in with both feet to pass judgment on me. Do not believe you charmingly called me indolent?”

She glanced up at him, knowing she ought to feel contrite about her behavior. But she did not. This man needed to be kept at a distance lest he unwittingly fall prey to his charms, which were considerable. Thaddius should have done it.

Curiously, he did not walk away in a privileged huff or dismiss her with anger. What did that signify? Not attraction, for why should a duke be interested in her? Her cousin, Thaddius the innkeeper, thought the duke was quite an intelligent man.

He did have intelligent eyes that seemed to miss nothing. She found

t nicer, interesting. A bit frightening for the aura of power that circled him much like the swirl of the sea breeze off the cove waters.

you are But she was still not sorry she had spoken out of turn.

Why was he suddenly so keen to acquire her home?

peal to Who was he really?

Yes, she knew he had been a viscount and probably held additional titles, including his recent elevation to the title of duke. But what did anyone in the village know about *him*? Despite his coming here every summer for the past several years, there was not a single person in the village who could call him a friend, let alone even those who were his peers. This was entirely his own doing, but everyone in Moonstone Landing was friendly, especially the Killigrews and the noblemen they had married. They were all now happily settled in their fine homes on the heights overlooking the village.

Brenna's was a fine home, too. Nothing as grand as the others, but it was so quite beautiful, and hers possessed the finest view in all of Moonstone Landing—especially at this time of year, when those red poppies bloomed yet through the fields down to the sea.

include They captivated him, too. She could tell by the way he had been looking out across them with an unguarded expression of longing.

family What was he longing for?

they will Or was he pining for a person? Someone he cherished? Or had he been missing, Iago?

r about Brenna let out a breath, ready to make a goodwill gesture and tell a little about herself, even though she doubted he cared. He would probably dismiss her as deadly dull by his *haut-monde* standards. After all, she was a person of no importance.

It did not matter that her cousin, Cara Angel, had fallen in love with and married the Duke of Strathmore. The *ton* was still reeling from that scandal, but she knew that Cara or her duke cared, for theirs was a love match.

t insult She hoped for a love match, too.

However, she knew better than to look above herself. This had been her situation; the duke would not consider her fit for anything other than serving as a mistress.

like was *The lout.*

Well, he had not propositioned her.

nd him However, she could not overlook the smolder in his eyes as he re

ch like her, studying her with enough intensity to peel away her layers of c
and see into her soul.

“Your Grace, you have not seen me around here before because
teacher at a prestigious girls’ school in Oxford. The Rainard Academy
you heard of it?” When he did not bother to answer, she sighed sof
al titles, continued. “I came home this summer to settle affairs. You see, my
e really passed away five years ago, and my father last year. I am their only su
st three child.”

friend, “You had brothers and sisters?”

because She nodded. “One brother and one sister, both older. But they
7 sisters survive into adulthood.”

ttled in “I’m sorry. I see you clearly loved them.”

She nodded again. “I did. Very much. This was partly the reason I
out still to get away from here. Walls suddenly seemed to close in all around
on stone you understand this feeling?”

is swept His expression softened, for the first time showing a little war
surely do.”

looking “I thought you would.” She absently brushed back a wayward cur
wind, already warm for this hour of the morning, blew it loose. “Whe
offered the position at the Rainard Academy, I jumped at the opport
st years returned only this week with the thought of selling the house and
permanently in Oxford. But now that I am here...” She shook her he
l him a held out her hands in a gesture of supplication. “I cannot part w
quickly property. In truth, I could no more part with it than I could part w
e was a heart. I am sorry, Your Grace. It is not for sale.”

“I see.” His arms remained folded over his chest as he gazed tow
ve and village and its sweep of homes down to the sea. “There is somethin
andal—Moonstone Landing that draws me here, too. I have been searchin
house around here for years, as everyone in town seems to know. M
agent, Mr. Priam, must be pulling his hair out in frustration. He is cor
andsome I am impossible to please. Perhaps he is right. I did not know wha
as his looking for, only that I would recognize it when I saw it.”

“And after three years of searching, you have suddenly decided m
is for you? What changed from one year to the next? Surely you alway
of this house.” She regarded him with a deeper curiosity, sensi
egarded unhappiness behind his genial smile. “If it is of any consolation to y

Nothing Priam is ready to throttle me, too. I know he is salivating to sell Stoningham Manor. But I cannot bring myself to sign the papers. I am sorry, but you are free to continue your search elsewhere. However, may I please have your observation?"

He raked his gaze over her once again, those eyes of his as sharp as mother-of-pearl crystals, so blue and icy. He regarded her with marked impatience. He was surprised instead of refusing her, he cast her a wry smile and said, "Go ahead, you seem to enjoy inserting that little nose of yours into my business."

She ignored his comment. "There are many fine homes in the area. This is not a house you are looking for so much as peace for your ravaged land."

He stiffened, and his expression immediately darkened. "That is not some observation, Miss Angel. Perhaps you ought to keep those thoughts to yourself in the future."

It was her turn to arch an eyebrow. "Perhaps you ought not to be so prickly."

"Perhaps you ought to stop meddling in other people's affairs and mind your own. Let me delay you no longer. Did you not mention you needed a place else you need to be?"

She had never said any such thing.

His arms remained taut as they lay crossed over his massive chest. Obviously, his jacket required no padding at the shoulders, for his muscles were real and meant to intimidate.

Was he dismissing her? The gall of him.

She tipped her chin up in defiance, a gesture he would certainly regard as meaningless, but it made her feel better. "Perhaps you ought to apologize for trespassing, because this is my land you are standing on, and need I point out to you about trespassing? I have every right to be here. You do not."

His arms now fell to his sides as he stared at her, no doubt attempting to determine whether she was in jest. "Are you telling me *all* of this is yours? This poppy field? This hillside and its view of the sea? As well as that little washhouse?"

"Yes. I thought Mr. Priam would have told you."

"Perhaps he did. The man is an idiot and never stops babbling." He glanced at the large stone manor in the distance behind him. "That setting is what I want. Stoningham Manor. I want all of this."

She inhaled lightly. "Have you not been listening to me? It is not for me, Mr. Priam."

ingham Besides, the manor is run-down and will not suit your family anyway.'
ou shall "It is not all that run-down. I have been inside. It requires little more
ass ana fresh coat of paint and a thorough dusting."

"And repairs to the stone. Cracked windows that require new
as cut Chimneys in need of cleaning. When did you see it last?"

However, He shrugged. "Last year. Mr. Priam showed me around shortly after
id. Your father passed. You must have returned to Oxford by then, for I could

would have remembered meeting you. He thought your manor was
I think perfect for me. But he said the same of the other twenty properties he
l soul." me, so I did not make too much of it."

is quite "Why, that sneaky fellow. He must have wheedled the keys
ights to Thaddius. Why are you here now? Obviously, you found my home
last year."

be so "I never said that."

"You did not have to. Had you truly loved it, you would have made
tend to offer for it on the spot. Well, it was not for sale back then, and Mr.
u have should not have shown it to you. In any event, I am not going to sell
that was once filled with so much love to the likes of..."

She clamped her mouth shut.

chest. "To the likes of me?" he filled in for her.

muscles She met his gaze. "My apologies. My comment was beyond the pale."

"Indeed, it was. May I give you some advice, since you are so eager
pile a full plate of opinions on me? When selling goods, whether a bag
gard as wine, a gown, such as the pretty green one you have on, a horse and carriage
ogize too a house—whatever the merchandise, do not get caught in
you are sentimentality. Go for the top price you can get and be ruthless and

Sentiment will not put food on your table or provide a roof over your
oting to Fight for everything you can get, because no one will admire you for
yours? less because of sentiment."

as your "I did not realize that wound of yours was so raw. You hide your
quite well behind a façade of casual indifference. It threw me for a moment

Is this why you choose to associate with those particular friends lodging
g." Hey you at the inn?"

bles it. I "What has Thaddius told you about them? That they are aimless
shallow?"

for sale. "Your words, Your Grace. My cousin would not say anything so

I gather they are all about maintaining façades. So they will never be more than beyond the one you have so carefully crafted, and you like that just for the pretense. No questions asked. And no hearts at risk.”

panes. “I had no idea you were such a gifted oracle,” he said with open surprise.

“Do you also read palms? Tea leaves? Look into crystal balls?”

er your “Only at fairs and carnivals.” She knew she was being terribly rude, but certainly intrusive. But there was something about this man that rattled her, and she would bet the emptiness she perceived in his soul.

showed No, not emptiness. He had too much feeling, albeit suppressed. She knew he was all wrong. It was not that he was empty, but too full of bad feelings he could not shed.

lacking “I must apologize again to you,” Brenna said. “If I spoke out of turn, I am sorry.”
“Which you did.”

“—it is only because I am going through a bit of turmoil myself, and I am sure you are unrecognized the same in you. I am trying to figure out where I ought to go. Priam Here, with family? Or Oxford, where I enjoy my work? All I am saying is that I thought our situations were similar, and I sought to commiserate with you. I was wrong. Your concerns stem from a much darker place.”

“They do, Miss Angel. I warn you, do not poke that coiled snake.”

“I assure you, I mean to keep my distance. I am quite aware it is a dangerous snake who will be hurt in the encounter.”

ager to “Once again, I commend you on your powers of observation,” he said. “I am a little bit of a rattler.”
ottle of “And yet you are still giving me that gentle look of concern. I see you are quite ready to stop asking questions. What do you expect me to do next?”
up in Angel? Confide in you? Upon five minutes’ acquaintance? Here’s an idea. How about we confine our topics to the weather, this marvelous scene before us. Mrs. Halsey’s teacakes?”

taking She nodded, surprised he had not simply stormed off, declaring her to be the most irritating young lady he had ever met. But he hadn’t, not because he was determined to have her property and would stick to her until he got his way.

ed with He was still studying her, a little too closely for comfort.

What was he thinking?

ess and He had an ability to mask his feelings, so she could not tell what he was going through in his mind. However, she knew that she must be irritating him, because she was denying him something he had decided, on a whim,

er lookwanted.

ine. All Well, he was provoking her, too.

“So it shall be, Your Grace. I shall dazzle you with my knowledge and sarcasm. weather. Isn’t it a fine day? A warm sun and cool sea breeze. Nothing for one’s lungs or general constitution. How is your constitution, by the way? Do you suffer from lumbago? Gout? An embarrassing flux in your bowels perhaps?” His lips had been twitching, and he now burst out with a deep chuckle.

e had it “Dull enough for you, Your Grace?”

e could “Miss Angel, I sense you are too lively ever to be dull. But your conversation... Yes, it is worthy of putting me to sleep.” A smile escaped her lips, one she found surprisingly charming.

This scared her, for she did not wish to like him, or begin to trust herself and him. “Excellent,” she said, continuing their pointless conversation. “As to the local scenery, do you ride out on different paths each morning or always riding the same one? They somehow always lead you back to this spot, I’ve noticed. But I have you found something here that stirs your soul? Or evokes a memory? It is the poppies, isn’t it?” she said quite gently. “I am so sorry. What happened not the other day?”

“By heaven, you do not mince words, do you?”

“I apologize if I am too blunt. What am I to do about you when you are riding over here? And do not dare suggest I sell my property to you.”

He sighed. “Even your questions about the weather and scenic views are not so innocuous, Miss Angel. Can you not try harder? Your idea—your comments to the inane and frivolous?”

“I am not certain I can,” she said with utmost sincerity, because his words were a puzzle for her, and she did not wish to lie to him about her determination to befriend him. “Would you care to accompany me back to the village? I doubt I shall end my walk with one of Mrs. Halsey’s teacakes, now that I have mentioned them.”

She noticed his horse was lathered. He must have taken the magnificent beast for a hard ride, which only proved her point that he was in a desperate and unable to find a solution to whatever was plaguing him. “You ought to take it easier on your horse. No matter how hard you ride him, you will never outrun the devils chasing you.”

that he “Blessed saints, you have a mouth on you.” He said no more.

gathered the reins, but his horse snorted in annoyance, since he was contentedly munching on some nearby gorse and did not wish to be disturbed. “Come, Scipio. There’ll be sweet grass for you at the stable if you’re a better boy.”

“How?” Scipio nodded as though in understanding.

“How?” Brenna stroked the horse’s nose. “He’s a warhorse, one you’ve observed, richly named after a much-admired Roman general. Were you cavalry?”

“What makes you think I was ever in the army? A man of my rank and privilege could have bought his way out.”

“But you did not. Do not bother to deny it, for it is obvious.” She bowed and stepped his walk alongside the duke as he led Scipio back to the village. The horse required very little coaxing from his master.

Well, his master was quite a handsome fellow and could be quite persuasive. Of this, Brenna had no doubt.

He had gorgeous eyes, the beckoning bedroom sort, capable of redounding to tingles and flutters with a mere glance. Not that she would respond to him in this way...

Well, she was ignoring the excited shivers running up her arms and the butterflies fluttering in her belly.

As for the duke, she did not know what else he wanted from her, or what he was thinking, or what to make of him at all.

She made the mistake of posing the question to him.

He arched that eyebrow of his, a sign of his amusement as he considered another of his wry smiles. “Are you sure you wish to know the thoughts whirling in my head?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Very well, my snoopy miss,” he said, with a little heat to his voice. The lightened smolder in his eyes. He took her hand—neither his nor hers, but she gloved—to draw her closer. She thought his hands would be soft as hers, but they weren’t. They were big and rough, and so was his voice as he spoke.

“What I was thinking... Since you do not wish to give me your house.

“Which I don’t.”

“Perhaps you might be persuaded to give me... you.”

“Me?” Her mouth dropped open as she gaped at him.

Had she heard him right?

Would she be clapped in irons if she hit him? Perhaps not, since he

He was the local constable.

She hauled her arm back, fully intending to slap him, since the whole village, including the Duke of Malvern, Marquess of Burness, and Viscount Brennan, would come to her defense against this loathsome man if he so low as to press charges.

How dare he insult her with that revolting proposition!

He easily blocked her hand, then drew her open palm to his lips and gave her a soft kiss. "I warned you not to tangle with the coiled snake."

She had to own that he was right.

Why had she passed that comment about his demons? She could see the turmoil in his eyes that she had ripped the bandage off a wound that yet to heal. She ought to learn to keep her mouth shut.

What was he going to do next?

His eyes had a feral look to them...hot and raw.

"Brenna," he said with a wrenching ache that seemed to emerge from the depths of his damaged soul. "Brenna," he repeated with a throaty

lowering his head to hers and kissing her full on the mouth with scandal and heat.

or what

cast her
thoughts

He and a
girls were
hers, but
he said,
.."

her uncle

was the local constable.

She hauled her arm back, fully intending to slap him, since the entire village, including the Duke of Malvern, Marquess of Burness, and Viscount Brennan, would come to her defense against this loathsome man if he were so low as to press charges.

How dare he insult her with that revolting proposition!

He easily blocked her hand, then drew her open palm to his lips and gave it a soft kiss. "I warned you not to tangle with the coiled snake."

She had to own that he was right.

Why had she passed that comment about his demons? She could see by the turmoil in his eyes that she had ripped the bandage off a wound that had yet to heal. She ought to learn to keep her mouth shut.

What was he going to do next?

His eyes had a feral look to them...hot and raw.

"Brenna," he said with a wrenching ache that seemed to emerge from the depths of his damaged soul. "Brenna," he repeated with a throatier ache, lowering his head to hers and kissing her full on the mouth with scorching heat.



Chapter Two

DAIRE DREW HIS lips off Brenna's mouth, needing a moment to make her stop spinning. He had expected to dazzle her with the soft crush of his lips on hers, melt her, and render her helpless to his prowess, but—what the hell? He'd never tasted sweeter lips or felt a lovelier body pressed to his.

She pushed away, furious with him.

"Go ahead, slap me. I won't stop you this time, since even I will deserve it." He held out his hands, allowing himself to be a target. "How do you feel? If you wish me to be honest about it, I am not sorry I kissed you."

"I am not going to slap you and risk another kiss, for you are just precious enough to do something like that," she replied. "Since we are being honest with each other... I did not like your kiss in the least."

He saw the heat in her eyes and knew for a fact that quite the opposite was true. She had adored it. Women always did, especially *ton* women who understood the rules of engagement, which Brenna did not. One did not get into the hearts of men like him without risk of getting kissed...or buried both.

"You are an oaf," she shot back when he grinned at her.

"And you are lying to yourself if you believe my kiss did not melt your bones." He raked a hand through his hair, and his grin slipped. "If you continue insulting me, then you ought to be more precise about it. I am a snake, not an oaf."

"No, your anguish is the coiled snake. You are... I don't know what you are yet, other than arrogant and impossibly forward." Having said that, the snooty bundle of froth who called herself Brenna tore down the stairs toward Moonstone Landing.

He sighed, knowing he needed to go after her and make things right because what he had done had been unspeakably offensive, even for him.

She had asked what he wanted, and he had shown her because that

ruby mouth of hers was irresistible.

Perhaps he had responded with too much honesty.

But she had not remained indifferent, for he saw the innocent passion in her eyes.

Where was the harm in a simple kiss?

Well, perhaps no harm for someone with experience.

Brenna was surprisingly inexperienced, as it turned out. How was his head know? Of course, this was something he should have picked up on. If lips on a man kissed her before this? She was such a sharp little thing, he just a blaze? she would be sharp about everything.

His mistake.

Lush, bow-shaped lips, emerald eyes as bright as starlight, and admit I mop of hair, a glorious mix of chestnut brown and darkest red, mac however, beautiful woman, but not one who necessarily wished to leap into his kiss him.

reverse Even if she had liked their kiss more than she would ever admit.

honest Daire mounted Scipio and spurred him forward to catch up with I who was now running as fast as her legs would carry her toward the opposite “You will fall and break your neck hurtling down the hillside if you en who slow down,” he said, cutting her off so that she was forced to stop not pry running headlong into his beast.

ied...or She was breathing hard, her lovely bosom heaving, as she struggled to restore her composure. Her eyes shimmered and her rosebud lips were parted, which made him want to kiss her again. He did not reach out elt your however. That would only earn him another attempted slap, not to r u insist lose him any chance of acquiring her house.

ike, not “Truce, Miss Angel.” He dismounted and offered his arm to esc back into town. “You were never in any danger from me.”

hat you “Why did you kiss me in that...that...?”

hat, the “Scorching way?” Did she seriously need to ask? Had no or hillside mentioned how pretty she was? He ached to kiss her every time she her lips, something she had a habit of doing whenever she was thin s right, fretting. “Here’s a hint—it had nothing to do with your wit or wisdom.

im. She frowned at him. “You are quite the boor.”

at plush “I never claimed to be anything else. You are the one who sought t into my soul. What did you think to find? Pretty butterflies and butt

Or were you thinking to uncover something heroic about me? I assure you I have not sipped a drop of elixir capable of making me brave or valorous. The heat of battle is not what you are suggesting. “Are you suggesting you were never heroic in any respect? You fought in the war when you could have bought your way out.”

“Who says I didn’t buy out my commission?”

“Your horse.”

“I was not aware my horse could talk.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Fine, fighting Napoleon does not make me a hero. It was a long time ago, and I was young and foolish.”

She refused to accept his offered arm, so he dropped it to his side.

To his surprise, she proceeded to walk beside him. “You are a man full of contradictions, Your Grace. What do you have inside of you?”

“Other than bitterness and bile?”

She looked up at him as they walked along, with Scipio now a contentedly behind them. “I am sorry you are so haunted. Have you ever been like this, or did the war do this to you?”

“What does it matter? Do you think you are just the woman to save me? Do not. Others have tried and failed.”

“Heavens, no. I am not interested in saving you. You are part genius, part tragic poet, and part coiled snake, as you warned. I have learned my lesson and know better than to tangle with you.”

He reached out and brushed a windblown curl off her cheek. “Smile for her, do you live alone at Stoningham Manor?”

“No one lives there at the moment. I am staying in the village, in my cousin Cara’s cottage. Stoningham Manor is too big for me to manage on my own, which is why it makes sense for me to sell it. But to do so is a bit of a loss, though I am giving up my parents. My siblings, too. Indeed, my entire existence. I suppose you will chide me again for my sentiment.”

“I have no need. You are chiding yourself.”

“Not really. I value sentiment. It does have a value, no matter what you think or say.”

“There’s where you are wrong. You are going to hold on to the house and pour your savings into its upkeep, even though all that work will never be sufficient to properly restore it. Then where will you be? Struggling because you spent the funds to preserve a memory?”

“You’re winding up with a house reduced in value because the funds were going to be enough, and it still needs fixing.”

“Let you She again pursed her lips.

Ah, those exquisite lips. He wanted to kiss her again.

But even he understood he had done enough damage for one morning.

Besides, now that he realized how innocent she was, he could never take advantage. She looked quite youthful, like the breath of spring. But she was to be approaching her mid-twenties, since he knew she had taught at Rainard Academy for several years.

Gossip flowed both ways here in Moonstone Landing. She had heard a lot about him, but he’d also heard quite a bit about her. She was liked and admired, regarded highly for her knowledge, which obviously extended to men.

He was not going to make that mistake again.

In truth, he felt quite some remorse for taking advantage and kissing her without permission. Well, he did not really regret kissing her. But he was too much of a gentleman, despite what she thought, and would not act again without her permission.

Blasted shreds of decency and honor. They were such useless things for a gentleman. “You mentioned you had siblings, Miss Angel.”

“Yes, a beloved brother and a sister who always looked out for me. But a fever took them before they reached adulthood. I don’t know why the fever did not take me, too.”

“You might have been the littlest, but you must have had the littlest bit of my spirit.”

She shrugged.

“Miss Angel, if you are reluctant to sell me your property, perhaps we shall come to another arrangement. Would you consider letting the house to me for the remainder of the year? A six-month term? Or a full year? To give you an income while you decide what you want to do.”

She pursed her lips yet again.

Really, this girl needed serious kissing.

He grunted. What was wrong with him?

“It is a comfortable home,” she said. “My father was a man of importance in the area. But you are a duke. I doubt it will be nearly fine enough for you.”

“Mr. Priam would be issuing you a severe lecture right now,” he said.

ne nevera mock frown. "Is this not a perfect solution for you? At least a ten one to get you through the year? Why are you trying to talk me out of piles of money at you?"

She cast him a pained expression. "You are right. I am being ing. Toss away. I'll fetch a basket to catch as many banknotes as you ver takethrow at me."

she had "You are being sarcastic. But you should not be so quick to dismiss at the little dove. I'll need to tour the place again to make certain it is suitable the entourage about to descend on me. Mother. Nephew. Governor heard an Maidservants. Butler. Cook. Groom."

beloved "Will you reside there, too?"

did not "Perhaps. I haven't decided yet. The Kestrel Inn is quite comfortable. Especially with your lady friends ensconced there."

He arched an eyebrow. "Thaddius talks too much."

ing her. "What you do with your lady friends is none of my business, so h of ayou do not think to turn my home into a bawdy house."

out her "With my mother in residence? I can assure you, it will be as free as any fine church. So, do we have a deal?"

gs. They were almost into town now, and he knew they ought to part v as not to be seen returning together. For a young woman to be caught ked out with a man such as himself would cause damage to her reputation 't know were in London. But he wasn't quite certain how these locals would r especially since she was related to most of them.

ardiest "A deal? No... Maybe. Well, let me give it some thought. Set o offer and convey it to Mr. Priam. He can bring it to me."

"Why not discuss it with me directly?"

aps we The girl had lovely and delicate features, even as she frowned ouse to "Because you think you can manipulate me with kisses. Let me assure his will did not appreciate your forwardness. Sweeping me into your arms to will not soften me toward you in the least. It will firmly put me off. S keep this strictly professional. We shall deal through Mr. Priam or not

He sighed and put up his hands. "Very well. I surrender to your terms ask Mr. Priam to take me to Stoningham Manor this afternoon, if th ortanceright with you. Care to come with us? You needn't speak to me direc r you." there will be some adjustments needed to the house, and it would be s uid witheasier if we could come to terms on all of it today. Any work done

temporary solely at my cost, and if any of it is not to your liking, I shall
tossing additional funds in escrow to cover the expense of restoration once the
term has ended and we have gone back to London. As for the lease,
foolish, offer you double whatever the other homes in the area are being let for
wish to “And you chide me on my bad negotiation skills?” she said with
of her head. “Good heavens.”

Miss me, She considered his offer, one she had to know was ridiculously good
able for and ought to be grabbed before he came to his senses.

firmness. Not that he would, for this was mere pocket change for him.

She sighed. “Yes, I would like to be there when you look over the place.”

“Good. I’ll arrange it with Mr. Priam.”

He waited for her to walk back into town before he mounted Scipio and
made his way back to the inn. The hour was early, and Mr. Priam would
be in his office yet.

Daire was in no hurry now that he had swayed Brenna. All that was
do was set the terms down in writing, and Mr. Priam would put his
of sin it immediately in order to secure his own fee.

There was no other pressing business to occupy Daire’s day, so he
ways so his time making certain Scipio was properly fed and curried by the
it alone ostler, the chatty Mr. Matchett.

“I’ll take good care of him, Your Grace. Never you worry. I heard
respond, were looking over Miss Angel’s property on the heights. Lovely girl,

Cleverest of us all, but we always knew she was a bright little thing
but you would make good someday. She could read and write better than me
time she was a wee sprite of six. But for all her book learning, her
Joseph’s worried about her.”

at him. “Joseph?”

“Aye, m’lord,” Mr. Matchett said. “Joseph Angel. He owns the
kiss me Lions Tavern. Runs it with his son, William. He’s a strapping lad and
protective of his cousins. Looked out for Cara, he surely did. And not
at all.” looking out for Brenna. They are close as siblings, but that comes
ms. I’ll surprise, since the three of them, along with their cousin Felicity, were
at is all up in the squall that killed Captain Arundel, and would have killed them
tly. But had the captain not come to their rescue. Such wee ones they were
o much time, and their ship about to go down. Don’t think our village would
will behave recovered had they drowned.”

deposit It took Daire another few minutes to disengage himself from the
the leasebut the man had given him much to think about. Brenna had almost d
I shallas a little girl? How had this affected her, having to face death at a
.” age?

a shake He did not know why it roused his protective instincts.

Gad, he wanted to take her in his arms and just hold her forever. I
enerousshe required this from him, for she was a scrappy little thing, having s
a near drowning and the scourge of an illness that had claimed the live
older siblings. She was clearly a strong woman and not afraid to m
house.” way in the world. Perhaps the ordeals she had faced had given
strength to stand on her own.

pio and The innkeeper, Thaddius Angel, greeted him as he strode in. “I
ould nothave a pleasant ride this morning, Your Grace? Lovely day for it.”

Daire nodded. “Yes, quite an enlightening ride.”

s left to The fellow arched an eyebrow. “Enlightening? Ah, then you
lerks toencountered my cousin, Brenna.”

For pity’s sake, did everyone have to know his business?

he took Daire glanced at the notice posted on an easel by the entryway.
ie inn’sthere is an assembly ball to be held at the inn this evening.”

Thaddius looked at him askance, knowing he was mentioning it
ear youchange the topic, since the notice had been prominently displayed t
she is.week, and one would have to be blind as a mole not to have seen it
ing andthis moment. “Yes, Your Grace. Will you and your party attend? Brer
by thebe there.”

Uncle Daire merely nodded and walked into the empty dining room. Tl
was early for most of the inn’s patrons, but he preferred the solitude, s
needed to think about Brenna. She would be at tonight’s dance, he
e Threetaking a seat at one of the tables in a back corner of the room to disc
nd veryany of the inn’s guests approaching him, should they happen to walk in
ow he’s Tomorrow there was to be a tea hosted by the Duke of Malvern
s as nowife at their grand estate, St. Austell Grange. He wondered whether
caughtwould attend that affair, too.

hem all No matter.

e at the He would see the girl again this afternoon, and this pleas
ld everimmensely, although he did not know why it should when she ha
nothing but meddle and poke her finger into his deep wounds.

ostler, He ordered a cup of coffee, finished it quickly, and then decided to stroll down to the harbor. He needed to think about his summer plans and did not wish to be interrupted by his wastrel friends. Why had he brought them along when they no longer amused him? Well, it was his own fault for inviting them.

Not that Brenna had been surprisingly quick to catch on to why he kept them around. They were toadies who did not ask questions or require him to confess to the contents of her heart. The ladies among them, although still unmarried, did not make her unapologetic in their promiscuity. They did not hesitate to join him whenever it suited him. Nor did they particularly care which of them came to his bed, or if both accompanied him.

Did you But he hadn't touched either of them since arriving in Moor Landing several weeks ago. They were amoral creatures, both of them betrothed to older noblemen who were in frail health and ridiculously wealthy. Those were irresistible qualities, apparently. They were willing to offer nights of sex during their marriage in return for scads of money and the demise of their well-satisfied husbands.

"I see Daire shuddered to think what kind of salons Lady Gemma and Sarah would host once they were merry widows. Nor did their brothers, only to Hollingsworth, ever show any concern for their virtue or shocking lack of it here all Ah, families.

before But who was he to pass judgment on any of them when his own behavior was so shameful? Brutal, cruel, and completely lacking in scruples. The only one among them who stood a chance of getting into heaven was the one he referred to as his mother. Duchess Juliana was actually his stepmother since he had married his father only a month before that bastard died. To his mused surprise, she had taken her role as mother quite seriously, raising him and his older brother as though they were her own. She never beat them or gazed on them, despite the trouble they caused.

and his Unfortunately, she had come into their lives too late to save his brother from turning into the heartless monster that their father and grandfather before him, had been.

As for Daire himself, the outcome was yet to be decided. Would his stepmother intervene in time to save him? He simply did not know.

He had done "Ah, Brenna," he muttered. "Perhaps you are right to want nothing to do with me."

to take a He strode down the high street, passing the monument to Captain Arundel. Daire had passed by this statue dozens of times over the years, but never stopped in front of it until this morning. The man's sacrifice for now had meaning for him, for without his valor, Brenna would not be here today. The sea captain was the village hero for rescuing all the schoolchildren from that sinking schooner during the squall, as Mr. Matchett had said.

Daire shook his head. Why did this incident now leave *him* in such turmoil? Perhaps it was something he would talk to Brenna about later. War had changed people forever, their rescuers and especially the survivors. Had he not been so changed by war? He had led his men into some of the bloodiest battles.

Daire tried to dismiss thoughts of war or Brenna as he reached the dockside and looked out over the harbor that was dotted with sailing vessels. They were mostly fishing boats, but there was also a naval frigate easily the largest upon one of the slips in order to discharge its wounded soldiers. Fort Arundel, an ancient stone fortress beside the harbor, was an army outpost commanded by Lord Viscount Fionn Brennan, and attached to it was a newly built military hospital also under his command.

Most of the naval vessels arriving at this port sailed in for the purpose of depositing their wounded.

Daire knew he ought to do something about helping out, perhaps. He would talk to Viscount Brennan about it later. He turned away from the fish market, which was bustling at this hour. While the men were off in their fishing vessels catching their daily haul, the women were skinning and gutting the fresh catch as it was brought in.

The ground was strewn with blood, and the air held the scent of fish.

He sighed and walked back up the hill to the inn, annoyed with himself for allowing the memories of war to seep into his thoughts. Suddenly everything he saw and every breath he inhaled reminded him of the soldiers on the bloody battlefields. Blood on all sides, young men dying needlessly.

How detestable his life had been even before he headed off to war. How empty it was ever since his return to England once the war with Napoleon had been defeated years ago, and Daire's father had died.

in Brioc before that, so why was he still battling demons?

over the And why did he suddenly think Brenna could be what he needed
sacrifice his heart?

be here She thought him low and repulsive for kissing her.

children But, dear heaven, he thought he would suffocate if he did not
again.

However, he would not attempt it unless she was willing. She
thought he was an arrogant rogue and did not like him. Well, she did not
. These to like him, which was not quite the same thing. If he had any se
rvivors, would keep his arrangement with Brenna completely professional and
e fairly the *ton* ladies for his amorous affairs.

Yes, it would be so much easier to keep to those easy women who
led themselves at him and offered him whatever he wished, without need
vessels, to expend any effort or make any promises to get them into his bed.

ing into But Brenna... He would have to work hard to claim her. It was h
del, they had started off badly. In his own defense, it was not every
ided by brazenly kissed a woman he had just met. In fact, he had never done it
military She assumed he wanted her as a bedmate.

But she was wrong. It was very possible he wanted her as someor
pose of permanent.

However, not merely as his mistress. First of all, he did not bel
.. Well, keeping a mistress, and never had, since they were a responsibility an
to walk be as demanding as a wife. Nor did he like the thought of keeping a
hile the bird trapped in a gilded cage. It was still a cage, and the pretty bird v
r wives free, no matter how many expensive trinkets her *keeper* provided.

Second of all, Brenna was completely innocent and would not kr
rotting first thing about enticing a man in bed.

Though that innocence was enticing in itself. She was an a
himself glorious, beautiful, celestial being. And this was her family name, too.
ddenly, He had done some low things in his life, but never had he befouled an

aughter Perhaps she could become someone dear to him over time—he sim
dlessly, not know.

She certainly remained in his thoughts, and he had never
rar, and invigorated after meeting someone. It made no sense, for she was
is over, more than a prim, overly sentimental schoolteacher on the verge of be
d years a spinster.

But gad, what a stunning spinster she was.

to heal He liked her, despite her insolent attitude...which probably made h
her more.

Why was he thinking so much about her? It must be boredor
kiss her momentary madness on his part.

What else could it be?

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nothing
coming

But gad, what a stunning spinster she was.

He liked her, despite her insolent attitude...which probably made him like her more.

Why was he thinking so much about her? It must be boredom, or a momentary madness on his part.

What else could it be?



Chapter Three

DAIRE DECIDED THESE surprising feelings he had for Brenna were in momentary madness, for who but a madman contemplated marriage minutes of meeting a person? Not that he was seriously contemplating certainly not with this girl, who was nothing like the biddable lass usually came across.

Nor would Brenna be in any way suitable, since he was a duke and had not an ounce of noble blood. It did not matter that his body was thrumming and his heart had not stopped racing from their earlier kiss.

She had said what he needed was salvation, not a home.

What if she turned out to be his salvation?

Blast, he was doing it again. Why could he not stop thinking of this? Not that his thoughts were at all serious about her.

However, if they did turn serious, then what did he care what thought about who he chose for a wife? Only his opinion mattered. Duke of Strathmore could marry an Angel, why couldn't he?

"Botheration," he muttered, chiding himself for allowing these far-musings to invade his thoughts and completely swallow them up. He had been on nothing and no one but her since meeting her this morning.

Since kissing her this morning.

Bollocks.

He was being an idiot, and Brenna would be the first one to call him on it.

Nor would Brenna ever believe or trust him if he chose to do something beyond the leasing of her house. How could she when he could not trust himself? He was still that coiled snake, and too dangerous for an innocent like her to handle.

He pushed thoughts of her out of his mind, yet again.

His friends were now awake and seated in wait for him at one

grander tables in the inn's dining room when he returned. They caught attention as he tried to stride past them, so he could not ignore their gaze to come over.

They looked like a muster of peacocks, all of them overly dressed casual village, and impatient for him to relieve their *ennui*.

"Really, Claymore," Lord Hollingsworth said, seated idly in a chair beside the one Daire now took. "How long must we rusticate indeed? Why don't we all head to Bath for the summer?"

Daire glanced at the others. "Is this what you all wish to do?" Hollingsworth's sisters, Lady Sarah and Lady Gemma, had bored expressions on their faces. So had their cousin, Lord Danson, who adored bright colors and thought he struck quite a dashing pose in them. All he could do was blind everyone with his colorful silks. He looked quite out of place as still ridiculous.

The others were similarly out of place with their bejeweled attire and pale complexions.

"I intend to settle my mother and nephew here," Daire said with a slight smile. "Leave if you wish, but I am staying."

His edict did not please them, but they quickly assured him they would stay on. It was not out of friendship, because these were not true friends. If they were merely hangers-on. He was footing the bills, and these Hollingsworths were more than happy to go along with his plans, since they did not like to fetch anything themselves. Their own funds were spent on glittering trappings. Hollingsworth, Danson, and the ladies routinely went through the generous allowance given them every month by their uncle, the Marquess of Haverlock, every last farthing frivolously applied to their own purposes and nothing set aside for future needs.

Perhaps he would ship them off to Bath. They would only be in town while he supervised repairs to Stoningham Manor. There was little time to pursue all had to be in order before his mother and nephew arrived. Besides, his mother did not care for his friends.

In truth, neither did he.

Well, Hollingsworth could be all right sometimes. The man was not a complete dullard. But Daire had little patience for any of them right now. He could easily afford to ship them off to his townhouse in Bath. Of course, it was located in one of the most elegant crescents, because his family

right his acquired the finest. Yes, he would send them off once he and Brenna's gestures firmed their terms.

"I'm afraid you will have to entertain yourselves today," Daire said, "for this will see you this evening at the assembly ball."

They responded like lost children, whining and questioning why he would leave them on their own in this boring backwater. "What is so important here? Will it occupy your time? Why can we not join you?" Lady Sarah asked, giving him a pretty pout.

"It is a business matter, and you will only delay me." He slapped his hands to his thighs and rose.

"But you will be back in time for the assembly ball?" Lady Sarah asked. "Who are we to dance with if you are not there?"

He nodded. "I shall be back well before then, and you shall have a dance."

He returned to his suite of rooms and ordered up a bath. Once washed and properly groomed, he walked over to Mr. Priam's land office, which was on the high street along with most of the village shops and businesses.

The man's eyes lit up when Daire strode in and told him he wanted Stoningham Manor again for the purpose of letting it. "Merely to let it? I thought you wished to purchase."

"But Miss Angel does not have a mind to sell, so I am authorizing me to offer her leasing terms. But I must tour the house again before I sign anything. Tell her I wish to see it this afternoon, Mr. Priam, and be certain she is present on the tour. I do not intend to waste time haggling."

"Yes, my lord. I shall arrange it at once. Miss Angel happens to be in a tea shop. I saw her there not ten minutes ago. If you will be so kind as to come right here, I shall—"

"I'll go with you," Daire said, not caring that it was probably a bad idea, since Brenna had insisted on having him deal exclusively through Mr. Priam. But since when did Daire take orders from anyone?

Good thing he was put in charge of his cavalry regiments during the war, for he truly was not good at taking orders, and rarely bent to the wishes of others.

The little man cleared his throat. "It might be best if I—"

"No, Mr. Priam. We shall go over there together."

Brenna was just finishing her tea when they arrived at Mrs. H

ina had popular establishment. The aroma of cakes, pies, and bread baking ovens struck Daire as he strode in, and was enough to make his mouth said. “I However, the most tempting morsel for him was Brenna.

Gad, she was pretty...in an impudent way. Big eyes, a pursed and e wouldmouth that was as sweet as cherries, and unruly hair that blazed m ant thatthan brown in the sunshine.

casting She maintained an even countenance as he and Mr. Priam approac table. “Do sit down, gentlemen.”

ped his They took chairs on either side of her, but these wrought-iron chai ornately designed and meant for a dainty woman’s frame, not for b Gemmasuch as Daire. He sat quietly as Mr. Priam began to do the talking for h

“Miss Angel,” the man said, his beady eyes shining as he silently c ve yourhis profits, “His Grace, the Duke of Claymore, is seriously interested property. I have told him how exquisite it is, and he is eager to make red andoffer on it. Now, I know you have mentioned it is not for sale. But was ongenerous man, willing to offer generous terms. And we all know y hard-pressed to maintain—”

d to see “That is enough, Mr. Priam,” Daire said. “Miss Angel will not res let, myyour tactics. My offer, which I made clear to you, is merely to let th from her for the remainder of the year. I know she is not yet ready to s ; you todo not appreciate your coercing her.”

ign my “Thank you, Your Grace,” she said, staring at him with marked s l. Makeand a hint of appreciation.

g.” He could be nice when he wanted to be.

e at the “Miss Angel,” he said, trying not to smile at her continued expres to wait surprise, “will you be amenable to meeting us at Stoningham Mar afternoon? I would like you to walk me through the property, after wh ad idea, can discuss leasing terms that will suit us both.”

. Priam. She nodded. “Very well. Two o’clock this afternoon at the house.”

He smiled. “Until then, Miss Angel.”

he war, Daire rose and walked to the tea shop door, sparing a greeting f will of Halsey, who was quite the gossip but also baked the best pies he h tasted. “Have a good day, Mrs. Halsey.”

“And you, Your Grace. Will you and your party be stopping by l tea and cakes?”

lalsey’s “Yes, as always. It is the high point of our day.” Which was not f

in the truth, since little went on in this quiet village to amuse his friends. Daire, he enjoyed the quieter life and had never been much enamored of typical London entertainments. After all, how many dinner parties and poutymusicales, and theater outings could one attend with the same people more red could one speak of the same trivial things, and listen to their infuriating petty complaints?

He had long ago lost any feeling of excitement in bedding the same ladies, most of whom were married and unhappy with their lives. No one would have traded their wealth and titles for a true love match, but that did not stop them from bemoaning their plight.

He looked back, sparing a glance at Brenna, who was chatting with Priam.

She was the romantic, impossibly idealistic sort who would insist on a love match.

Perhaps this is why she fascinated him—this refreshingly innocent she had of finding love. And yet she was also sensible, quite independent enough to teach at an elegant girls' school in Oxford, and not to live on her own.

In her own way, Brenna was formidable.

He had yet to cross the street to return to the inn when another of the shop's patrons hurried out after him. "Good morning, Lady Dowling," she surprised greeted her.

"Good morning, Your Grace." She flashed him a seductive smile that would not impress him in the least. Many considered Lady Dowling to be the most beautiful woman in Moonstone Landing, and he had to own she was not for this nice looking. But the lovely widow was also an opportunist and not one who would break up a romantic couple if it served her purpose. He had seen her action trying to break up Viscount Brennan and Lady Chloe Killian, but fortunately, a failed attempt on her part.

She smiled at him quite prettily. "A lovely day, isn't it?"

Daire sighed, for he did not like the woman very much. Not that he had ever conscience to speak of, but he knew love was something important at

He did not like to think it could be so easily destroyed by this tenacious woman. "Yes, quite a pleasant day."

She took his arm as they walked toward the inn, although he had not been there if this was her destination. "Will you be attending the assembly tomorrow?"

. As foreveining?" she asked with a charming lilt to her voice.

l of the He nodded.

, balls, "Excellent. I shall see you then. I was thinking of taking a room at
e? Howfor myself."

iatingly What was she suggesting?

"For tonight, Lady Dowling? Why? You live close by, and any of
e boredgentlemen would not hesitate to see you safely home."

it a one "Are you offering? I do so appreciate it."

that did "Of course." He cursed silently, for being seen in her company wo
endear him to Brenna. She would never believe his actions were in
ith Mr. Not that his affairs were any business of hers, but the girl already tho
ran a brothel in his room. He did not want her mistaking a simple c
st on awalk Lady Dowling home as something more and refuse to lease her p
to him.

nt hope Not that he intended to stay the night, which was obviously wha
endent, Dowling was offering. Now, if Brenna were to invite him, his answer
t afraidbe quite different. But she would never do such a thing.

He left Lady Dowling in the dining room with the others of his par
had not budged and were once again complaining they had nothing
the tea "Really, Claymore," Lord Danson drawled, "must you leave us when
ng," hewe are so miserable?"

"Alas, I must." Daire retired to his suite to attend to the pa
that didbusiness delivered yesterday by his man of affairs.

re most There was not much to do, for Daire's detestable brother had no
is quitelong enough to inflict much damage to the dukedom their grandfat
t aboveruthlessly built up to be one of the most profitable estates in England.
i her inbrutal father had died shortly after his grandfather, to everyone's reli
grew—Morgan, his reckless bastard of a brother, had inherited next.

The only good that could be said of Morgan was that he left the b
matters to Daire, for the most part, while he wreaked havoc in his te
e had aduke, running up gambling debts and siring a slew of illegitimate of
nd rare.all but one of whom had died.

ntpress. The boy, Matthew, was as wild as wolves.

Perhaps it was a mistake for Daire to bring his mother and Matthe
no ideaWell, he had made the decision, and hoped it would not prove to b
all thisone. The boy's mother had died, too. Daire was the only one left to lo

him.

He finished the most pressing matters and delivered his mail to Thaddeus at the inn. "See that it is put on the next mail coach to London."

"At once, Your Grace," Thaddeus said with an amiable smile.

Since the hour was nearing two o'clock, Daire strode up the high street to a dozen of the land agent's office. Mr. Priam had his curricle hitched and was waiting for him to climb in before he flicked the reins and they headed to Blackthorn Manor. "What about Miss Angel?" Daire asked.

"Oh, I am certain she is there already. She likes to walk. It gives her innocent to think, she claims. In my opinion, she thinks an awful lot but does not ought to resolve anything."

"Mr. Priam, that is unfair. You know she is the sentimental sort and property must be quite hard for her to part with this beautiful property, even only for a few months."

The man eyed Daire curiously. "You seem to know an awful lot about her, Your Grace."

"I make it my business to know whom I am dealing with."

"Ah, then you've heard she is also contemplating an offer of marriage to do. Daire's heart leaped into his throat. "I've heard some concerning you see accounts."

This was an outright lie, for no one had mentioned Brenna having a suitor until this very moment. Why would this be kept from him when the whole village must have known of it? Not a blessed soul could control their tongues if they lived about anything, so why fail to bring up the fact she had a beau?

The fellow could not be much of a man if he had not even kissed Brenna. Daire's heart leaped into his throat. "I've heard some concerning you see accounts."

"What do you know about him, Mr. Priam?"

And how was it possible a girl as beautiful as her had never been proposed to? Or asked to kiss? Perhaps those seven uncles had scared the lads off. But those seven uncles had not been with her in Oxford.

"Well, Your Grace, it is not my place to say." Mr. Priam looked ahead and flicked the reins again to hurry his old bay up the small hill towards the house.

"But say it anyway, Mr. Priam. It is pertinent information. Not that I care about the gentleman, but Miss Angel's feelings for him will certainly

her decisions regarding Stoningham Manor. Who is he?"

addius. "I hear he is an Oxford professor. Quite respected in his field."

"And what might that field be?"

"Oh, that I do not know. I'm sure Miss Angel will tell you if you street toher."

waiting Daire doubted she would open up to him and discuss something renna's personal. But he would do his best to draw her out in casual conversation.

Why was she determined to hold on to this house if her beau truly preferred to marry her? A full professorship at Oxford University had to be much more than a title. This fellow of hers was not likely to give it up to reside in some remote village in Cornwall, such as Moonstone Landing.

, and it If this man was indeed serious, did Brenna feel the same about him if it is The possibility made Daire's stomach churn.

Brenna was already at the house, standing in wait on the front steps. As they rattled up the overgrown drive in the jouncing curricula, Daire could not take his gaze off her the entire time, soaking in the uncommon beauty of her face and that sweet body of hers. She would hit him again if she saw what he was thinking.

fluctuating But how could he not ache over her? This girl sparkled. The air crackled around her because she had so much vitality. That she should be the mistress of a staid Oxford professor who did not know how to kiss her properly would be a gross injustice.

mouths "Blast," he said quietly, raking a hand through his hair.

"Your Grace, did you say something?" Mr. Priam glanced at him. Brenna drew up in front of the house.

irkedom "No, merely thinking aloud." Why should Daire care whom she could marry? He'd only met the girl this morning.

It was mad to care, but he did, and his stomach was churning again. *Botheration.*

uncles What was it about Brenna Angel he found so fascinating?

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toward

it I care
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"I hear he is an Oxford professor. Quite respected in his field."

"And what might that field be?"

"Oh, that I do not know. I'm sure Miss Angel will tell you if you to ask her."

Daire doubted she would open up to him and discuss something this personal. But he would do his best to draw her out in casual conversation. Why was she determined to hold on to this house if her beau truly meant to marry her? A full professorship at Oxford University had to be much coveted, and this fellow of hers was not likely to give it up to reside in some out-of-the-way village in Cornwall, such as Moonstone Landing.

If this man was indeed serious, did Brenna feel the same about him?

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"No, merely thinking aloud." Why should Daire care whom she chose to marry? He'd only met the girl this morning.

It was mad to care, but he did, and his stomach was churning again.

Botheration.

What was it about Brenna Angel he found so fascinating?



Chapter Four

BRENNNA TRIED TO maintain a calm façade as she showed the Duke Claymore through her home. She had brought along a small writing tablet and a graphite to jot down details that would go into the lease. “Three windows.”

“I’ll have those repaired,” the duke said, examining them closer.

“Should they not be my responsibility?” She was not comfortable with taking over every aspect of her home’s restoration, although it was quite on her part. If the man wanted to storm through her house like a commanding bull and insist on taking on all the expenses, why should she care?

He cast her a look. “Miss Angel, it shall be my cost, and that’s an end to it.”

“But—”

“Mine,” he said with an arch of his eyebrow, daring her to challenge him.

“Very well,” she grumbled, her lips twitching at the corners in a way because they were both being stupidly stubborn. She was the more stubborn because he was wealthy and this cost was nothing to him, whereas it was a significant expense to her. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

Mr. Priam merely watched them in confusion.

“My Uncle Simon is a builder and can handle this list of repairs as well as the painting,” she offered, finally giving in, since this was a sensible thing to do. “Do you wish to see his references?”

Daire chuckled. “No. You Angels are a close-knit family. I do not want to do anything other than his best work on your home for fear that a constable uncle would lock him up.”

“He won’t mind being locked up by Uncle Malcolm, but he will have put an ancient curse on us if Uncle Joseph—he owns the Three Lions—ever barred him from enjoying a pint there again,” Brenna said with a smile.

laugh. "That threat would be far more effective. But I merely jest. My father is honest and hardworking. Uncle Simon will always do his best, even for you, a stranger none of us trust yet."

Daire chuckled. "You have such a flattering way with words, Felicity Angel."

She held up her journal. "Shall we decide on the colors for these rooms to be painted? Does your mother have a particular favorite?"

He shrugged. "I have no idea. What do you suggest?"

She shook her head. "You cannot leave the choice to me."

"Why not? What do I know about home decorations? Choose your own colors, and if my mother does not like them, I shall have the rooms repainted at my own expense."

"For pity's sake, you toss your coin around with such little care."

He shook his head. "On the contrary—I am well aware of every penny I spend, and all of it is carefully considered."

She sighed. "It does not feel as though you have given any consideration to this undertaking at all. Don't you think you are being a bit rashly?"

"How is wanting a beautiful house made fit for my family in a hurry a rash? Besides, as I've told you, it is something I can easily afford."

The rest of their tour went much the same way, with his being agreeable to her suggestions and insisting on footing all of the bills.

"The garden will require upgrading as well," she said, wondering what he had reached his limit of patience yet.

He merely nodded. "Who maintains the Kestrel Inn's gardens? That is quite excellently done."

"That is my cousin, Felicity Angel."

"A woman?"

She tipped her chin up. "What is so wrong with a woman taking charge?"

He grinned. "Nothing. But you are delightful when indignant, and I have a perverse pleasure in riling you just to see that little chin of yours shock the moon. I do not care who does the work, so long as it is done well and completed on time. Engage your cousin for me, and need I say it?"

She frowned. "Say what?"

His voice was rich and resounding as he said, "I shall be responsible for the cost."

family “Very well,” she said, unable to hold back another lilt of laughter.
if it is make certain Mr. Priam includes it on the list of your responsibilities
our lease. You really don’t mind that a woman will be in charge of
s, Missgarden?”

“Not in the least. When it comes to engaging workers, my
requirements are that the person I hire is competent to do the job, rea
in price, and reliable. In truth, I find women generally to be more
than men. They are always better organized and able to handle more th
task at a time.”

colors, “That is surprisingly forward thinking of you.”

d at my He shrugged. “I am not a complete ogre, Miss Angel.”

There was something in the sincerity of his smile that softened he
“In this, you are not an ogre at all. You will berate me again, but it is
thing I said... You are far too generous.”

Mr. Priam groaned.

careful The duke laughed. “Have no fear, Mr. Priam. I am not going to lo
having offer, no matter how badly Miss Angel negotiates on her behalf.”

“Very good, Your Grace. Because this is the finest home, and—”

ny way “I know its value, Mr. Priam,” he said, cutting the land agent off
once more turning to her. “Walk outside with me, Miss Angel. Let’s
oyingly the gardening work that will be required.”

He stopped Mr. Priam with a stern glance when he sought to follo
whether out.

Brenna shook her head and *tsked* at him once they were alone ou
hey are “You are giving that poor man heart spasms.”

“On the contrary,” Daire replied, “you are the one who is giving
spasms with your constant mention of my generosity. Do you think he
fig that I am overpaying? Why should he care how much I spend
large?” house? He is probably thinking up reasons to raise the price even hi
d I take order to increase his fee. One does not succeed in his business by gro
it to the conscience. You, on the other hand, my little dove, need to toughen t
ell and heart of yours, or some unscrupulous bounder might come along and h

“Are you speaking of yourself?”

“Am I the only man in your life?” he asked.

ible for “You are not in my life at all. Do not think a single kiss is eno
make you anyone special to me.” But the way he was looking at

“I shall though he could read her mind, made her blush. It was bad enough that an underhandsome oaf had kissed her and she’d liked it.

More than liked it, for she had melted in his embrace.

Had she the slightest amount of brazenness in her, she would have only her arms around his neck and held him in a wrestler’s lock while he sonably and plundered her mouth. Had she been less of a coward, she would have urged him to kiss her again.

And again.

Dear heaven, even the delicious scent of him was etched into her memory. Musk and male heat, and the slightest hint of leather.

Her first kiss had been more splendid than she ever dreamed possible. How could she know it was the first time she had ever been kissed?

Now she had to worry about what Albert would think.

Oh dear.

Had the duke heard rumors about her and Albert Swanson, her professor beau? She hoped not, for she did not want this man knowing anything about her private life.

Albert had asked her to marry him and was growing impatient for an answer. His latest letter had arrived only yesterday, demanding a response that she was not yet ready to provide. Perhaps he would give up on her.

She would simply resolve the matter by withdrawing his offer and finding someone else. Easy enough. Decision made for her.

She was startled out of her thoughts when she felt a light caress on her cheek.

“Brenna, I know you think I am an oaf and a bit of a bounder,” told him she said, his voice smooth as melted chocolate and achingly gentle. “I have also warned you about this darker side of me... That coiled snake. But on this you my word of honor, I would not hurt you for the world.”

She shook her head.

No, she dared not believe he could be sincere. He was just very good at softfaking it.

“Your Grace, we ought to concentrate on the landscaping.”

“Call me Daire. I cannot abide this formality between us. You are my equal, not my lesser.”

She groaned inwardly. Why was he being so cozy with her?

She could not even fault him for it. He had been generous and p

that theher the entire afternoon. “You are a duke. Why do you claim we are
Is this a trick?”

He cast her a wry smile. “No, little dove. I am in earnest. Call m
thrown whenever we are able to converse privately. I doubt it will be too ofte
probed you are afraid of me.”

ld have Her chin shot upward. “I am not afraid of you.”

“Oh, Brenna,” he said, emitting a chuckle, “you are. And do not t
pretty chin to the moon again and pretend indignation. Let us be hone
er soul each other, shall we? You like me and are not happy about it. This
scares you.”

ble. Did “That is utter rot.” She stared at him. “And what of you?”

“Is it not obvious I like you? Yes, enough to want to be a ger
around you. Ignore what happened this morning. I would like us
friends.”

Oxford She gave a most unladylike snort.

nowing He grinned. “Perhaps in time you will come to see I am not such
fellow.”

for an “Even with that dark snake inside of you?”

esponse “It is mostly intent on destroying me and not anyone else. Now, le
her and back to business. Will you ask your cousin to come by here and take a
ie else. the grounds? Have her write up a proposal for me with an estimate
costs. Do you think she can do this by tomorrow?”

s to her Brenna nodded. “Easily.”

“Good. Same for your Uncle Simon—have him prepare an estim
ie dukerepairs and painting. I’d like to get started as soon as possible. I s
know I they’ll need funds to purchase supplies. Let me know what they will
t I give to start. I’ll make arrangements with the bank manager today and ha
deposit the funds in your account.”

Her gaze shot to his. “Mine? Why?”

good at “This is your house, and no one will look after this renovation wor
than you.”

“But I don’t understand. You speak as though you are leaving th
not my matter to me.”

“Not entirely, for I must insist on all final approvals. But I do not
to be here day in and day out while the work goes on. You, howev
olite to be.”

equals? “How do you know this is what I will do?”

Her question appeared to amuse him, for his lips twitched at the e Dairein the hint of a smile. “Because this is your beloved home, and you hav n, since a bit of a controlling streak in you.”

“That is absurd! If anyone is a controlling oaf, it is you.”

He laughed. “Now you are just being defensive. To be controlli ip your frugal is in your nature, so do not bother to deny it. I am not suggestin est with a bad thing. In fact, I rather like these qualities in you. You are going t is what exactly what is going on, have opinions at every step, and be far mor fisted in spending my coin than I would ever be.”

She cast him an indignant frown. “I am not controlling... Merely ntleman responsible, and cautious. Nor am I miserly, but I do think before I t s to be money around, unlike you. And I shall certainly be careful with your you will likely hold me to account for all I expend.”

“Which is precisely the reason why I trust you, Brenna. I mean h a bad compliment, for I never trust anyone.” He glanced around. “We’ve go just about everything necessary. Have I overlooked anything?”

She shook her head. “No, not a single thing. Not so much as a t us get been overlooked.”

look at “Good. If you think of anything else, just let me know. I’ll keep ou e of the way as much as possible, since I am certain anyone who works on thi will respond better to you than to me.”

“All right,” Brenna replied. “I’ll bring Felicity and Uncle Simon ate for tomorrow morning before the tea party. I’ll leave word for you regard supposetime so you may join us if you wish. It will have to be early in the m require because the Duke and Duchess of Malvern have invited the entire vi ve him their estate, so we will all be going up to the grange tomorrow ju midday. Their tea is an annual affair and not to be missed. I suppo have extended an invitation to you and your friends, as well.”

k better “They have. Seems I will be seeing quite a bit of you these next fe I understand you will also be at the assembly ball tonight. Is that so?”

e entire She nodded.

“Save me a dance.”

: expect She laughed.

er, will “I’m serious, Brenna.”

“Very well. But only one, otherwise everyone will talk. And yc

promise to dance with other village ladies as well. I cannot be the only cornersclaim your attention.”

He nodded. “I shall dance with others. But ours must be a waltz. to share only one dance with you, I ought to make the most of it.” He her a grin and pressed on before she could comment. “And now I ne ing andguidance on another matter entirely. Since you are a teacher, you are g it is aone to advise me. My nephew is six years old and a bit wild.”

“Six?”

“Yes. What is so odd about this?”

“You described him as an infant, so I assumed he was no more th dutiful,or three years old. Well, I suppose you do not have much experience oss mychildren. Never mind—do go on.” The duke obviously regarded ever s, sinceunder the age of fourteen as some toddling creature to be avoided at al

“The boy needs some distractions. What would you suggest I l it as areadiness for his room?”

“Books, for certain. I can help you select some suitable reading r for his governess to read to him. A large slate board and chalk. Tin : rail hasand marbles, as well. I think he will enjoy playing with those. Childr enjoy spillikins. A ball for him to kick or toss around. I have a few it of thewith children of similar age. Would you be averse to having the s housetogether?”

“Matthew will like that. He isn’t suited to London and the confine aroundtownhouse, even though it is quite large by any standard. He feels ling therattling around the halls with no one to speak to but his grandmother.”

Brenna frowned. “What about his governess?”

“He has not liked a single one of them yet. They march st aftercommanding generals but rarely last the month before dashing c se theyfrightened rabbits.”

“Perhaps this is their mistake, to come at him with brute force ins w days.gentle understanding.”

The duke shrugged. “In truth, I do not know. I require each gover part of her duties, to take him to the park whenever possible, for handful and never seems to tire. I thought being outdoors and hav chance to meet other children might do him some good. So far, my i not worked out very well. He comes home sullen. The governesses co ou mustThey make it quite clear he isn’t an easy lad.”

one to Brenna nodded. "Does he come in with his shirt tucked in or out?"
"What does it matter? I did not take notice."

If I am This man, as well-meaning as he was, certainly knew nothing
tossed children. Had he never been a child himself? "Boys at that age
ed you expend themselves, run around, get messy. Simply have fun. If he ret
just then as he left home, then one can assume the governess did not
restrict his fun."

He appeared to give her comment serious consideration. "I never g
thought, to my shame, I suppose."

man two "I think it is more to the shame of these governesses who hold their
around out as experts in dealing with children. Give it thought now, Your C
y child think it is important for the boy. I will own that girls at this age ar
l costs. easier to manage. I'll ask my uncle to fix the swing in the garden. M
have in will like that, too. He might enjoy long walks in nature, because eve
fascinates children at that age. The shape of the grass, a fallen leaf, fro
material insects. Did you notice the stream running behind the house?"

soldiers "Yes, one can hear the sound of softly rushing water whenever th
en also shifts directions."

cousins She nodded again. "The stream forms a little pool in the glade
m play from here. It is an excellent place to swim. Your nephew will enjoy th
Does he swim?"

s of my "No," he said with some dismay.

lonely Brenna did not want the duke to think she was criticizing him, s
obviously cared for the boy and wanted to do what was right. "Then y
teach him. It is an excellent way for the two of you to build a rapport."

in like "What makes you think I can swim?" He cast her a sardonic grin.

out like A trill of laughter escaped her lips, but it soon died down and she
her voice. "Your Grace, you accused me of having a controlling natur
stead of pale in comparison to you. That coiled snake haunts you, and you
much of your time running from it. You fear it will strangle you and
ness, as you. Swimming is one of the first things you must have sought to m
he's aspect. I think you have the prowess to swim across the sea to France
ing this what it takes to escape your snake."

dea has He groaned. "Bloody blazes, Brenna. Where do you think u
mplain nonsense?"

But she knew it wasn't nonsense. "Can you swim?"

“Yes,” he said, letting out a long, deflated breath.

They walked back into the house and began to close it up before re-
g aboutto Moonstone Landing, each of them silent and lost in their thoughts
need towent about the task. Mr. Priam was eager to get back, and made no s
urns asit, drawing out his watch fob and continually checking on the time. ‘
ing butreturn to my office if I’m to have my clerks prepare the lease in tim
signed tomorrow.”

ave it a They all climbed into his curricle, the three of them squashed toge
these rigs were only designed to comfortably accommodate two p
nselvesBrenna found herself practically on the duke’s lap. There was nowhere
Grace. Ibe while trying to keep out of the way of Mr. Priam’s elbow as he st
e oftenwith the reins.

Matthew “Sorry,” she muttered, falling against the duke.

rything “Quite all right, Miss Angel.”

ogs and “Sorry,” she muttered again, accidentally poking him in the ribs v
elbow as she fell into him again. She emitted a soft cry when it happ
ie windthird time, and he suddenly drew her onto his lap. “Your Grace!”

“Do not turn prim and feign outrage. It is the only sensible s
not farunless you wish to walk back to Moonstone Landing. You look tire
at, too. Angel, and the sun is beating down on us relentlessly.”

“You could walk.”

“And leave the seat to you?” He tossed her that irritating look of d
ince heamusement he must have perfected over the years, lifting one eye
you canthough obviously bored. His eyes shimmered with insolence and insu
mirth. “Yes, I could. But I am not going to do it.”

“Fine, if you don’t care, then I won’t either.” It was not much of a
gentledand she could see he was doing his best not to laugh at her. She wa
e, but Iher best not to melt against his body, resisting when he wrapped h
i spendaround her to hold her steady as the curricle rumbled and rattled
l drowndown the steep roadway.

aster, I “Rest against me, Miss Angel,” he said a short while later. “You w
e if thishurt yourself if you insist on teetering on the edge of my lap. You’ll
off the curricle if you are not careful.”

p such “I’ll be fine,” she snapped. “You needn’t hold on to me.”

“You are not fine. How can you be when you are unbalanced and
your back as stiff as a board?” He grinned. “Of course, I refer to you

merely physically unbalanced, although your decision to remain uncom-
fortably situated as you are is not very sensible.”

as they Would he simply not drop the subject? Were they not already giving
secret of Priam fodder for gossip? “I am not stiff or unbalanced.”

“I must” “Miss Angel, you will crack if you are any stiffer.”

ie to be She knew he was right, but she would rather swallow worms than
admit it to him. “As for unbalanced, I—” Her protest was cut short when
the curricle hit a rut and she almost went flying off it.

persons. “Miss Angel!” the duke and Mr. Priam cried out in alarm at the
same time.

ruggled Fortunately, the duke caught her and drew her back firmly against
his chest. “Enough,” he said with raspy heat, and wrapped his muscles
around her. “Lean on me and do not utter another word.”

Her heart was still pounding from her almost tumble, so she obeyed
with her head against his shoulder. “Do not make anything of this
accident, Grace.”

“Of what? Your being sensible?”

olution, *The lout.* Why did he always have to be so smug?

d, Miss Ignoring him proved impossible. Try as she might, she could not
resist his insanely appealing musk scent, the hard contours of his body,
which tingled as she remained enfolded in his sinfully strong arms.

attached The curricle hit another rut that would have sent her flying into the
road as if not for his secure embrace. “Mr. Priam, are you purposely aiming
to make every bump in the road?”

“No, Miss Angel. I am doing my best.”

threat, She wanted to say something more, but her lips were too close
to the duke’s jaw. He had only to tip his head in the slightest for her mouth to
brush his skin. Did he know it? Yes, of course he did.

its way “Comfortable yet, Miss Angel?” he asked, arrogantly tightening his
arms around her as the curricle jounced over several more rough patches.

will only She prayed they would get into town fast and her ordeal would
soon be over, for his hands, despite their light touch, were burning into her skin.

Was this how it felt to be touched by a man who knew his way around
a woman’s body?

holding She hated to think she was as easily conquered as all his other
mistresses. She certainly was not one of *those* women.

ain as Her face was in flames by the time Mr. Priam drew his horse to
beside the Kestrel Inn's stable. In her haste to get down, she tripped c
ing Mr. duke's feet, and was about to take a dive onto her head when he cau
yet again and drew her back hard against him. "Blast it, Brenn
whispered, his lips against her ear. "Stop running from me."

an ever "I am not—" She made the mistake of tipping her chin up in defi
hen the she turned her head to face him.

Their lips touched.

ie same Mr. Priam gasped.

She struggled to right herself, something not easy to do while
inst his wildly leaped through her veins.

d arms *Dear heaven.*

First an unforgettable kiss this morning, and now this?

ved and She had never been in such close contact with any man before, mu
s, You rone with a hard, muscled body like his.

"Have a care, Miss Angel," the duke said with a husky chuckle.

"You too, Your Grace." Oh, that made absolutely no sense, and
had to be silently reveling in his smug victory.

verlook A bead of moisture somehow transferred from his neck to h
or her because he was still holding her too close and she was still facir
though their lips were no longer touching.

e poppy She scowled at him.

ing for "I am always careful, Miss Angel. Stop pretending you do not like

She began to sputter in outrage. "Like you? Are you always so
yourself? The horse suddenly shifted forward and I lost my balance
e to theyou truly a gentleman, you would have refused a ride in the curri
o grazewalked."

Mr. Priam was looking on with beady-eyed interest.

is arms The duke must have noticed. "Mr. Priam, as you can see, Miss A
out of sorts, and I will admit to having behaved perhaps a bit bc
finally toward her. But if you breathe a word of anything between Miss An
myself, I shall personally see to destroying your business."

round a "Your Grace!" the poor man said, his eyes wide in alarm. "I am t
of discretion!"

women. The duke's eyes were a soft blue, but his gaze turned lethal as he
said, "Good."

to a halt Mr. Priam bade her a hasty farewell and ran off as though the devil were chasing his tail.

to light her At first the duke said nothing, merely hopped down and then placed his hands on her waist to assist her off the curricle. "Do not be angry with me, Brenna."

in silence as "That is Miss Angel to you. I did not give you leave to address me informally." How could she not be furious? "You are an arrogant, haughty rake. How could you scare Mr. Priam like that? You must apologize to me at once."

in flames "And have him gossip all over town that I had you on my lap? Or that our lips touched yours? I don't think so. Before you know it, that accidental kiss of our lips will become a heated, tongues-swallowed, passionate kiss that everyone who knows where they'll say my hand roamed?"

in which less "Tongues swallowed?" What was he talking about? "Why would you swallow our tongues?"

"We... It's not... Dear heaven, you are innocent." He stared at her incredulously for a long moment, and then his expression turned a little softer. "My point is that the damage would be to you, little dove. Sooner or later, you might realize if you ever stopped glowering at me long enough to let things through. Dukes are impervious to gossip. We are beloved no matter how naughtily we behave. But you? I would be forced to marry you if your reputation were tarnished."

me." She shook her head. "I would never force you to do such a thing. Can you think I would ever impose on you in that manner? Nor would I ever marry someone like you. I think I have been clear on wanting a suitable match. Why did you not simply walk back to town? Or ride up separately to Scipio?"

"Enough, Brenna. I had matters to discuss with Mr. Priam on the way, and riding with him made most sense. Nor did I expect you to be so stubbornly back and forth on your own. Where was your horse? Or your curricle?"

in which gel and "I don't have either."

He sighed. "So you walk everywhere? You must have been fatigued."

in which he soul "I was," she grumbled.

"I know I behaved like a lout," he said, his manner gentler. "But I have a coldly own defense...it was because of you."

She folded her arms over her chest. "So we are back to putting the blame on me?"

“I am not blaming you. All I am saying is that you are different from the other ladies of my acquaintance, and I was not ready to part ways with me, I am truly sorry if I caused you any misery. Now, let us put an end to this squabble. I have apologized.” He raked a hand through his hair. “It is my concession on my part, for I never apologize to anyone.”

She nodded, for she had done her bit to blow the incident to him proportion. “I apologize for my part in it, too. I am no priggish matron who could have just kept my mouth shut. This might have caused scandal in London, but would have earned me no more than an afternoon of rebuke from the village ladies, and perhaps a lecture from my uncles to borrow their carts if I need to meet you at the manor house again.”

Her apology obviously surprised him. His eyes widened slightly and he gazed thoughtfully at her. “Indeed, you are different from the other ladies of my acquaintance.”

“Why? Because I admitted I might have also been in the wrong?”

He nodded.

“I will own up to my mistakes. As for you, is it not obvious to you that keeping company with the wrong sort of ladies?”

“Yes, so I have been telling myself for quite some time now.” He smiled at her with a boyishly appealing smile, one she had no idea he was capable of after seeing the ruthless way in which he had dealt with Mr. Priam.

Poor Mr. Priam. Hopefully the commission he would make on the lease would go a long way toward mollifying him.

Mr. Matchett, the ostler, hurried toward them. “Your Grace, forgive me, I did not realize Mr. Priam had left you with the task of handing the curricula.”

The Kestrel Inn stable served not only the inn but the local barons and walking owners, and sometimes housed the army horses as well.

Brenna grabbed her journal off the curricula’s seat, bade the ostler a good day, then hurried off to find Uncle Simon and Felicity to make arrangements for tomorrow. After the scene between her and the duke, she wondered he had not changed his mind about leasing her manor. Apparently the thought of canceling had not crossed his mind.

She decided to leave well enough alone. Yes, she was still irritated by the completely avoidable curricula incident. She had gotten an apology

him, which was quite something because, as he'd stated, he clearly was not the sort who ever apologized for his misdeeds. That he had offered to help you was quite a concession on his part.

to this She had yet to cross the high street when the duke caught up with her. "Your Grace? What now?" she asked.

"Daire," he said, falling into stride with her. "Call me Daire. I'll be out of go in a moment, but can you tell me where I might find those items mentioned for Matthew?"

ndal in She stopped walking to stare at him askance. "Do you plan on chastising them yourself?"

ow one "Yes, I do. What is so difficult about it? You forget I was a little boy once."

and his She did not think he had ever been a little boy—not in the sense of a boy from the youthful upbringing that was in the least enriching or innocent. "I was more of a terror than young Matthew."

He nodded. "I was not the best-behaved lad."

"If you can wait until tomorrow, we could stop by Mr. Beckett's mercantile before you leave for the tea party. I'll be done going to the manor."

Stoningham Manor items to be repaired with my uncle and cousin tomorrow morning. Shall I stop at the inn to fetch you once I am back? Or do you have any other plans?"

"No other plans. In fact, I'd like to go up to the house with you tomorrow morning, since it might be simpler to make swift changes if your uncle has something else that must be done."

re me. I "All right, that's an even better plan," Brenna replied. "We'll pick up the wagon in my uncle's wagon. Felicity and I can ride in the back while you sit up front with my uncle. It is not nearly as fine as your posh carriage."

usiness "Nor as cramped as Mr. Priam's curricle, I imagine. Too bad. We were quite cozy, weren't we?"

and the She frowned at him. "Do not ever bring that up again, not even in jest."

o make "Wagon is fine. I don't mind riding with the rabble," he teased, though she saw it was up his hands in mock surrender.

arently, She gave up and sighed.

He was naturally charming, but so full of himself. And yet not arrogant by like his elite friends. He thought highly of workers, for he had not been so busy from twice before accepting Uncle Simon or Felicity for the work proposed.

was not judged people on their merits.

her one “Once we are done and return to the village,” she continued, “it will take us a few minutes in Mr. Bedwell’s shop to select some games and to her. for Matthew. I’ll give serious thought to what he might like. Mr. Bedwell send to Plymouth or Exeter for whatever he does not have.”

let you The duke was agreeable to all her suggestions.

ms you “We’ll be seeing a lot of each other over the next few days, Br really wish you would call me Daire.”

roosing “No, Your Grace,” she said softly. “It is better that we maintain a professional rapport.”

tle boy He sighed. “Very well, but we can remain professional while still being cordial with each other cordially. Why are you so reluctant? Are you concerned that your beau might disapprove?”

’m sure She stopped walking and turned to look up at him. “Who told you about Albert?”

“Your distinguished college professor who has never properly discussed you? Everyone in Moonstone Landing gossips, Brenna. Half the time they don’t realize they are doing it because it is so innate to them. Why do you think I had to come down so hard on Mr. Priam? I took no pleasure in doing so, but I could not risk harm to your reputation. Especially since you are completely innocent. But since we are on the subject of your Albert, might I in the don’t you tell me about him? Isn’t it better that I hear the facts from you rather than find wild rumors from unreliable sources?”

She shook her head vehemently. “Oh, no. I will not have you undermining him.”

ip front “Why do you think I would do such a thing?” the duke asked.

“It is none of your business whether he has ever kissed me.”

le were He tucked a finger under her chin and raised her gaze to his. “That’s the question I asked you, little dove. Why are you mentioning kisses?”

est.” Her cheeks heated. “I will not discuss Albert with you.”

en held He released her and folded his arms across his chest. “What are you afraid of, Brenna?”

“Well, *Daire*... I’ll tell you.” She mimicked his stance and frowned at nothing, but her mention of his name obviously pleased him, even though she had uttered it sarcastically. His eyes lit up and his smile was one of genuine delight. She found it irritating, and frowned harder. “You are going to tell me about Albert?”

ridicule him because he is earnest and serious and does not know
ill only seduce women as you do.”

l books “I am not going to ridicule him.”

vell can “Then what are you going to do to him?”

“Nothing.” He lowered his hands to his sides. “I do not give t
about him. It is you I am concerned about. How can you consider ma
enna. I man you do not love? How can he possibly love you, either? Men
cannot keep their hands off the women they desire. What is wrong w
ntain that he remains a gentleman around you?”

She lowered her hands and balled them into fists. “He respects me.
dealing “You know, that is the lamest excuse either of us has ever heard. I
ed your eyes are an emerald blaze of fire.”

“So what? I am angry with you. Yet again, I might add.”

u about “Which proves my point. You have too much passion bubbling in
you ever to be happy with a cold fish like Albert.”

kissed “He isn’t cold!”

ne they “He just doesn’t care to touch you, is that it?”

do you She gasped. “This is why I am not having this conversation with y
n doing is a decent man and holds himself to high standards.”

you are “Why does he want you, Brenna? It took me three seconds to c
rt, why wanted to get my hands all over your body, which I promise I will
ou than without your permission. So do not start huffing in indignation again.

important question, and one you ought to be asking yourself before y
ve you him an answer.”

She turned on her heels and hurried toward the Three Lions
where she hoped to find Uncle Simon enjoying a pint.

“He’s still up at the Duke of Malvern’s residence, helping h
it is not Duchess Hen prepare their grounds for tomorrow’s tea,” said her
William, while drying off some freshly washed mugs.

“What about Felicity?”

are you “Oh, she’s up there at St. Austell Grange, too. You and I are jus
the only Angels not there at the moment. Even Mum and Da took the
vned at up to deliver kegs of ale.”

igh she Brenna turned back to the duke, who had followed her into the ta
genuine ought to have realized they would be busy. I’ll seek out Felicity and
oing to Simon as soon as they return.”

how to He nodded and escorted her out of the tavern. “What if we head Bedwell’s mercantile now?”

wo She shook her head. “Would you mind terribly if we saved tomorrow? I would like to give your nephew a little more thought and a proper list of items.”

rying a “You do love your lists,” he said, his voice soft and teasing.

in love “It helps me organize my thoughts. I’ll bid you good day for now. I’ll return to Cara’s cottage. There’s correspondence I need to get out.”

” “Ah, yes. Albert must be impatient for your response.”

” “Gad, you are irritating.” She walked on toward her cousin’s cottage in Brenna, where she was living for the duration of her stay.

The duke strode beside her, completely ignoring the fact she had invited him along.

inside of Honestly, this man needed a good comeuppance.

” “I will not invite you in.” She came to a halt in front of the cottage that was nestled on one of the quaint streets just above the beach. Her cousin Cara’s former home was a simple place, but its view overlooked the bay. The cove was quite stunning.

” “I have no intention of going in. I merely walked you to your door and glanced at the beach and then turned to study the house. “Cara is the only woman I have not caught herself the Duke of Strathmore, isn’t she?”

It is an Brenna looked up at him and huffed. “She did not *catch* him as though you give were a trout. Cara and the duke fell in love.”

” “Unlike you and Albert. What exactly do the two of you see in each other at the Tavern, other?”

In truth, she did not know.

him and Mutual respect? Friendship? Shared intellectual pursuits? It was not a simple question, say. Those reasons had seemed enough until the duke came along and looked at her with enough heat to turn her insides liquid. What had seemed a simple plan—visit Moonstone Landing, stay a few weeks to sell Stoningham to the duke and then return to Oxford and Albert’s waiting arms—was not so simple anymore.

But Albert would never take her in his arms, certainly not if anyone was watching. “I was looking. Would he be more amorous if they were alone?”

l Uncle She simply did not know, because they had never been alone. She had never even *tried* to get her alone.

to Mr. Would he ever kiss her as the duke had? Or make her body melt?
 “You cannot marry him, Brenna. Is this what you will tell him?”
l it for She refused to answer. “Good day, Your Grace.”
d come She opened the door to the cottage and walked in, quickly slamm
 door in his face. Only then did she groan and lean against it.
 She heard his rich chuckle on the other side of the door. “I’ll see y
. I mustevening, Miss Angel. Do not forget to save a waltz for me.”
 She wanted to fling open the door and tell him she would never
with him, but who was she hurting other than herself?
cottage, He was infuriating.
 But he was also the handsomest man in Moonstone Landing, and
ad notno less. Why give up the chance to share a waltz with him?
 She could school her features, appear to appreciate his offer of a
and keep a polite but unaffected smile on her face while he twirled he
armingthe floor.
ch. Her He was to be her tenant. Should she not maintain a cordial relati
ing thehim?
 However, there was one small problem. A tiny one that she ought
or.” Heable to overcome...
ne who *Ought* to be able, but how did one prevent one’s traitorous bod
 turning molten in response to this gorgeous duke’s touch?
ough he

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l kissed
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Manor,
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me else

He had

Would he ever kiss her as the duke had? Or make her body melt?

“You cannot marry him, Brenna. Is this what you will tell him?”

She refused to answer. “Good day, Your Grace.”

She opened the door to the cottage and walked in, quickly slamming the door in his face. Only then did she groan and lean against it.

She heard his rich chuckle on the other side of the door. “I’ll see you this evening, Miss Angel. Do not forget to save a waltz for me.”

She wanted to fling open the door and tell him she would never dance with him, but who was she hurting other than herself?

He was infuriating.

But he was also the handsomest man in Moonstone Landing, and a duke, no less. Why give up the chance to share a waltz with him?

She could school her features, appear to appreciate his offer of a dance, and keep a polite but unaffected smile on her face while he twirled her about the floor.

He was to be her tenant. Should she not maintain a cordial relation with him?

However, there was one small problem. A tiny one that she ought to be able to overcome...

Ought to be able, but how did one prevent one’s traitorous body from turning molten in response to this gorgeous duke’s touch?



Chapter Five

THE KESTREL INN was quite lively as Daire walked down the hall with her entourage toward the large dining room, now devoid of tables so that it could serve as a ballroom for the evening. The orchestra was tuning up in a corner beside some potted ferns, and the inn itself was packed with villagers standing in the doorways and spilling out of all the main rooms that had been set up for the entertainment of the attendees.

The library now served as a cards room, and one of the smaller, unused dining rooms had long tables lined against the walls, upon which had been placed trays of sweets, glasses of champagne, bowls of orgeat and punch, and kegs of ale.

The villagers had donned their finest clothes for the festivities. Of course, Hollingsworth, Danson, and the ladies wasted no time in passing their condescending remarks.

“Have they never heard of silk?” Lady Sarah remarked as she looked at several of the local ladies whose gowns were of muslin, to which they had attached lace collars in an attempt to transform their attire to suitable court wear.

“Oh, and those horrid scraps of lace. Not to mention every one of them wearing cheap jewelry,” Lady Gemma said with a sneer. “They would have been laughed out of Almack’s if they dared appear in those appalling garments.”

“Now, I say. She’s not bad,” Danson interjected with a leer. Daire looked at Brenna, who was chatting with several locals Daire presumed to be her cousins, since they bore a slight resemblance to her. She looked breathtaking in a cream silk gown she must have acquired in Oxford, because she was fashionably elegant. She wore no jewelry other than tiny diamond earrings.

“She’s worth bedding,” Hollingsworth drawled.

Daire shot him a quelling glance. “Touch her and you shall never see your hand again.”

His friends stared at him in surprise.

“Fine, Claymore. If you want her that badly, she’s yours,” Holling said. “Looks like a virgin, anyway. Too much effort required.”

Daire sighed.

Yes, he was dispatching them to Bath right after tomorrow’s tea at Austell Grange.

He left his group and made his way to Brenna, who was obviously debating whether to smile at him or scowl. Fortunately, she decided that it might as he greeted her. “Your Grace, may I present my uncle, Mr. Simon and my cousin, Miss Felicity Angel. We were just making our plans for tomorrow.”

He nodded to acknowledge them as they bowed to him. “Then I’ll be in time to be included.”

They agreed to pick him up at the inn at seven o’clock in the morning. That settled, Brenna’s uncle and cousin moved on to chat with others, leaving him alone with her. He eyed the delicious girl but said nothing.

She pursed her lips in that kissable way he quite adored.

“What are you thinking, Brenna?”

“If you must know, I am trying not to snap at you. Why are you snapping at me that way?”

“How am I looking at you?” The music began to play, and guests were urged to hurry onto the dance floor. Daire ignored everyone, for only Brenna existed for him in this moment. The dance was a country reel he had never recognized. He ignored that, too.

Only a waltz would do for him and Brenna.

“You are gloating,” she said.

Daire shook his head. “I am not at all. Why should I gloat? I’ll decide to refuse your Albert?”

A blush stained her cheeks. “No, I haven’t replied to him at all.”

“And you think I will consider this a victory?”

She nodded.

“Brenna, what I think should not matter to you. It is you who matter, not the man, not I.”

The little blush now spread across her face and neck. “Why do you bother to talk to you? Our conversations always manage to turn inappropriate.”

“Because we speak of intimate desires.”

“See, you are doing it again.”

“Perhaps, but what do you expect me to say when this matter of intimacy is on topic? This is something that troubles you deeply. In a way, your Albert seems perfect for you. Respectable. Intelligent. Able to give you a comfortable life. But it will be a dull life, a safe one with absolutely no excitement above the frenzy of finding him a suitable cravat to wear to the annual university luncheon. That life, my fiery little dove, will crush your Angel, soul.”

She tipped her chin up in defiance. “It will not.”

He shrugged. “Lie to me all you want, Brenna. But you cannot lie to yourself. You do not want him to be respectable in the bedchamber, and that is what worries you. You want him naughty and thirsting for you, but he has shown no inclination to do so. Alarms ought to be ringing in your head, leaving you unable to sleep.”

She gulped down the orgeat in her glass. “Oh, that is vile,” she said with a moue of distaste, and handed her glass to a passing servant Daire recognized as her cousin William. The lad was obviously a hard worker, for he was always at his father’s tavern, the Three Lions, serving, cleaning up, filling lookingbarrels, running errands—and now he was busy handing out drinks and clearing them away here at the inn’s assembly ball.

Daire was always looking for good workers, but he tucked the thought of Brenna aside for now, since Brenna was foremost on his mind.

“How about some champagne?” he suggested, as Brenna was obviously trying to get the taste of orgeat out of her mouth.

She shook her head, causing her lively mass of curls to bob. “No, thank you. Not.”

“Why not?”

“I will fall atop you when we waltz if I have any. I do not hold my liquor well.”

“Good to know,” he said, tossing her a wicked smile.

She frowned at him.

He sighed. “Stop reprimanding me. I’ve told you, I am never going to take advantage of you. I merely spoke in jest.”

“You kissed me and had me sitting on your lap,” she said in a highlywhisper. “Is this your idea of behaving?”

“Yes, actually. If I were seriously misbehaving, you would know it.”

not have them come out complete dunces. Many girls were quite clever when it came to the academic subjects. I am proud of my small contribution.”

But in “Never think it is small. I am sure you inspired these girls to be more than they imagined possible.”

Good. He “Thank you,” she said with genuine appreciation. “Albert never really acknowledged my contributions.”

It truly Because her beau was an elitist arse who thought women had no business being outside the home. Would Albert require Brenna to give up her position at school once they married?

Right in a He asked her.

It happen, She cast him a pained look. “We never discussed it.”

It not be “Why not?”

It tie the “I...I...don’t know. It never seemed the right time.”

It anyone “Brenna, I am arrogant, impatient, and difficult in many ways, as well as to be constantly proving. But even I know this cannot be good. If you are truly a love match, then you should have no qualms about confiding your hopes and dreams to your husband-to-be. Nor should you hold back or disagreeing with him if you feel he is wrong about something. You cannot do not hold back with me.”

It rew her “But you are—”

It melodic He kept his gaze on her as they slowly spun around the room. “Why do you call me a little dove?”

She sighed. “You are easy to berate. Oh, you deserve it. But you deserve it rather well, considering who you are.”

It uld she “Thank you—I think. I’ll take it as a compliment.”

It importantopen-minded.”

“Well, well. The little dove is starting to like me,” he gently teased. “Does this not make my point? I have not met Albert, but I think you are a good actor?”

He expected a vehement denial from her lips, but she simply remained silent.

It was as though her entire body turned inward, curling up in a protective brain shell.

“Forgive me,” he said as they continued to twirl with exceptional grace around the dance floor. “Tonight is meant to be enjoyed, and I am but a simpleton.”

ver and you with my concerns.”

She looked up at him. “I appreciate what you are saying. For someone more than who has avoided love quite deftly all these years, you seem to understand quite well.”

“It is not love I am avoiding. In truth, I may be more desperate than anyone else here. What I seek to avoid is being caught in the place trap with someone who is completely unsuitable for me, as all these ladies pushed at me by their scheming mothers have been so far.”

“I have never had a beau other than Albert. I am never myself around and his friends. They engage in esoteric debates among themselves and me out if ever I attempt to offer an opinion. Sometimes, they are insufferable than your elite friends.”

Daire laughed. “Dear heaven, that bad?”

She cast him the softest smile. “Yes.”

The waltz came to an end, and Daire felt considerable regret, for not yet ready to leave Brenna’s side. But to remain with her any longer would only embarrass her and stir up gossip. He returned her to her Uncle Malcolm, who was the village constable and much respected by the local citizens.

After greeting her uncle, he turned to Brenna and bowed over her. “A pleasure, Miss Angel.”

He spent the rest of the evening sharing a lively reel with Mrs. Dowling and another with her daughter, then a steadier quadrille with Lady Dowling and waltzes with Lady Gemma and Lady Sarah. But his eyes were on Brenna all the while. This inability to get her out of his thoughts disconcerted him.

He had told Brenna to stop worrying and simply enjoy the evening. He had decided to take his own advice.

This made for a rather cheerful evening, until Lady Dowling approached. “But while he once again happened to be speaking to Brenna and he never Malcolm. “Your Grace, you promised to escort me home,” she said with a suggestive purr.

His smile faded.

She placed her arm in his with a bit too much familiarity, leaning in so that her breast grazed his arm. “I am quite fatigued and look forward to jumping into bed.”

Bloody blazes.

He looked around for Hollingsworth or Danson, hoping to fob her

one of them, but they were nowhere to be seen. "Very well." He
omeonereluctantly to Brenna and her uncle. "I shall return shortly to contin
stand itconversation."

How much more obvious could he be in assuring Brenna he v
o find itgoing to spend the night with the merry widow?

arson's "Do not concern yourself," Brenna said, her voice sounding br
: youngmust leave soon as well."

He sighed. "Stay, Miss Angel. I will not be gone long."
ind him But it was a lost cause.

nd shut Brenna was convinced he had planned an assignation with Lady D
e moreand was now merely trying not to look like the bounder she knew he w

"Good night, then." He gave a curt nod. "I will see you in the morn

He walked the widow back to her house, making certain nothi
amiss before he turned to leave. Although this was a quiet village,
he wasstarting to attract the usual assortment of unsavory characters who fo
r wouldthe idle rich. A widow alone was an easy target. As irritated as he w
alcolm,the woman for purposely stirring up trouble between him and Brenna,
y. not going to ignore her safety.

r hand. "Do stay," she purred, this time rubbing her full body up against h
a cat in heat.

Halsey, "No." He unwound her arm from his. "To be clear, Lady Dowling,
owling,play your games with me, for I do not take kindly to being manipulate
Brennaasked to be walked home, and you are now home. Good night."

him. He strode out, hoping to make his way back to the inn before Bren

ing. He But he was too late. She was nowhere to be found among the crow

"Blast," he muttered, grabbing a drink for himself and stalking of
roachedinn's garden to calm himself down.

r Uncle To his surprise, he saw Brenna seated alone on one of the garden b
id in astaring up at the milky stars and a moon that was big and silver ag
clear, dark sky. "You're here," he said, not bothering to mask his surp
thought you had gone home."

nto him She turned to him in shock, her features beautifully illuminated
ward toflame of a nearby torch, and cast him a hesitant smile. "And I th

Well, you know what I must have been thinking."

"Which is exactly the impression Lady Dowling hoped to give y
r off onall I ever intended to do was walk her home. Not that I offered,

turned trapped me earlier with the request, and there was no way for me to
due our decline. Even though you think quite little of me, I am a gentleman
the time.”

was not She gave a light snort.

“I am, Brenna. If I weren’t, I would be kissing every delectable
ittle. “I you right now.”

“Oh.” She cleared her throat. “I had better go inside.”

“Yes, I suppose it is wisest, considering my reputation. Are we a
little dove?” He took her hand and gently held her back when she st
dowling walk away. “By the way, you look beautiful tonight. I ought t
was. mentioned it earlier.”

ing.” “Thank you.” The amber glow of firelight from the torch mingl
ng washer own soft blush, stirring the fire within him. “Yes, we are fine.
it was must go before anyone sees us together.”

ollowed “And reports it to Albert?” He groaned. “Never mind. Forget I sa
as with I’ll see you in the morning.”

he was He released her hand, and she flitted away like a butterfly in cream

He remained outdoors a while longer, listening to the strains of
him like reel while sipping his champagne and breathing in the scent of roses
salt of the sea.

, do not *This place.*

ed. You He wanted to settle here.

He wanted to get to know Brenna better and perhaps make
na left. permanent part of his life. But that thought came out of nowhere. One
d. think of permanence upon one day’s acquaintance with an opinionated
f to the woman. Besides, she was nowhere near ready to trust him. Nor was h
ready to be trusted. He was the first to admit he was not by nature a nic
enches, He still had much to work through before he would ever consider
gainst are reliable when it came to women.

rise. “I Could he ever be faithful to one woman for all of his life?

He thought he could with someone like Brenna.

by the *Dear heaven.*

ought... All this talk of permanence. He certainly was surprising himself.

The more immediate problem was to make certain Brenna remain
rou, but long enough to get to know him and develop an unshakeable faith in h
but she He had not thought to ask before, but now it was important for

politely know when she planned to return to Oxford. She valued her teaching post most of all at the elite girls' school and did not seem ready to give it up, even if she had to move on to Stoningham Manor.

And what of this Albert character who was eager to marry her? What troubled him most of all. What was Albert's true motive?

It could not be love, because the man had never properly kissed her. Brenna was who was irresistibly kissable. Any beau in his right mind would have had all the right words, lips on hers at every possible opportunity.

Nor could Albert's motive involve Brenna's wealth, because she had no money to speak of beyond this charming manor house that was too far from London to be of any use to him. If Brenna ever sold it, the proceeds would allow her to live out the rest of her days in modest comfort if she chose not to work.

Perhaps this was enough of a lure for her Oxford professor. Albert would mend his stockings, embroider initials on his handkerchiefs, and be a good father to his children. In addition, he would gain control of the tidy sum from her inheritance of Stoningham Manor, to be used for his purposes.

Daire shook his head.

Something did not feel right about this beau of hers.

He was still thinking of Brenna by the time he retired to his suite. He left the assembly ball well before it ended because nothing more interested him. As he undressed, he could hear the orchestra playing a waltz. It had escaped his lips, for he caught Brenna's subtle lavender scent upon his

Her warm skin.

That delightful body of hers.

Their waltz was something he would not soon forget.

He removed his jacket, waistcoat, and cravat before sitting at the head of his bed to remove his boots. He had not bothered with more fashionable footwear, since the villagers did not have the funds for such luxuries as dancing slippers, and he refused to look like an elite toad among the common folk. He left the trappings of wealth and rank to Hollingsworth and Danson.

Next, he shrugged out of his shirt and took a moment to wash his hands and face before pouring himself a glass of port wine, then dozing off under the lamplight to leave him in the dark. He settled into the elegant chaise longue and ed herein his sitting room to think about Brenna once again.

She was afraid of her feelings for him, and he could not blame her. Whatever was simmering between them was going to erupt eventually.

osition could end badly if he did not handle it properly.

he held He had meant it when he promised never to hurt her.

Still, what if she fell in love with him? It could happen even if he
r? This no attempt to seduce her.

He had never been in love.

Brenna, He wondered what it would feel like to fall in love with Brenna.

had his But he quickly shook out of the thought, because it was a terrible i
so many reasons. What did he know about love, anyway?

ad little Nobody had ever shown him love beyond a motherly affection fr
Oxford stepmother. How desperate her family must have been to force a m
low her between her and his odious brute of a father. Well, she hadn't long to
: again. since he had died within a month of their marriage.

wife to He used to wonder whether she had poisoned him and gotten aw
ear him it, but the woman he now referred to as his mother was genuinely k
sale of compassionate. If anyone had done away with his father, it was likely
odious older brother, Morgan.

He sighed and took a sip of the sweet port.

As had become his custom, he had ordered the windows left o
n truth, allow in the night air. Despite what others thought, he never found this
terested air to be harmful. In fact, it was quite a relief, since thoughts of Bren
A smile had him in a fiery roil.

jacket. Gad, he adored Brenna's hot body.

He had been completely in the wrong when refusing to give up his
Mr. Priam's curricule. He would have done it for anyone else, for th
back to the village was mostly downhill and easily accomplished in :
edge of the heat.

ionable But the chance to have Brenna up against him... Well, it was n
ries as done of him. He really had to do better whenever he was with her.

em. He She seemed to have come to terms with their curricule incident, and
not going to raise it again.

s hands *Blessed saints.*

ing the She did look beautiful when angry, though. Her eyes genuinely sp
longue and he could only hope one day they would sparkle for him in passion.

It was not such a stretch, for even though she hid behind a prim
ne her, the girl was incandescent. It only required the expert touch of a man—
lly, and him—to set her body on fire.

But he needed to keep her in Moonstone Landing long enough for them to get to know each other. He did not mean getting familiar in the present sense, although that possibility was never to be ruled out.

He meant it in an abiding friendship, mates of the soul way. They were united. Troths plighted.

He now had her house, albeit merely a leasehold. She had now agreed to the idea for the repairs he wanted. What he needed was something more.

He would sleep on it, and perhaps the answer would come to him from his wasn't certain how she had gotten in his blood and become this important part of his life in the span of a day.

Did he hope to win Brenna's heart? Marry her and make her his daughter?

He could not imagine anyone more qualified for that role.

He shed his trousers and fell naked atop his sheets, falling asleep to the sound of a violin and the scent of a light, salty breeze off the water.

Daire's



The sun filtered into Daire's elegant suite shortly after dawn, and the cooler light momentarily blinded him as he awoke. He rolled out of bed with a groan, shoved into his riding clothes, and managed a quick ride through the countryside on Scipio, both of them working up a lather before returning to the village.

Once back at the inn, Daire shaved, washed, and dressed at his leisure since he still had a little time before Brenna was scheduled to fetch him. He ordered breakfast brought to his suite, since he had received a packet late last night that he had yet to go through. He wanted to get the most important items addressed before hopping onto the wagon with Brenna and her family in what promised to be a glorious morning.

Of course, he could have met them at the manor house, riding Scipio after giving the beast a run. But these Angels intrigued him. He had never seen such a close-knit, genial family. They all seemed happy, as if infected with a curious disease that left them chirping and smiling throughout the day.

He did not ever recall a happy moment with his family, unless it included watching those bitter, cruel, ruthless men die—grandfather,

them to and even his brother. It worried him that they shared a bloodline. He physically wanted to be anything like them.

Yet he had inherited the ruthless Claymore streak, becoming quite like his father. He sat always getting what he wanted. However, it was through cunning, outsmarting, and sometimes manipulation, never cruelty. In this, he had decided early on never to use his power to destroy others.

Besting others was acceptable. Crushing them was not... Unless it was his own. He thought to crush him first.

He settled in the tufted leather chair behind the small desk he had placed in a corner of his bedchamber, and began to sort through the pouch. There were not very many documents in it, and reading through them did not take very long. These business affairs proved simple enough to resolve. An approval required to commence repairs on the grist mill was an investment opportunity that he declined. A third that he approved.

At the bottom of the pouch was a letter from his stepmother, Julia, the widowed Duchess of Claymore and the one he referred to as his mother because she had been the only one to ever care for him. He quickly opened the brighter missive and read the unsurprising news. The latest governess had fallen out on them, and she no longer knew what to do with the income. "Well, I know what must be done," Daire grumbled.

He quickly penned a reply, urging her to come to Moonstone Island with her entourage and the little devil's spawn as soon as possible. Of course, he referred to his nephew by his given name, although the child truly was a concern and seemed bent on a path of evil.

Do not bother to engage another governess, he wrote. Let the most housemaids take turns serving as nannies for the lad on your journey, and shall take responsibility for hiring a governess and tutors, as necessary.

Clearly, one governess was not enough. The boy needed a full regiment of soldiers to watch over him.

Upon finishing, he strode downstairs and handed off his letters to the innkeeper, though Thaddius. No sooner had he given them over to the innkeeper than she hurried in, her cheeks rosy and her smile forced. Her eyes revealed she was troubled. "What is wrong, Miss Angel?" he asked.

"Nothing, Your Grace."

He sighed and ran a finger lightly across her brow. "Try again. What is written all over your forehead. Something happened, and you are over-

did not. Is it something I did?”

She pursed her lips. “Will you tell me the truth if I ask you?”

He did not know what she was talking about, but he nodded. “Of course. Was this about Lady Dowling and last night? Daire thought the matter had been resolved.

She withdrew a folded parchment from her bosom.

He knew better than to stare. Or grin.

“Did you cause this?” She handed him the letter, which turned out to be ordered from the headmistress of her elite girls’ school, expressing sadness that Brenna would not be returning to them at the start of the term and wishing each other well in her future endeavors.

He frowned. “How could you think I had a hand in this? When we have had the time to send a letter off to your school informing them you are not returning? It would take three days’ riding in good weather on a horse as fast as Scipio. Not to mention the time it would take for a response to come from your mother.

She put her hand over his. “I’m sorry. I *am* upset and lashed out and opened unfairly. I know you are not to blame for this...misunderstanding. I must return to Oxford as soon as possible to straighten it out.”

“Don’t, Brenna. At least not before you hear me out.”

“Hear you out?”

“Yes. I also received a letter and now have a proposition for you to consider. I reached into the breast pocket of his jacket and withdrew the letter his mother had written. “As she reports, we’ve lost yet another governess. The fourth in as many months.”

She looked up at him, her eyes gentle. “Oh my.”

Daire nodded. “Matthew is a troubled boy, but so was I at his age. I do not think he is a hopeless cause. In fact, I believe the right governess will find him a world of good. But we won’t find her in London. I think London is part of the problem. He and my mother will arrive here within a fortnight. Do you consider taking on the duties of governess? More than that, Brenna, you are my mentor, confidante. The lad desperately needs someone like you. Nan says she was wretched. Make up a list of supplies. I’ll make certain you have everything you need.”

“Your Grace, I—”

“Is it not fitting you should remain at Stoningham Manor with the rest of the household by your home, after all. Choose whichever bedchamber you desire. You’ll

relegated to the nursery. Take the largest room, if you wish. I'll have Uncle Simon freshen it up to your specifications."

course." "Your Grace, stop! It is impossible."

ter had "Why, Brenna?" Thaddius had been listening in all the while. "Wasn't you just remarking to the family how much you wished to stay? And now Grace has just offered you terms that are more than generous."

"Yes, but...this is different."

it to be "How?" Thaddius asked.

ss that Daire listened quietly, knowing he had said whatever needed to be said. For him to now press Brenna would only put her off. But he saw that she was listening to Thaddius.

would I She scowled at Daire.

ou were He sighed. "What do you not like about my offer?"

orse as "All of it," she grumbled. "Who are you? My fairy godmother?"

arrive." He and Thaddius chuckled.

t at you "Brenna, you do realize how foolishly you are behaving, do you not think I said, his manner gentle but stern. "You cannot possibly be so ungrateful because His Grace is giving you everything you hoped for. Stop protesting. You only sound ridiculous and ungrateful."

ou." He being so generous? First with repairs to the manor, and now with the property you are offering me?"

at's the "Stop viewing it as generosity but as the price I know I must pay for what I want," he replied. "Believe me, you will more than earn your money with Matthew. I am the one getting the bargain here."

ge. I do "Assuming I accept your offer."

will do He nodded. "Do not be so hasty to reject it. There is a good chance that the manor might not be able to get your teaching post back if the headmistress were to immediately moved to fill it. More important, we both know who must be replaced...tutor, advised the headmistress that you were not returning."

ne your She folded her arms across her chest and frowned at him again. "Wasn't you saying...ing you "Must I say it? Are you not thinking the same thing?" He sighed. "Well—I shall tell you what you already know. It was your underhand maneuver of a beau. I thought I was ruthless, but he puts me to shame. I would not have done that to the woman I loved."

I not be Tears formed in her eyes.

ve your Daire groaned. "We'll work it out, Brenna. If you still want your p
at Oxford, I'll use my clout to help get it back for you. But I hope y
seriously consider my offer. It is sensible and more than fair... Even
ere you coming from me."

nd His She stood quietly while he withdrew his handkerchief and cup
chin to dab at the tears now streaming down her cheeks. "I cannot
Albert would do this to me."

"I know, little dove." He should not have called her that in f
oe said. Thaddius, but the innkeeper was the most discreet of all the An
she was Moonstone Landing, so hopefully news of the endearment Daire h
called her would not spread throughout the village like wildfire. "Wha
to you was harsh, even for my jaded sensibilities."

"I am better now. Thank you."

"Are you certain?" Pain still filled her eyes, and she was going
again if he did not do something to ease her distress.

u not?" But she hurried out of the inn before he could utter another word.

e angry Daire stared at her as she climbed back into her Uncle Simon's wa
testing. "Your Grace," Thaddius said, his expression one of concern. "I
really believe Professor Swanson was the culprit?"

are you "Who else would have reason?" Daire said. "He's offered to ma
osition She has been putting him off. How better to cut her off at the knees a
her no option but to accept him?"

y to get "It is a dastardly scheme, Your Grace. But I suppose if he loves
ur keep would be desperate to win her consent, even if it is by unsavory means

"Thaddius, I do not see how he loves her. Your cousin is as pu
newborn lamb. He has never even kissed her."

ice you The young innkeeper's eyebrows shot up. "He hasn't? How
ess has know?"

ist have "Do not take out your shotgun. I respect Brenna and would never
badly." Which Daire had upon their first meeting and his giving h

/ho?" scorching kiss. But was he not reforming? Had he not promised to do
. "Very harm? "However, I am an experienced hound and understand such th
d sneak is obvious Brenna has never been kissed, and this has me ever
ever do concerned."

"What do you mean?"

"Any man with functioning eyeballs can see how beautiful she is. /

position this man has not even *tried* to kiss her. So, why is he determined to do so with her?"

"If it is Thaddius, he is a respectable professor and must hold to a certain standard of comportment," Daire dismissed the remark. "He's a man, Thaddius. Yet not a kiss-believable touch. I doubt they have exchanged tender words. Well, you and I are going to resolve anything by standing here. I'll try to talk to her while you are out of the manor house."

He strode out and climbed onto the front seat beside Brenna's wagon just stretching his long legs before him as the wagon rocked and rattled on the hill. As they approached the house, Daire glanced back to take in the view, the field of red poppies and the glittering sea beyond it.

Daire noticed Brenna studying him and cast her an affectionate smile. He cried for this innocent girl and did not like to see her so unhappy.

She was now trying to deal with the loss of a job she loved and the betrayal of the man who claimed to want to marry her. Most of all, the situation did strike Daire as quite amusing that he should be the valiant knight offering her a generous solution.

He understood the true reason for her distress. She wanted him to marry her and was reprehensible because she was afraid of falling in love with him.

He was not afraid of falling in love with her. In truth, he expected her, he would be good for him.

"One problem at a time," he warned himself. He had known Brenna as a girl of a day.

That she felt completely right for him was irrelevant, and would be irrelevant until sufficient time had passed for him to make a meaningful decision. He needed to see how she got along with Matthew and his use of her. He sensed she would be wonderful and they would love her.

Well, his mother would. Matthew might chew her up and spit her out like she had done with all his prior governesses.

When they arrived at Stoningham Manor, Daire remained in the background while Brenna went through the house from top to bottom. She talked to her uncle, and then did the same with her cousin with respect to the garden.

Brenna and Felicity chattered easily while they strolled along the flowerbeds. Daire suspected they were speaking of him as well as when

to marry with the flowerbeds.

No matter.

he's a Brenna was not likely to reveal that he had kissed her.
ent." He smiled when she brought out her journal and jotted down de
s. Not a whatever Felicity was telling her. When they finished, she walked
are no him and handed him her journal. "It is still a bit sloppy, but you wil
we are comprehensive list of the work to be done in the house and in the

Beside each item is an estimate of the cost."

uncle, Daire skimmed through the pages. A few entries were left blank
up the filled in later as her uncle and cousin checked on the price of suppl
e scenic were yet to be confirmed, but those were minor omissions. "You'll n
excellent estate manager," he remarked when he finished his perusa
nile. Heare extremely thorough and well organized."

"I try to be," she said evenly, but he noticed the sparkle in her ey
and the knew his compliment had pleased her.

—and it They returned to the wagon, but he merely helped the ladies up
: in this not climb in himself. "I'll walk back to town."

er and To his surprise, Brenna scampered down. "So will I. Do you m
walk back with you?"

be vile He smiled at her. "Not at all. We have plenty to discuss, I think."

Although he motioned to her journal, reviewing details about the
ted she was not at all the discussion he had in mind.

She did not look at him again until they had walked out of ear
a for all Felicity and her uncle. "Your Grace, are you going to lecture me
Albert?"

remain He arched an eyebrow. "Do you want me to?"

ningful
mother.

out, as

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rden.

ng the
at to do

with the flowerbeds.

No matter.

Brenna was not likely to reveal that he had kissed her.

He smiled when she brought out her journal and jotted down details of whatever Felicity was telling her. When they finished, she walked over to him and handed him her journal. "It is still a bit sloppy, but you will find a comprehensive list of the work to be done in the house and in the garden. Beside each item is an estimate of the cost."

Daire skimmed through the pages. A few entries were left blank, to be filled in later as her uncle and cousin checked on the price of supplies that were yet to be confirmed, but those were minor omissions. "You'll make an excellent estate manager," he remarked when he finished his perusal. "You are extremely thorough and well organized."

"I try to be," she said evenly, but he noticed the sparkle in her eyes and knew his compliment had pleased her.

They returned to the wagon, but he merely helped the ladies up and did not climb in himself. "I'll walk back to town."

To his surprise, Brenna scampered down. "So will I. Do you mind if I walk back with you?"

He smiled at her. "Not at all. We have plenty to discuss, I think."

Although he motioned to her journal, reviewing details about the house was not at all the discussion he had in mind.

She did not look at him again until they had walked out of earshot of Felicity and her uncle. "Your Grace, are you going to lecture me about Albert?"

He arched an eyebrow. "Do you want me to?"



Chapter Six

“I DO NOT lecture,” Daire said, tossing her an affable smile. “I give counsel.”

She smiled at him and nodded. “Shockingly, I agree. Everything you said about my nonexistent love life has made sense.”

He held out his arms and glanced skyward, taking in the bluest sky seen in an age. But everything was vivid and beautiful here. The brilliance of the poppies. The dark red clay of the towering cliffs. The azure shimmer of the sea. The vibrant blue of the sky. “Do you hear that, Lord? Brenna I am sensible.”

She laughed. “Just this one time. You are far from perfect. I would gloat if I were you.”

He dropped his hands to his sides and shook his head. “Oh, not taking that compliment and will never let you forget it, especially since the last one I may ever receive from you.”

“Am I that difficult?”

“No, little dove. You are a delight, but you are still afraid of me.”

“How so? I am walking alongside you, and we are alone.”

He pointed in the distance. “In plain sight of your cousin Felicity’s uncle has purposely slowed his wagon to be certain we are always in view.”

“I suppose they do not fully trust you yet.”

He nodded. “Nor should they, for they do not really know me.”

“None of us do,” she said, her brow furrowed in thought.

“My fault, I know. I have done nothing to ingratiate myself, as you pains to point out when we first met.”

“Well, we can work on that over the summer, since I...” She
“Since I am going to accept your offer. I will do my best to take care of my nephew. But are you serious about my residing at the manor house having my choice of living quarters?”

“Yes.” He had expected more of a battle in convincing her to take the role of governess. But she had a compassionate nature and was thinking of all the things Matthew needed, starting with a strong kindness that she could provide.

He wanted to reach out and caress her cheek, assure her that she had made the right choice, but she would turn skittish if he touched her. In the event, he had won this battle, and nothing more needed to be done than to accept Albert’s high-handed and callous undermining of her teaching position.

“Brenna, I will make it clear to everyone that you are to be treated as a member of the family...my family, with all the privileges that affords. You shall dine with us, take tea with us, and have a lady’s maid to assist you.”

“But my care of Matthew ought to come first.”

“I know you will put all of your heart into helping him out. I don’t want you to be merely a caretaker, but a tutor for him in academic studies and a mentor in building his character. It is a lot to ask of you. My mother will help in any way we can. Consider us all in this endeavor together. I would not want you taking meals in your room or walking about the place as if you are a mere notch above a servant.”

They walked slowly down the hill as they spoke, and while there had been nothing particularly special about this moment, Daire could help but feel more at peace than he had ever been in his life.

He knew it was because of Brenna. There was something quite steady and calming about her—perhaps magical.

“What do you think I ought to do about Albert?” she asked, cutting through his thoughts.

“He was surprised but flattered she wanted his advice, because he held strong opinions about that scoundrel. “Reject his offer of marriage.”

She pursed her lips. “What if we are unfairly blaming him and he is innocent?”

“Seriously, Brenna? He isn’t. But go ahead and write to the headmistress for confirmation. Write to Albert, as well. See what he says.”

“I will. It is only fair to hear him out before I pass judgment, do you think?”

“Little dove, you ought to refuse him even if he is completely innocent and it was all a terrible misunderstanding.”

Her eyes widened, those big, bright eyes so lovely as they shimmered.

on the emeralds while staring up at him.

already Indeed, she was magical.

dose of “Why are you so adamant about this?” she asked. “Simply because
yet to kiss me?”

she had “Yes.”

In any “But we were rarely alone. It would not have been proper.”

anks to “Brenna, part of your charm is that you have no idea how pretty y

l. But I see it, and Albert must have seen it, too. He should have been
l as one for you and wanting to devour you. What would it have taken to gat
all dine in his arms or give you a scorching kiss? No more than a few seconds
heart does not go into spasms every time he looks at you, then some
very wrong.”

’t want She was still studying him with her big gemstone eyes. “I think
s and a describing your own wolfish ways. Hunger? Devour? You are descri
r and I predatory animal. But I suppose this is what you are. Albert is nothi
er. I do you.”

though “He would be if he cared for you.”

 She stiffened at the remark. “He does care for me. Sabotagi
should teaching position was wrong, but he did it—assuming he is guilty—t
uld not my hand because he loves me and wants me to marry him.”

 Daire decided to end the conversation, because he did not wish
ady and Brenna and undo his victory. But for pity’s sake, how could she not
take a hunting rifle to that puffed-up, professorial arse and shoot him
ng into gut? “Truce, little dove. What do you plan to wear to the Duke of Ma
tea party?”

ad very She laughed. “Goodness, you must be desperate to change the t
conversation if you are asking me about my clothes. Do you really ca
d he is I intend to wear?”

 “Would you believe me if I said yes?”

o your “No, Your Grace. That is too much of a stretch.”

ys.” They were nearing the village and would soon part ways. The
n’t you poppies was just behind them, and Daire could hear the light whoosh
petals swaying in the wind. He glanced at Brenna as they walked a
nno centsilence. True, he did not care about her clothes other than in the w
filled them out—which she did spectacularly well, no matter what she
red like This morning she was clad in a pale green muslin gown with the b

lace trim at the modest collar and sleeve cuffs. The sun shone down on her hair, setting the red tones ablaze amid her dark locks. Her lips were a delicate pink and gracefully shaped, and her eyes shone like dark emeralds. All these colors about her ought to have clashed, but each enhanced her beautiful features instead.

Or was it just him falling under her ensorcelling spell?
You are. She would laugh heartily if he dared to call her an enchantress.
hungry For one mad moment, he contemplated what his life might be like if he were married to her. But the fleeting moment of madness passed, then he was jolted out of his musings. He knew it was on its way to the Keswick because the inn served not only as the village's hotel but the local post office as well. Thaddius, who seemed to be quite the enterprising businessman, was the inn's postmaster.

ing like "Your Grace, I—"

"Bollocks, Brenna. Call me Daire. I've given you permission to call me that whenever we are alone."

ing my "I know, but it does not sit well with me."

o force "Only because you want to keep me at arm's length from you. I've already given you my oath to behave around you."

to rile "Which is something any gentleman ought to do, so do not make it a want to be a sacrifice or reason for reward. It is only polite behavior."

n in the He grunted.

ilvern's "Obviously, I trust your word, or I would not have agreed to move to Stoningham Manor and work with your nephew. I hardly think of pushing you away."

re what "This is you being friendly?"

"Let's just say cautiously friendly. You know I cannot let down my friends around you. And our definitions of friendship are not quite the same. My notion of a lady friend is one who is a bit too...willing to surrender her field of your amorous advances."

of their "The women approach me. I do not approach them."

long in "What is the difference? You do not turn them away from your bed."

ay she "Why should I turn them away?" he asked. "I am not betrothed. I am not married. You are frowning in disapproval, little dove. If it is any consolation, they use me as much as I use them. Nor do they care about me beyond their own desires."

on her pretty trinkets I might give them. Do you think I would ever dare offer a lush heart to any of them? Or trust them?"

She looked at him but said nothing.

"To them, I am nothing beyond my title, first as Viscount Claymore now as Duke of Claymore. Just a title and deep pockets."

"Is this why you keep yourself aloof? To maintain your propriety barriers?"

"Yes." He raked a hand through his hair. "Although I have lowered the spell for you. Is it not obvious?"

She regarded him with some surprise. "Why me?"

"Because your friendship, if ever freely given to me, would be of great office and something worth treasuring."

"Half the time you want to throttle me."

"Is that not part of friendship, being confident enough to express opinion and knowing it will be valued even if we happen not to agree? Do so, impudent and do not hesitate to challenge me."

She arched a delicate eyebrow. "Is that an insult or a compliment?"

He grinned. "A compliment. In truth, one of the highest I can give."

"Then I feel quite worthy." She dipped into a quick but graceful curtsy.

"I like that you care nothing for my status and always expect better of me. You do not pander to my whims or say what you think I want to hear."

"Dear heaven, that is true. I shall never do that."

"From the moment we met, you poked and prodded to find the move backside." He pounded lightly on his heart. "You may yet decide you like me, but that decision will be made upon knowing who I really am."

"I am honored." She cast him a wry smile. "Well, *Daire*, now that on our way to becoming good friends, do you wish to stop in my guard Bedwell's mercantile and look over the supplies needed for Matthew. Your should not take us long. I think we will have to order most of what we need from Exeter or Plymouth. Some items might have to be ordered from away as London."

"Sure, I have time." Since they were now walking into town surrounded by passersby, her uncle had hurried his wagon along and was no longer in sight. *Daire* was in no hurry to part from Brenna and was glad she had suggested browsing in the mercantile. "You haven't asked me, Brenna, and the She looked up at him. "Asked you what?"

pen my “We have yet to discuss your governess wages.”

“Oh, that.” She told him what she earned while at the girls’ school.

He emitted a groan and then laughed. “You are a terrible negotiator and dove. Why would you volunteer this information to me? I might have you more.”

protective “I only want what’s fair. Will you match it?”

He sighed. “I’ll double it. Settled.”

and them Her jaw dropped open. “Daire, you are mad.”

No, he was euphoric.

She was now calling him Daire and not averse to considering a genuine friend. She had no idea how much this pleased him, and it had nothing to do with how pretty she was or how much he desired her in his bed, which was a molten and unbearable ache.

But he would lose her if he acted upon his urges now. She needed to know if you could trust him.

Yes, this had everything to do with gaining her trust, just as she was gaining his.

This was something completely new to him, trusting a woman who was artsy. Brenna was a gem. A Moonstone gem.

Honest, earnest, compassionate. Truly someone special.

He ought to triple her wages.

She would berate him and smack him across the back of his head if he considered anything so insane.

But who could put a price on a woman like this?

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Chapter Seven

DAIRE ESCORTED BRENNA into the mercantile.

It took them no more than thirty minutes to select reading materials for his nephew, because Brenna had a very good idea of what a boy needed and approached the task with skilled efficiency. Daire put the books, games, and toys that were readily available and asked for them to be delivered to his suite at the inn.

“Right away, Your Grace,” Mr. Bedwell said, obviously pleased. The man’s smile broadened when Brenna then handed him an additional list of supplies the entire length of a page and instructed him to purchase them from wherever he could find them. “I’ll do my best, Brenna.”

“Thank you, Mr. Bedwell. And do negotiate the best price possible for us.”

“Of course.”

As for their current purchases, Daire was certain the mercantile prices were hiked for him because he was a wealthy peer, but they were not much out of line. He placed a hand lightly over Brenna’s to quiet her as she started to haggle with the shopkeeper. “We are done, Miss Anne. I need to come to my defense.”

She rolled her eyes the moment they were out on the street and in the shopkeeper’s hearing. “Honestly, everyone will fleece you if you stop treating your coin purse as though it is bottomless and there is an endless supply.”

He grinned at her. “But there *is* an endless supply.”

Her mouth rounded in an *O* as that sharp brain of hers took in his words. “Seriously? Are you suggesting you can buy this village ten times over?”

He nodded. “Probably closer to twenty. Little dove, stop fretting for me. I am contributing to the economy of Moonstone Landing, am I not? It is good for everyone.”

It was especially good for him because it was time for him to in himself with the villagers. But he also liked that Brenna was trying frugal on his behalf. Not that he wanted her to do it, but everyone beady-eyed and conniving once they realized how wealthy he was.

Not Brenna, however. There was no greed in this girl. She did not want his money.

Of course, she did not want *him*, either. He hoped her feelings change in time.

Though perhaps he should not desire this. If there was one thing Daire did not wish for, it was complication.

“How are you getting to St. Austell Grange?” Daire asked as he led Brenna back to her cousin Cara’s cottage. Another thing he did not like that she was living alone. It did not matter that half the cottages on the beachfront street were occupied by members of her family. What was the point of Albert from sneaking in one night and having his way with her? Or about the items she had hidden there?

Well, that was probably not going to happen. The man was a probable pirate.

“I’ll ride up with one of my uncles,” she said with a casual wave of her hand.

“You are welcome to ride in my carriage,” Daire offered.

She laughed and shook her head. “Oh, dear me. No. Your friends are so very glittery for me. I shall look like a lump of coal and have to endure their gel. No, not the entire way there.”

“I won’t be sneering.”

She arched a delicate eyebrow. “Daire, surely you realize that you are more dangerous to me than all of your friends combined.”

She had called him Daire again.

Yes, he was dangerous to her.

Despite all commonsense efforts to resist this girl, it was inevitable that she would end up in his bed, because he could not seem to get enough of her. “You are not the sort to settle for less than claiming all of her.”

And it was just as inevitable that if he bedded her, he would feel bound to marry her, because she deserved better than to be used by his single night or to be taken on as his mistress.

Besides, once he got a taste of her, he did not think anything less

gratiate forever with Brenna would satisfy him.

g to be Daire sighed. He walked her to her door and waited for her to dis- turned inside before he strode back to the inn to prepare for the tea party. He a bath brought in, then marched to his suite of rooms, noting the ot want furnishings in the small sitting room that served as his private parlor, t silk settees and matching silk curtains. The decorative pillow: would embroidered in tones of blue and yellow, and the carpet was clearly c quality, perhaps Aubusson or a fine imitation. The tables were of aire did polished mahogany.

He strode into his bedchamber, an equally elegant room decor walked those same shades of blue and yellow, and stripped out of his clothes. like was on a robe of black silk, loosely fastened the belt at his waist, and then is quiet himself a port while waiting for the inn's staff to bring in the tub and to stop of water.

ducting He had no sooner poured his drink than he heard a knock at th "That was fast."

ofessor, Setting aside his glass, he crossed the room and paused with his h the knob. Thaddius was an excellent innkeeper and must have anticipa e of her needs.

To his surprise, Lady Gemma was at his door when he opened it, h gleaming with a predatory hunger when she saw he was undressed. are too I've come at the perfect time," she said, her voice low and breathy.

r sneers Her nimble fingers undid the tie of his belt and teased aside th before he could stop her. In the next moment, she had her hands on h chest and was sliding them lower. He grabbed her wrists to stop he you are Gemma."

She frowned. "Why not?"

"I've ordered a bath, and the inn's staff will be along at any momen

"So what? That never stopped you before. I'll wash your back fo ble she she continued in that breathy purr that he found quite annoying her. He moment. "I don't mind being your serving maid."

"For pity's sake." She was about to cup his privates, but he cau honor-hand once more, trying to be gentle with her despite his impatier m for at turned her toward the door. "Out, Gemma."

But she resisted and turned back to face him. "It's that girl, isn't : ss than haven't touched me or Sarah since we arrived here. Are you saving y

for her? What is so special about that prim little nobody?"

s appear "This has nothing to do with her. Can you not see I have respons
ordered that are occupying my time?"

elegant She rubbed against him. "What occupies your time is that virgin. (C
he blue do this for you?"

s were "Dear heaven," he muttered, stopping her as she attempted to
of finest before him and take him into her mouth, giving not a care that his de
finely open and anyone passing by could see in.

He picked her up and set her in the hallway, then shut the door and
ated in the belt of his robe while chiding himself for ever bringing these
He put friends along with him when he had long since tired of them. He would
poured to Hollingsworth, Danson, and the ladies while in the carriage on the
buckets St. Austell Grange. It was time for them to leave. They would not m
much, since he planned to ship them off to Bath and would settle there
e door. fine townhouse on the fanciest crescent. Gemma and Sarah were b
women who would easily find some other clots to indulge their
and on appetites.

ated his No wonder Brenna was determined to keep her distance from him
decadent and depraved must he appear to her?

er eyes Would she ever believe he had not lain with a woman since arri
. "I see Moonstone Landing? One would think he had reformed his wastrel v
anticipation of meeting her. Perhaps he had unconsciously done so.

re robe When the tub arrived, he washed, dressed, and then strode past th
his bare registration desk as the noon hour approached, more determined than
r. "No, be rid of these hangers-on and actually attempt to behave like a ger
where Brenna was concerned.

His carriage awaited him and his toadies in the front courtyard.
nt." They all climbed in.

r you," Daire cleared his throat as it rolled away from the inn. "I've me
at the this before, but it is now time for all of you to go to Bath. You've be
go practically every day since we arrived in Moonstone Landing."

ght her Gemma's eyes widened. "Finally! It is about time you came t
ice. He senses and quit this place."

"No, Gemma. Not me. I am talking about the four of you."

it? You He went on to offer them use of his townhouse. Danson
yourself Hollingsworth were delighted with his proposition. "And we may

there for the entire summer?" Danson inquired.

Daire nodded.

Lady Sarah frowned. "Do you have it properly staffed?"

"Yes—not a full staff, mind you. But it should be sufficient for purposes." He provided more details as his carriage wended its way past the familiar poppy field and Stoningham Manor.

"Then it looks like Bath it is," Hollingsworth said. "One wears ignorant milkmaids found around here, although a few are quite robust and delightful handful." He cupped his hands and mimicked grasping toady bouncing breasts.

Lady Gemma was still pouting. "You make it sound enticing, but the way you are really doing is pushing us away."

Danson nudged her lightly. "I am sure you will find plenty of money in his bucks to satisfy you, my dear. Just remember to be discreet about it. As beautiful as you are betrothed now to that old goat, Viscount Handly. He's just sexual enough to believe he has bought your fidelity. He's already settled a good sum on you with the promise of more to come."

Her brother, Hollingsworth, nodded. "Try to show some respect to Gemma. Do not ruin it for yourself."

"Claymore is to blame," Lady Sarah interjected. "She is angry that ways suddenly become a monk around us." She turned to frown at Daire. "I have not been any fun at all lately. And now you are sending us away from the inn because of that little virgin."

"She is a pretty thing," Danson said. "There's something invigorating about claiming a virgin—isn't that so, Claymore?"

"I wouldn't know," Daire replied. "I do not make it a practice to seduce innocent young ladies."

Gemma sneered. "You'll tire of her and her priggish ways soon."

He was never going to tire of Brenna. She was the sort of girl a man could never forget.

"This is not about her. My mother and nephew will be here soon. I do not mean to devote my time to them this summer."

Danson laughed. "Claymore, you look so earnest. But you cannot do this."

First of all, your mother is no more than your stepmother. No blood relation at all. And your nephew is a by-blow. Why are you bothering with him? Unless you are doing this to look like a hero in your virgin's eyes?

“Danson, you are an idiot.” Daire silently cursed his own stupidity for attaching himself to this sad lot.

His fault, of course.

For your information, he turned away to stare out the window as his elegant carriage rolled past the Westgate Hall and then Moonstone Cottage. “I hear that place is haunted by a ghost.”

Lady Sarah said. “By a very handsome ghost.”

“Isn’t this where that other pretty young thing lives?” Hollingsworth remarked. “You liked her once, didn’t you, Claymore? But she had eyes as blue as the sea, and a mouth as lush as a Major Brennan at the time.”

“Chloe Killigrew,” Daire replied.

“Yes, that’s the one. I must say, she’s a far better choice than your daughter.”

Chloe is the daughter of an earl, while this Brenna Angel is the daughter of a young tradesman’s daughter. You’re not thinking of courting her, are you?”

“Me? I am not courting anyone. Nor do I intend to.” First of all, he didn’t know the stupid idea how to actually court a woman. He doubted he would ever have the generous patience to whisper sweet nothings in some giggling goose’s ear, or bring her flowers, or recite sonnets to her beauty.

Nor would he ever patiently wait his turn among a queue of suitors.

No, if he wanted something, he simply charged in like a bull and took what he wanted. That approach would never work with Brenna, however.

“You can afford to be brash and set your own rules,” Hollingsworth said with a note of wistfulness. “I always admired this about you. Ruthless when you want something. I hope to be like you someday. It is with a note of wistfulness. “I always admired this about you. Ruthless when you want something. I hope to be like you someday. I have to wait around for my uncle to die first. I am convinced he will die forever just to thwart me.”

They turned up the drive to St. Austell Grange, a magnificent house overlooking the sea. Daire could not wait to get out of his carriage and away from these friends. This afternoon tea was not going to be easy for him because he would be seeing Lady Chloe Killigrew for the first time since her marriage. She was Lady Brennan now, having wed Fionn Brennan, a Major at the time but now a viscount.

Not that Daire minded seeing her again, for they had parted on good terms.

Her husband was not too fond of him because Daire had thought of proposing to Chloe. Being eminently sensible, Chloe had cut him off from the start. “She did not love him, and Daire had not been in love with her.”

idity inliked her, and she would have made him a good wife.

It was never going to happen. He would not have made her husband, and she knew it. The danger signs were obvious to Chloe, led pasteven while thinking to court her, Daire had been dallying with Gemunted,”Sarah in their casual nighttime romps.

Looking back on it now, he knew it was not well done of him. Some bad habits were hard to break, especially when there were sres onlyeasy women around, those who took no effort to lure into his bed anbe appeased with trinkets. He chose these conquests because they give a fig about him.

Chloe was not such a woman. Nor was Brenna.

Things were different for him now. Some might say he had finally into a responsible man.

As for him, he had never thought of himself as a thoughtless bounce he had closed himself off to everyone. It was the only way he knew ing hermaintain a shred of dignity after all those years of abuse from his fathold bastard claimed to be beating strength into him. Ironically, Daonly beaten when he attempted to stand up for himself. He was neve took it.sure why his father was doing it, only that the old man took to pleasure in it.

The war and the senseless brutality of every fierce battle had only, that’s him off further.

What was he now but an unhappy man who could no longer bear t will livethe festering burden of a damaged heart? He was desperate for it to heal

Perhaps this was why he enjoyed Brenna’s company as much as countryBrenna, with her refreshing innocence and opinionated ways, was bet age andany healing balm. He particularly liked her unwavering belief in love.

Perhaps she could convince him such a thing existed and was possnce herhim.

He had already acknowledged the need to change his ways. courtesans, expensive brandy, and nights at the gaming table w n goodproviding any satisfaction. He was already on the path to redempt whatever one called it.

He had abstained from touching a woman in over a fortnight. Noist backhave any desire to be with anyone other than Brenna... At least for now

But he *Bollocks.*

Was this what he had to look forward to? A summer of celibacy? And yet he would not hesitate to turn into a monk if this was what he had to do to heal.

He set aside the thought as he approached the reception line. Viscount Brennan was looking on, and pinned him with a glower.

The man was obviously not happy to see Daire.

He recognized that apish look, that *Chloe is mine, so keep your hands off her* glower. The viscount had nothing to worry about. Daire's attention was not completely on Brennan, never mind that he'd known her for little more than two days now.

Daire wondered whether he would be as jealous of Albert if that poor grownrat ever dared come to Moonstone Landing in search of Brenna.

The answer was yes. Daire would go at him like a wild ape and tear them apart.

Ah, men were such possessive creatures.

He sighed and shook his head in dismay. He was not even concerned about Brenna. Courtship implied patience, politeness, and care for another's feelings. This was never in his nature.

Once again, he shook out of his thoughts. They were mostly inapplicable anyway. He cleared his head as his turn on the receiving line came up.

Although this was the Duke and Duchess of Malvern's tea party, the duchess's sisters and their husbands stood beside her to greet their guests. Daire, heeding Brenna's words, strove to be more engaging—especially when he was eyeing him warily.

The Duke of Malvern was far more jovial in his greeting. "Clayton heard you were back," the big, gruff bear of a man said, giving him a hearty shake.

His duchess, Henley, who was as gentle and amiable as could be,

greeted Daire with warmth and a merry lilt to her voice. "Brenna says you're bringing your mother and nephew to Moonstone Landing for the summer. That is wonderful. Do send word once they arrive, and we will have your party for supper. A quiet party, nothing as hectic as today's affair."

"Thank you, we'll be delighted to join you." He moved on to greet Phoebe and her marquess husband. "Burness," Daire said with

uncertain how the marquess and his outspoken wife would receive him. "Lady Burness, a pleasure."

Daire had acquired a reputation as a rake, but his reputation was not as reprehensible as the one earned by this marquess before he had and married Lady Phoebe. For this reason, the love that burned in Buck's eyes for his wife surprised Daire. If anything, it seemed the marquess falling more deeply in love with his wife with each passing year.

Daire wondered if he could ever fall in love so completely, or in months instead of mere days or months when it came to his own faithful husband.

He glanced at the Duke of Malvern and saw that same dotting expression in the man's face whenever he looked upon Duchess Henley.

These men were committed to their wives, all in with their hearts and their bodies. They were not likely ever to break their wedding vows. Daire hoped that he was as fortunate with her husband.

"Brennan," he said, offering his hand to the viscount, who did not particularly seem pleased to shake it.

"Claymore," he replied, his tone still icy.

Lady Chloe showed no such reserve. "I am so glad you found your way back to us. And I hear your mother and nephew are to join you. Her and the boys are going to grab you first, but we look forward to having you with us. Don't we, my love?"

The viscount's expression softened when Chloe reached up and kissed his cheek. Yes, this viscount was completely besotted with his wife.

Daire was glad for Chloe. She deserved the best.

He chuckled at the viscount's chagrin. "That is very kind of you, Brennan. I haven't done much to endear myself to any of you, but I hope that this will change as my family and I settle in."

"Settle in?" Her husband frowned. "I thought you were only here for the summer."

"I hope to be here much longer, but that will depend on how my mother and I adapt to Moonstone Landing. As I am sure you've heard, we will be staying at Stoningham Manor until the end of the year, but I hope to work out a longer arrangement."

Chloe smiled. "We knew of it before the ink was dry on your lease agreement, but I was not very happy about it," she said, giving her husband a playful nudge. "but I think moving here will be very good for you."

Daire nodded. "I hope so. I need to devote more time to my nephew."

nowhere better man for him, and London is simply too distracting.”

had met The marquess overheard his statement. “Good for you, Claymore. My little nieces saved my sanity when I lost my arm.” He glanced at the man whose sleeve hid his missing limb. “I knew I had to do better for them.

met Phoebe and knew she would never have me unless I shaped up, not for them but for myself.”

being a Daire nodded. “I have a bit of fixing up I need to do for myself. No, it can be blamed on the ravages of war.” He turned to Chloe’s husband whose expression was still regarding him with a strong dose of skepticism. “You were in any danger of losing Chloe to me. You were the only one she ever loved and soul. Brennan’s manner softened. “I know. I still cannot figure out what Chloe sees in me.”

Chloe gasped. “Fionn! How can you say such a thing? To work you got not look up from nothing...less than nothing, the way you did? You have more strength of heart than anyone I know. There is no finer man than you.”

Chloe’s husband turned to Daire with a lopsided grin. “I hope you find your way someone just as outspoken who feels this way about you...so long as you and Cain my wife.”

us, too. Daire laughed. “It will not be Chloe, so put your sword away and stop scowling at me as though you intend to gut me.”

ssed his “Have you found someone?” Chloe asked, her eyes alight.

“I don’t know. That’s my problem, isn’t it? I would not know anything if it struck me in the face.”

1, Lady “Well, you won’t be able to think clearly while you keep those friends close around,” she remarked, frowning as Hollingsworth, Danson, and the other ladies approached.

for the “I’m shipping them off to Bath tomorrow.”

nephew haven’t you?” She cast him a brilliant smile. “You are? Then you have found someone, I have.”

He moved on without answering, leaving Chloe and her sisters to look out at his *ton* friends. He took a few minutes to wander about the nicely landscaped grounds of St. Austell Grange, for this is where all the tables had been set.

Additional long tables, their linens blowing in the soft breeze, had been placed on the terrace and were laden with tea sandwiches and fancy cakes, doubt supplied by Mrs. Halsey. He recognized several specialties from the shop. There was also heartier fare set out on other long tables for

who came with large appetites.

Smaller, round tables dotted the lawn and formal gardens, and chairs empty set around them for those who wished to sit. Several footmen walked

Then the throng offering champagne, and others carried out teapots to serve not only

It seemed as though everyone from the village was here, and Daire thought was that a thief could tear through the town and steal what not all of wished, for there was no one left to protect the homes and businesses.

Malcolm Angel, the village constable, must have noticed his expression in “Your Grace, is something troubling you?”

“Good afternoon, constable. I was merely wondering, who is left in charge that everyone seems to be here.”

“Most of the businesses closed shortly before noon, since no one would want to go our way going to shop now that the tea party has started. Let me assure you, the

more is well guarded. My men are working in shifts so that everyone has a chance

to attend at some point in the day. Those who are here now will leave you find allow those on duty to come up. Major Brennan does the same with

it is not soldiers, including those on staff at the hospital. Everyone takes turns and one misses out on this grand affair, but our quiet village remains and stop protected.”

There was a harpist set up beside a rose bower.

“That’s my daughter, Verity,” the constable said, beaming with a good pride.

“She’s talented.” Daire meant it, for he had been to enough *ton* music ends of and listened to plenty of sweet young things torture their instrument

and the hope of gaining his admiration and attention, when all they manage was to torture his ears.

“Thank you, Your Grace. When she finishes, the orchestra will take me one, and start playing their tunes. The villagers enjoy her harp music, but

they really want to do is dance. The guests will get a bit rowdy once the tea party is over. The teapots are put away. But it is all in good fun.”

Daire continued to wander the grounds.

The house, which was quite grand in size, was open to those who had been to sit indoors. Not that guests were permitted to roam wherever they liked,

no footmen stood guard to make certain those wandering in remained close to the parlor. But they did not stop him from exploring the rooms beyond

or those doubt because he was a duke.

No one interfered with a duke.

Daire took a quick look around the main rooms, curious as among decorations and wall colors Duchess Henley had chosen. Not particularly cared, but he wanted to be prepared if Brenna insisted e's firstmaking decisions about Stoningham Manor.

He ambled through the parlor, the dining room, the entry hall, and strolled into the library. He thought he would be alone, but was surprised to find Brenna with her trusty journal in hand, too busy jotting down notes to notice him.

He laughed and leaned a shoulder against the doorjamb. "I might have known you would be snooping. How did you get around the watchdogs? They were not letting anyone past the parlor."

"They let you through, didn't they?" She smiled at him. "One of the footmen is a cousin of mine."

Daire emitted a hearty chuckle. "Of course."

"I suppose you got through because of your noble rank. No one is supposed to stop a duke from doing whatever he pleases." She held up her journal. "I am fully thought to prepare myself for the Stoningham Manor renovations. My mother will expect a certain level of elegance, and I do not want to make any garish mistakes."

"You won't. You have naturally elegant tastes." He left the door open and kept his distance, for he did not want any scandal arising if someone walk in on them. "Have you seen enough? Care to take a tour in the garden with me and tell me about your findings?"

She glanced upward. "In truth, I would love to see the bedchamber, but I think that is too much of a trespass."

The library was near the grand staircase. The butler and footmen who were usually around had all been drawn to the parlor or outside, and hence the hands full with the entire village on their lawn. "Come on, little dove," he said. "I'll stand guard while you scamper upstairs."

Her eyes widened. "What if I am caught?"

"I will shoulder the blame. Go on. You know you want to snooze. I'll whistle a warning if the duke or duchess come upstairs."

"All right." She cast him an adorable, conspiratorial grin. "You know your father's influence, you know."

"Yes, yes. Morally corrupt and all that. Get on upstairs before the

over.”

to the She scurried up the steps, her derriere wiggling delightfully as she
that heup. He waited at the foot of the staircase for her return. This girl
on hisneeded a little dose of wicked in her. Gad, she was so refreshingly in

Had she *ever* misbehaved?

l finally She hurried downstairs a few minutes later, a guilty blush on her
rised toIf Daire had to place wagers, he would bet it would take Brenna no mo
otes toa day to tearfully confess her so-called crime to Duchess Henley.

“What did you find, you naughty girl?” he teased.

ht have She opened her journal and began to check off the colors of
duke’sbedchamber. “Peach. Yellow. Cream. Ivory. Pale mint green. Lilac, and

I was not enamored of that color on the walls. It is much prettier
of the drapes and bed curtains alone.”

“Too much if slathered on the walls?” He folded his arms across
chest. “Consider lilac banished.”

s going “The mint-green and floral curtains looked beautiful. I think your
rnal. “I might like that for her bedchamber,” she said, still blushing over the find
. Yourhad trespassed on the privacy of their host and hostess. One would think
ake anyhad just stolen the Crown Jewels.

She was so sweet and good hearted.

or wide “Done,” he said, suppressing the urge to wrap her up in his arms across
shoulder. “Where will we find those fabrics?”

n in the She pursed her lips. “Not in Moonstone Landing. You’ll probably
go to Exeter for those.”

s. But I “Me? You are the one who ought to choose them.”

en whatask? But I cannot go alone.”

ad their “We’ll go together.” He raised his hands when she took a deep breath
” Dairewas about to excoriate him for suggesting such an improper thing. ‘

you must have a relative who can serve as chaperone. But we won’t get
your uncle starts on the repairs and painting first. Same for your cousin
op. I’ll work on the garden. We’ll get them underway before we rush off, all right.

She gave a wary nod.

u are a “However, before we plan our wild tryst in Exeter,” he teased, un-
resist riling her, since she was quite irresistible when flustered, “I suggest
party issimply ask Duchess Henley if she happens to have discarded fabrics. I

she ordered books full of samples.”

“Wild tryst, indeed,” she grumbled, tossing him a disapproving look which was not convincing at all because she could not suppress the innocent curiosity in her eyes. “But your idea about the samples is an excellent one. Will you ask her?”

“Will you ask her?”

He arched an eyebrow. “Why me?”

“Because you are a... Um, and...”

“What were you going to say, Brenna? That I am a duke and you are nobody, so why would she ever accommodate you?”

She nodded, then shook her head, then simply sighed. “She isn’t like that, but this house is the height of elegance. She might consider me a usurper and resent that I am attempting to make my home as fine as hers.”

“Do you hear yourself, little dove? A usurper? Because you like his draperies?”

“Well, I would certainly not copy her exact designs. I have no intention of turning Stoningham Manor into a miniature of St. Austell Grange. I am simply hoping to get ideas about what makes a home elegant.” She cast him a winning smile. “Am I being ridiculous?”

“Yes.” He took her arm and placed it in his. “We’ll talk to her together. You cannot summon the courage to talk to her on your own. But we can kiss her now. She’s too busy entertaining her guests.”

He led her outdoors and guided her toward the gazebo, which overhung a beach tucked away in the cove. The wind was blowing lightly off the water, causing Brenna’s gown to swirl in becoming waves around her body. “Look pretty, Brenna.”

“Thank you, Your Grace...Daire.”

By the scuffs on the wood floor of the gazebo, Daire knew a small table and chairs were usually placed here. But they had been taken away, and the set was on the lawn as one of the tea tables. He was glad, for it kept other people out until there was no place to sit in here, and it allowed him time alone with Brenna.

She looked lovely in a simple gown of ivory that had delicate pinpoints of green stems and leaves embroidered on it. A silk band in the same green hue circled her body just under her breasts, drawing attention to her full mounds.

Not that he cared a whit for the gown itself, only that she looked so beautiful in it. Perhaps it was the Oxford influence, because her

despite being simple, were very well made and unmistakably good look, “Brenna, tell me more about yourself.”

learn of “What do you wish to know?” She turned away from him to point one toward the sea, which shimmered in shades of green and blue under the light of the sun.

He came to her side, standing close enough so that their shoulders grazed. “Whatever you wish to tell me.”

you are a “I don’t know. There isn’t much you would find worthy of your interest.”

“What about your experiences teaching at the Rainard Academy? Or your raughty life growing up here in Moonstone Landing? Or the things you like to tell me about? Hopes? Dreams? Victories? Disappointments?”

rs.” “Do you really want to hear all this about me?”

er taste He nodded. “I would not have asked otherwise.”

I want to know everything about you.

ation of He waited patiently, hoping she would begin to open herself up.

im only “Have you heard of our local moonstone lore, *Daire*?”

him a He smiled, liking the sound of his name on her lips and the impression of stress she put on it because she did not feel comfortable yet with the unfamiliarity. “No, little dove. Tell me.”

cannot “The moonstones glow for those who find true love. They did not glow for me when I held up Albert’s letter, the one where he demanded an answer to his proposal. I read it aloud as I looked out over the water.”

water, “And received not a single glimmer in response?”

7. “You “You are mocking me.”

“No, not at all. The entire village believes in this lore, so I expect some truth to it. Perhaps the lore is enhanced because the sight of all the moonstones shimmering across the water puts one in an amorous mood. No doubt makes a man propose to the lady he is with. Or perhaps being caught away with an unmarried young lady late at night puts said young lady in a compromising position, and a hasty marriage is the result whether or not the moonstones shine.”

leafy- “Must you be so cynical? The moonstones only shine when there is love. This is why they are magical.”

“But they did not shine for you and Albert. I would have been shocked if they had. Have I not told you he is not the man for you?”

clothes, “Yes, but the moonstones don’t care about your opinion.”

stylish. He chuckled. "Unless I am the one you love."

She cast him a pained look. "Don't ever say that. You know we are outsuited. And do you think I would ever consider you while you travel the force with your harem?"

"Brenna, I've sent them away."

almost "What?" She eyed him warily.

"They're leaving for Bath tomorrow."

interest." "Because you are sending them off? Or did they decide to leave on your own accord?"

to do? "It was all my doing, but they are eager to go. Moonstone Ladies society leaves much to be desired for them. They will be much happier in Bath...and I will be much happier with them gone."

He noted the turmoil in her eyes as she stared at him. "Why did you send them away?"

"It was time," he said quietly.

"What made you decide it was time?"

pertinent "Oh, several reasons, the most important being that my nephew needs a presence in his life. If I wish to shape him into a man of character, then I ought to set the example. Should I not?"

it glow She nodded, and her expression softened. "I'm glad you realize that you carry more influence than anyone else, and he will notice your deeds more than your words. What were your other reasons?"

"For a while now, this casual life has not satisfied me. I am ready for more serious attachments. Did you know I had started to court Lady Elizabeth before she married Viscount Brennan? It was a halfhearted attempt, I know, but I thought she might be the first to admit. I knew she would never take me seriously while my good friends remained with me, yet I made no effort to shed myself of those friends. They stayed, and Chloe dismissed me, as I fully expected she would."

ly in a "So why send them away now? She is married and will never leave you. Her husband she loves for you."

"This has nothing to do with Chloe. I never loved her and she never loved me. It is true, but she was not married at the time and had many qualities I desired."

However, the most important quality was always missing. There was no spark between us. Those moonstones would not have shimmered for us. I think..." He tucked a finger under Brenna's chin and tipped her face so that her gaze met his. "Must I spell it out for you, little dove?"

“Yes, because I am dense and will probably come to the wrong conclusion. Or be angry with you because you are taking advantage of my knowledge of moonstone lore to make a jest of it and me.”

“Brenna, I would never do anything so cruel. Especially to you. We enjoyed our time together immensely. Yes, we only met recently. But we have been in each other’s constant company, and I haven’t stopped thinking about you ever since.”

He saw at once this admission scared her, for she pursed her lips in a fretting way of hers. “Are you suggesting I am one of your reasons?”

“A small part of it for now, but yes. I am not going to do anything to interfere with your governess duties for my nephew, or having my nephew comfortably settled here. I don’t know what will happen between us, but possibly nothing, because I still need to change many things about my life. I’ve sent my *harem* away, but who is to say I will not change my mind in a month and bring them back?”

“I will never respect you if you do.”

“I know, little dove. If it is any consolation, I do not expect I will ever get them back. It would be a sign of my failure if I did.”

She shook her head. “I think you are capable of commitment, sir. You take your duties as duke quite seriously. You also provide generous help to your family, I expect. It is not commitment so much as trust that is the stumbling point. Trusting someone with your heart, that is the difficulty. Allowing yourself to be vulnerable. What happened to you? Why was Chloe’s heart so ravaged?”

He gave a short, bitter laugh. “I wanted to find out more about you, my lady, here you are trying to draw out the secrets of my soul.”

“Is it not relevant? I think there is a lot to learn about you, Your Grace.”

He shook his head. “Daire.”

She sighed. “Yes, Daire. Any other questions you wish to ask me?”

“So you can turn the tables on me and get me talking more about my life?”
“No, little dove. This is enough for today. But I will have lots of questions for you throughout the coming days. This is not the last conversation you and I are going to have.”

“If you say so,” she said with a soft laugh. “My life is not as complicated. Nor is it very deep or particularly filled with turmoil. I can tell you all of it in under five minutes.”

wrong “I’m sure it will take much longer than that. You almost drowned the child. How did this incident affect you?” He had not meant to ask questions now, but neither of them seemed eager to move away from each other, and he really did want to know more about her.

But we’ve She thought she had little to offer, but this was not true.

She pursed her lips yet again in that kissable way as she pondered the question. “I will own that it was the most frightening experience of my life in that haven’t gone in the water since that day. Cara reacted similarly. We are both deathly afraid of drowning, although she will go in now if her husband is standing beside her and holding tightly to her. But she will never go in alone. Not even I. I suppose it is ridiculous, because this is a seaside village and our lives revolve around the sea.”

Tears formed in her eyes, but she hastily wiped them away. “Having a husband in a fear of drowning is not what guides my life. It was Captain Arundel’s actions that had the strongest impact on me. He sacrificed his life for ours. He did not even hesitate to do this brave thing. This is why it is so important for me to honor him by doing something worthy with my life. This is what I have been striving for, and it has shaped me more than a simple fear of water.”

Daire took out his handkerchief and handed it to her so she could wipe away her tears as they threatened to fall. “That is quite a story. It is particularly difficult. Brenna.”

“I knew in that moment I had to do something meaningful,” she said, her lips trembling as she struggled to maintain her composure. “Captain Arundel had given us all a second chance. This is why I sought to become a teacher to add value to the lives of others.”

“You have, little dove. I’m sure you inspired every girl you taught.”

“I hope so. I tried... But Albert has now taken this meaningful thing from me, hasn’t he?” She sniffled and turned away. “Well, I have to find out what really happened. It is not fair of me to leap to any conclusions. I will gather all the facts.”

Daire wanted to put his arms around Brenna, but thought better of it.

Everyone was watching them and must have seen her dabbing at her eyes. Now they would be wondering what foolish thing he had said to make her cry.

He moved to the opposite side of the gazebo while she composed herself.

It was not a large enclosure, and he was still within easy reach of her.

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understood now why she was such an earnest thing, determined to do good in the world.

In truth, he was quite proud of her. He could not think of a better way to honor the man who had saved her life.

What had he ever done to honor those who had sacrificed for him? Absolutely nothing.

Brenna was teaching young ladies to think for themselves and find their strengths. He was romping in bed with sexually active debutantes, bored widows, and unhappily married wives.

No wonder he had become disgusted with himself.

Perhaps this was why he was so fascinated with Brenna.

There was a depth to her that he had not seen in other women. Certainly never in the spoiled and pouty *ton* diamonds he had seduced.

Gad, he hadn't even needed to seduce them. Women flocked to him of their own accord. He had only to choose whom he wanted for the evening... or the ten minutes in a shadowed alcove if he only had time for something quick.

He could fall in love with someone like Brenna. He did not give a fig about the scandal it would create among the *ton*.

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"Stay here, little dove. I'll fetch you a lemonade."

Brenna nodded. "Thank you."

She meant to hand him back his handkerchief, but he shook his head. "Dry your tears. I'll take it back later."

He strode off to fetch a drink for each of them, needing a little distance between them, for she seemed to be wrapping herself around his soul, and he was not ready for this.

Was there anything about this girl he did not like?

He could not think of a single thing.



Chapter Eight

RETURNING TO BRENNA took a few minutes longer than Daire expected because others approached him, and he did not wish to appear rude. To the new Daire Claymore, ever patient and engaging. What a jest!

Would people so easily forget what an arse he was?

But being this better version of himself felt effortless when he was with Brenna.

He strode back to her side and immediately cursed himself for leaving her alone. Gemma and Sarah were now beside her, no doubt destroying any illusions about his valor the little dove might have held.

By the looks on their scheming faces, they were spilling every dirt of their nighttime frolics. He did not owe Brenna any apology or explanation for his past behavior. He did not owe her an explanation or apology for his present behavior, either.

He had been an amoral hound. She knew this.

Still, their attempt to demean him made his blood boil. It was done for other reasons than to maliciously retaliate for sending them away.

Their spite was utterly ridiculous, for both were betrothed to wealthy men who were suffering maladies that would likely kill them within the year. He was a novice compared to them when it came to using people to achieve their selfish purposes.

This was why he never opened himself up or dared to trust anybody. He had paid for their stay at the Kestrel Inn, had footed all the cost for these ladies in addition to buying them sparkly trinkets, and would now pay for their Bath. He had been generous to them for years...and yet they did not turn on him with a vengeance.

Was there no gratitude? No understanding? Not a shred of loyalty?

“Ladies,” he said curtly, handing Brenna her lemonade. “Don’t you go somewhere else to be?”

They laughed and skittered away.

He groaned. "Dare I ask?"

"No, it is better that you do not." Brenna turned to him, not particularly horrified. "The Marquess of Burness had a hideous reputation even worse than yours. Look at him now. He would die before hurting Lady Phoebe. The Duke of Malvern was often his partner in debauched jaunts. He is completely reformed as well. He adores I expected Hen."

his was "So, I am absolved?"

"No," she said with a gently admonishing laugh. "You have yet to try yourself. I hope in time you will, because it appears you are sincere as with attempt. However, it is not me or your family or any of these villagers whom you owe your proof. You owe it to yourself. The desire to change or ever arc of your life must come from within you. We may supply the first bent on but making the important changes in your life is ultimately up to you and .

"Do not dismiss your importance to me, Brenna."

y detail "Do not say that. We hardly know each other. Nothing will come anation beyond a cordial friendship. Your rank and my lack of it can neogy for overlooked. So, let us be sensible. What I think of you cannot be important."

"You are wrong." Her opinion could prove to be his salvation, but e for no not want to hear this. She would never believe him, because she placed importance on the difference in their status than he did. *Everyone* lthy old importance on it.

ie year. He, however, did not.

idvance She sipped her lemonade and turned to watch the dancers gather the first dance of the afternoon.

y. He'd "Care to dance with me, little dove? The orchestra is tuning up, and adies in think of nothing more enjoyable than hopping about and making a cc time in arse of myself as the entire village looks on."

hesitate Her eyes were mirthful and her laughter flitted on the breeze. "You excellent dancer, as you well know. All eyes will be on you because too handsome for words. But you must promise to dance with other ou have too."

"Yes, I shall have a care for your reputation. But no one will be Their eyes may be on me, but my eyes will be on you, and everyo

know it.”

“Don’t say these things to me.”

looking “Why not? Should I not be honest with you?”

utation, “Yes, you should... But...”

re ever “What is troubling you?” He slowed his pace as they walked toward their makeshift dance floor, which was nothing more than long planks of wood laid across the lawn.

“Your lady friends said you returned to Lady Dowling’s after last assembly ball.”

to prove He was not surprised they would make up these ridiculous lies. “I saw you when you returned. All I did was walk her home and come straight back to my room.”

to prove “I know. They were speaking of later, after I had gone home.”

st push, “And you believe them?”

alone.” “Actually, no.”

He sighed in relief. “Thank you, Brenna.”

ie of us “Do not be grateful. I only find it easy to believe you because Dowling has done nothing but cast me venomous looks since I arrived. She has claws, that one, and would have been looking at me with the confidence of a cat who had just polished off a bowl of cream if you had spent the night with her.”

to prove “I see.” He raked a hand through his hair. “Then good thing she is placed Brenna frowned. “I do not like to be caught up in these manipulation games.”

to prove “I know. I am sorry you are. The only way to avoid being drawn into my scheme is to have nothing to do with me, but this is the last thing I want. Hollingsworth’s sisters and Lady Dowling, for all their fine clothes and jewels, for all their elegant training and titles, are nothing compared to you. You are the complete pearl among them.”

“Hardly.”

to prove “A natural, exquisite pearl,” he continued. “People are always going after you because this seems to be the nature of most, especially the ladies, want something from me. It is all the more reason why you are so interested in me.”

to prove “I suppose this is why you must be cautious, always alert to those who will seek to use you because you are a wealthy duke...or trap you because

one of England's most sought-after bachelors."

"I can do little to control them. However, I promise always to be with you. We are building a friendship here, and friends do not lie to each other."

ward the "Learning to trust you will take time."

set out He nodded. "I look forward to the challenge."

"I don't. I am very afraid of what is going to happen."

night's He took her hand as they joined the line of dancers. "And I am afraid of what might not."

But you "What do you mean?" She stared at him as they moved down the line to the music.

He could not answer as they parted to twirl with the couple in front of them, each of them now standing with a new partner for the moment.

But was his concern not obvious?

Brenna had the capacity to believe in others, for she had been raised in love and had a supportive family willing to come to her aid when needed. She understood how to trust and what it meant to have unquestioned faith. She loved one.

She would not be afraid to make the leap and trust him once she realized it was really time was right.

But he had never put his faith in anyone in his entire life... When a person came close, and that was Juliana, the stepmother he always referred to as his mother, another of those rare, kind souls.

Perhaps this was all it took. If he had the capacity to trust his stepmother, then he might have the capacity to trust Brenna, too.

How closely was trust connected to love?

Now, he certainly knew that caring for a mother was a far different thing from caring for a woman in a romantic, burned-into-my-soul way.

He thought about what Brenna had told him of the moonstones and how they did not shine for her and Albert. If the moonstone lore was real, was it possible they would one day shine for him and Brenna? Or was his heart so damaged to ever be capable of finding love?

This was what he feared—hurting this lovely girl. Having her fall in love with him, and then finding himself unable to love in return despite his efforts to reform.

He glanced at Brenna, whose cheeks were pink from hopping about

lively tune, and her smile was as soft as a summer breeze.

honest How could he not fall in love with this girl?
to each The partners twirled once again, and she fell back into his arms.
She cast him a dazzling smile.
How could she not be right for him?

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Chapter Nine

BY THE FOLLOWING day, business had returned to its normal, unhurried pace in Moonstone Landing. Daire caught the scent of pies baking in Halsey's tea shop ovens as he strode to the stable to take Scipio out for an early-morning run. Good weather had smiled on them all week, but the threat of rain was finally upon them today.

He rode off, hoping to beat the impending storm, but felt a disappointment as a heavy mist hung over the poppy field. He could not make out the vibrant reds of the flowers. His view of the sea was completely obscured by low, wet clouds.

The air was thick and so uncomfortably damp that his shirt stuck to his clammy skin as he rode along the now-familiar pathways.

"We're going to take it slow this morning, Scipio." The visibility was so bad, and he did not want the beast to stumble over an unexpected obstacle. He decided to cut the ride short and return to the inn as droplets began to fall.

He heard the roll of thunder in the distance.

"Blast," Daire muttered, for he had not bothered to don anything more than his shirt, riding breeches, and boots. He had not given a moment's thought to bringing along an oilcloth for protection against the rain.

This was a minor nuisance compared to the delay the rain would cause in the work needing to be done at Stoningham Manor. He knew Brenna and her cousin had planned to start this morning. Simon Angel and his men had intended to work on the chimneys first. Since this could not be done in the storm, Daire hoped they would have sense enough to shift their attention indoors.

The garden work would be a total loss and would have to wait until the weather cleared. However, this was of less concern to him, since his wife could sit outdoors with or without a view of flowers in bloom—and he knew she rarely sat outdoors anyway.

A heavier rain began to fall as Daire gave Scipio his lead and let him to gallop back to the inn. They neared Moonstone Landing's main high street.

Mr. Matchett scurried out of the stable to grab Scipio's reins as Daire rode up. "There's a deluge coming, Your Grace. I feel it in my knees. I heard the clap of thunder."

"Aye, storm's rolling toward us like a mighty army. Let's hope it ends peacefast. This could still turn into a glorious day. One must always look on Mrs. Bright's side."

Daire nodded.
"Won't delay yer house repairs, though," the chatty man went on

Brenna and Miss Felicity have already been up to Stoningham Market and back. Simon and his men are at Mr. Bedwell's mercantile purchasing supplies. But they'll wait out the rain before loading their wagons and completely them up the hill. Those wagons will just get stuck in the mud if they do it now. I'm sure the girls are also smart enough to work around the rain.

Daire certainly hoped so. He did not like to think of Brenna or her caught in a dangerous storm. But she and Felicity were clever and understood the weather in these parts.

"I expect they know what they are doing."

"Aye, m'lord. The Angels are good workers, every last one of them. Brenna's been up since daybreak toting those big books around. She's got other little bees."

"What big books?"

Not that it mattered. Daire would see Brenna later and find out what the ostler had been talking about.

Right now, he had to avoid the rain.

Daire patted Scipio, made certain he was safely returned to his stable, then ran to the inn. But the sky opened up the moment he stepped out. It was as though mischievous goblins had been lying in wait for

him to run out in the open before immediately pouring tubs of water down on him. Pour down it did, right atop his head. Despite the short distance between the stable and the inn, he was soaked to the teeth by the time he stepped in.

Thaddius called out to him, but Daire waved him off. "Later, Thaddius. I am drenched."

He took the liberty of darting along the servants' hallways, since his

allowed were muddied and he was shedding water everywhere. There were familiar steps up to reach his elegant suite, and he took those two at a time.

“But my lord—!”

He ignored whatever the innkeeper was trying to tell him. “No needs.” Thaddius!

His clothes weighed him down, and every inch of him was sopping thanks to this deluge of biblical proportions. Cursing, he burst into his room, shut the door, and immediately began removing his clothes. He started with his shirt and unceremoniously tossed it to the floor. “Bloody rags,” he muttered, raking fingers through his hair as he watched the shirt land on the floor. “Misssquish beside the door.

Since he did not wish to track mud all over the impressively clean floor of his suite, he decided to take his boots off as well. He hopped on one foot, driving a tugging off one and slamming his back against the wall as he lost his balance and fell against it. “Bloody boots.”

He thought he heard a faint female gasp, but dismissed it as coming from some cousins somewhere in the hall, since he glanced around and saw no interloper in the suite.

He began to work on his other boot, this time striking his elbow against the doorknob as he yanked the stubborn thing off. “Bloody knob.” He had just started to undo the falls of his riding breeches when he heard a busy feminine cry that definitely came from inside his sitting room. “The...?”

It was then he turned toward the hearth and noticed Brenna poking her head out from behind one of the big leather chairs set beside it. She was wide-eyed at him, her cheeks aflame and her mouth agape.

He growled low in his throat. “Bloody blazes! Who let you in here?” Of course, he knew it had to be Thaddius, and this was what the innkeeper must have been desperately trying to convey to Daire as he passed the registration desk.

Sighing, Daire strode toward her.

He ignored the droplets of water sliding down his neck, and took a side glance as they fell onto his chest and continued lower, into the waist of his breeches.

If Brenna’s eyes bulged any wider, they would pop out of their sockets. She followed the trail of water down his torso.

... a few “Like what you see, little dove?”

She nodded numbly, then groaned and hastily turned to face the door.
“Oh, dear heaven! I have to get out of here.”

... ot now, “Why were you in here in the first place?”

Her breaths turned rapid as she began her explanation, still staring at the wet wall instead of at him, and chattering so fast that he could not immediately make sense of what she was saying. “I was delivering books to your study,” she explained, finally slowing down. “Thaddius said it would be all right if I brought them in here myself, since you were out for your morning run and would not return for another hour. Why are you back early?”

“Need you ask?” The wind was howling and a violent rain now pelting against the windows with enough force to make them rattle. “I did not expect to be here about, drowned in the deluge.”

... balance “Yes, yes. Of course. May I go, please?”

“In this downpour? What books are you talking about? What are you bringing from the library?”

... r in his “Fabric samples. You will never guess what happened as I was about to leave yesterday’s tea party.”

... against He turned her to face him, suppressing a laugh as Brenna inhaled a deliciously breathy sound and closed her eyes. But not before she had caught another eyeful of him without his shirt. Her cheeks caught flame and she knew that she was not well done of him to prolong her embarrassment, but he was used to dealing with innocents, and he found her reaction quite refreshing.

... ing her charming.

... e stared Not to mention arousing.

Heat thrummed through his veins. She was still making those little noises that would have him spilling himself if she were making those sounds in bed.

... he tore *Bollocks.*

It was sheer folly for him to delay her departure, and yet he could not get enough of her.

... no note “Open your eyes, Brenna.”

... band of She shook her head vehemently. “No.”

“I’ll step aside so you do not have to look at me. But you must open your eyes to see your way out of here.” To be caught with him in his undress was as compromising to her as if she were caught naked in bed.

Her reputation would be in ruins, while he, being a duke and the wall of condemnation, would be under no obligation to marry her because she was merely a tradesman's daughter. "Wait for me in the dining room. I will be long."

"All right." She made another of those deliciously breathy noises and immediately cracked one eye open.

"Sighing, he took her by the shoulders and guided her to the door. "I might let me make certain there is no one in the hall. When you leave, take the side and servants' passageway. The hour is early, but some guests will be awake now, so it is very important to be as quiet as a mouse and rouse as little undivided attention as possible."

She nodded.

And licked her rosebud lips. And made another of those deliciously breathy sounds.

"One more thing..."

She opened her eyes and looked up at him with her shimmering blue eyes about to burst.

"Little dove, if I catch you alone in here again, I am going to rip your clothes off you, pin you up against the elegantly painted wall, and kiss every inch of your naked body."

Which was exactly the wrong thing to say to this innocent, because he had not gotten out of his suite without giving him the chance to check the hallway and the next moment, she slammed into one of the inn's maids, who happened to be twice Brenna's size and had the shoulders of an ox.

Brenna bounced off the maid, who had been rolling a tea cart to the kitchen. The cart spilled as Brenna knocked it over and tumbled those things to the floor.

Trays clanged and banged. Teacups shattered. Tea spilled all over the carpeted floor. The maid started screaming. Doors flew open and people not yet peered out to see what was going on, only to find Brenna sprawled on the floor and Daire—still shirtless—rushing to her side and about to lift her in his arms.

The maid began to yell at Brenna. Daire silenced her with a quelling glance. "Summon the innkeeper to the state of word out of you," he said with arrogant authority, hoping to cut her off from his bed. Obviously angry woman before she revealed Brenna had run out of his

above “Get staff to clean this mess up. Now!”

he was He stifled a groan when Brenna’s delicious body melted against his. She didn’t bewrapped her arms around his neck and rested her head against his shoulder.

“Daire, your skin is so warm,” she whispered, her lips grazing his jawline and deliciously wet and warm.”

Did she just lick his neck?

“Wait, Fire shot through him. “And have the doctor summoned! She’s making me delirious.”

He took by The maid was about to toss another surly remark when Thaddius was running toward them. He took note of the situation and started to panic.

He quickly recovered and began to make up an excuse for his cousin.

“Grace, I am so sorry you were disturbed. My apologies to everyone,” he said, glancing up and down the hall to address the guests who were standing in their open doors. “I had asked my cousin to take measurements for new decorations, but she must have taken a tumble off her ladder and...”

Gad, these Angels were terrible liars. There was no ladder in sight.

Daire hoped he was the only one to notice, since everyone else appeared to have been startled out of bed and looked quite groggy.

Thaddius turned to another maid who had just run up with mop and bucket in hand. “Mary, run to my desk and fetch the vouchers. These guests need to have breakfast compliments of the inn this morning.”

He then turned once again to Daire. “Your Grace, I am truly sorry for the inconvenience. I hope you were not too greatly disturbed. I’ll help my cousin into the dining room, and we will not interrupt you again.”

Daire had no intention of letting go of Brenna, who was now nuzzled over his neck in her inept but adorable way and setting off an inferno within him.

“She’s hurt, Thaddius. Let her rest in my sitting room until the doctor arrives. Send in a maid to serve as her chaperone. I’ll keep the door open.”

Thaddius raked a hand through his hair as he eyed the scene, which included taking in Daire’s lack of a shirt. Since these Angels were here to protect each other, he expected Thaddius to be back here shortly with an arsenal of questions and perhaps a shotgun. “Very generous, Your Grace.”

Daire had claimed Brenna was hurt merely as an excuse to bring her off into his suite, but he quickly realized she was truly injured. “Thaddius, jest. Send one of your lads for the doctor. She’s bleeding.”

“Dear heaven, she is. I had better go for him myself.” The innkeeper as shedown the hall, all the while shouting orders to his staff.

oulder. Daire, momentarily left alone with Brenna, set her down w. “Sofashionable *chaise longue* and studied her eyes, which were slightly

“Brenna, did you hit your head?”

She winced. “I think it caught on the upended edge of the cart as I may be “I’m so sorry, little dove. This is all my fault. I should not have you what I did.”

is came “And I should not have stood there gawking at you while you sh nic. Butclothes. I have never seen water trail down anyone’s body quite like th

. “Your “Glad you liked the show,” he gently teased.

he said, She groaned. “It wasn’t intentional.”

g beside “I know.” He ran his thumb ever so gently along her brow. His ew hallfaded when he spotted a cut along her hairline that needed to be cl

“You might need stitches. Let me check the rest of you.”

Fortunately, he found nothing else of concern beyond a small sc appearedthe palm of her hand where she might have fallen on a broken teacup

had hardly pierced her skin, and there was no shard to pick out. “Do yo ind paila handkerchief?”

is are all She nodded and withdrew it from the sleeve of her gown. “It’s clea

“Good.” He applied it to the area of her cut. “Hold it there. Lie qui

for the “What are you going to do?” she asked when he left her side.

cousin “I need to toss on some dry clothes before the Mongol horde arrive

“Oh. Yes, that is wise.”

ling his He hurried into his bedchamber and closed the door firmly before is loins.else walked in and saw him bare-arsed naked as he removed his br

arrives.quickly washed up and dried off, and donned buff breeches, a work sh a polished pair of boots. He did not bother with a cravat, waistcoat, o

whichjust yet, since it was more important to get back to Brenna.

re very The handkerchief must have fallen, for she was holding a hand , armedhead when he returned to her side. “Don’t touch the cut, love.” He sav

of you,ooze through her fingers when she obeyed and removed her hand. “B don’t move. I’ll be right back.”

er back He hurried back into his bedchamber, took out several lius, nohandkerchiefs, and carried the ewer, which had been freshly filled las

and its matching basin into his sitting room. He doused one

per tore handkerchiefs with water and another with brandy from the corner that Thaddius kept well stocked to his specifications.

on the “Dr. Hewitt will do a better job of this, but I dare not wait any lo
dazed. cleanse it. We saw these sorts of wounds all the time in battle. When
they healed fast. If left untreated, they festered and... Well, we need
fell.” care of this.”

said to He knelt beside Brenna and rinsed away the blood from the
carefully as he could manage without hurting her. She gasped severa
ed your but there really was no way to wash it out properly without causin
at.” little pain.

Once done, he also washed the blood off her hands.

He then took the brandy-soaked handkerchief and held it close
humor brow. “This will sting, love. Close your eyes and hold your breath.”
eased. She shuddered when he pressed it carefully to her cut, but she was
thing and did not cry out. As a precaution, he also applied the brandy
rape on scrape on her palm.

o. But it By this time, Thaddius and Dr. Hewitt had arrived. “Doctor, she
ou have stitches,” Daire said. He quickly told the doctor what he had done.

“Excellent work, Your Grace. I see you’ve had experience with
in.” wounds. In battle?”

etly.” He nodded.

It turned out Brenna did need stitches, but fortunately only three
s.” required. Daire held her hand while the doctor sewed them to close her

She had such a delicate hand, so little and soft.

anyone He ran his thumb in gentle circles along her palm and whispered w
eeches, encouragement while the doctor worked on her. But his heart remaine
irt, and in his throat all the while. Why was he such an arse? He knew the g
r jacket innocent, and yet he’d uttered that stupid remark and set this latest i
motion.

l to her She was such a sweet thing and did not deserve any of wh
v blood happened.

collocks, “Your Grace,” she said, her voice soft as she struggled with her p
is still raining. May I stay until it stops?”

clean “Yes, Brenna. Of course. You’ll stay as long as the doctor requires
t night, if it is for the entire month.”

of his Dr. Hewitt nodded. “I would rather Brenna not go home tonig

cabinets should not be alone at least for the next twelve hours.”

Daire turned to Thaddius. “Leave your cousin here with one of your younger to watch her. She will not disturb me. We’ll figure out arrangements later. I’ll be treated, move into one of the rooms vacated by my friends, since Brenna should be moved. Have any of them stirred yet?”

“Lord Hollingsworth has called for a valet, but the others are still a bit cut as usual,” he muttered. “They won’t be out of here before nightfall. I’ll be in a few times, rate.”

As soon as the doctor left, Thaddius began to ask Daire questions. The usually genial innkeeper now assumed the role of protective guard. He determined to make certain nothing amiss had happened to Brenna. He would toss Daire out along with his indolent friends.

Brenna sat up with a wince. “No, Thaddius. He was a gentleman and behaved like a goose. I had just finished carrying in the books when he came by to them and surprised me. He had no idea I was here until I darted out and ran straight into the tea cart.”

Daire knew he had not spoken to her like a gentleman, but he would not contradict Brenna’s version, since there was no need to stir up more trouble. It was bad enough the rain was still pounding down and little work was done on the house.

And now Brenna was hurt.

Thaddius began apologizing to him. “I’m so sorry, Your Grace. I’ll be a gash. I think you would mind having Brenna bring those books into your suite. I was so eager to move ahead with the business of repairing her house. I’ll be sorry if you were just assumed—”

“Thaddius, no apology necessary,” Daire said, because he was not a girl who would allow himself to accept the role of innocent bystander when he had a part to play in the instigator. “In fact, charge the cost of this tea cart mess to my account, including those breakfast vouchers you handed out. Send word to Dr. Hollingsworth that he is to charge me for Brenna’s stitches. I ought to have mentioned him before he left.”

Brenna frowned at him. “But—”

“And have one of your maids bring up some tea and scones. Lots of them. Your cousin needs nourishment.”

Thaddius left them to put in the order himself.

The tea and scones were quickly delivered by one of his staff, with a note that she

bustled off to attend to other duties. Daire and Brenna were left alone for the moment, but the suite's door was open, and he expected someone would be sent in shortly to serve as Brenna's chaperone.

For the moment, he had her all to himself.

Daire poured Brenna a cup of tea and placed a scone on a plate beside her. "I am truly sorry," he said quietly. "What I said to you—"

It was her turn to cut him off. "I should have made my presence known the moment you walked in and began taking off your shirt. We were both stupid. All right? We seem to have a knack for being stupid together."

He cast her an affectionate smile. "Seems to be something we must learn, how to be around each other without giving each other fits. Now, this you wish to tell me about books?"

Her eyes lit up. "The best news. You'll never guess."

He smiled. "Tell me, little dove."

She wrapped her graceful fingers around her teacup to warm her hands.

"As yesterday's tea party came to a close, I approached Duchess Henrietta and asked if she might spare some time within the next few days to give me some guidance regarding refurbishing Stoningham Manor to your mother's liking. I would be most grateful."

"She grabbed my hand, and that very moment took me through the dining room in her house, including the bedchambers." She cast him a guilty look, not revealing she had not confessed to sneaking upstairs during the party, since she took me into their storage room and showed me an entire bookshelf filled with books and boxes of fabric samples. She said the duke's father had engaged one of England's foremost decorators to do most of the work. It going Duchess Henrietta made a few changes after they were married, but not much. Her father was a meticulous man who kept meticulous records. And do you know, the best part?"

Hewitt "He kept all the sample books in pristine condition?"

"Yes, that too. It turns out the fabric shop they used, Dumfries Hayworth, is in Plymouth. We do not need to send all the way to England in London for the materials. *And*," she said with emphasis, her eyes sparkling with a starlit glow, "it turns out the sewing itself is all done there, too. Right premises. How long do you think it will take us to go to Plymouth and back by carriage, Your Grace? Their shop is on Plym Square, one of the most elegant shopping streets in town. Do you know of it? Is it possible

...e again there in a day, place our orders, and return before nightfall? Felicity
...omeone were at the manor at break of day this morning, taking precise measure
...for each room and sketching out specific designs for your private
...bedchamber and those she will likely use to entertain her guests. I
...beside design in mind that will be perfect for her private salon.”

Daire listened to Brenna as she chattered excitedly, but stopped her
...known he realized she only meant to decorate the rooms his family would
...re both and meant to do nothing for herself. “Brenna, you are to redo the
...house. Have I not made myself clear on this?”

...st work She nodded. “But is it not wasteful to—”

...what is “No, it is not. My mother is a duchess. The entire house must reflect
...status.” He did not really believe his own words, but it was not very far
...the truth. Besides, he could not bear the thought of Brenna depriving
...or appearing of lesser worth than his family.

...hands. She sighed. “All right. In fact, Felicity insisted we measure all the
...ley and so we did. The details are all set down in my journal. But—”

...ie some “No, you may not pay for any of it.”

...iking.” “Gad, you are the most irritating duke I have ever met.” But she caught
...a smile that touched his deadened heart. “The fabric books are stacked
...n every corner.” She pointed toward the hearth wall. “I was bending over them
...y look, you walked in and suddenly began tossing off your clothes. This is what
...I did not see me. You were quite funny, hopping about like a rabbit
...If filled tried to remove your boots.”

...ner had “Good thing you said something before I dropped my breeches.”

...work. Flames shot into her cheeks again.

...ich. His He sighed. “Brenna, being curious about my body does not make
...u know wanton.”

She winced. “Well, it does not make me respectable, either.”

...bley & past it now. Do you have more to tell me about our project?”

...xeter or “Actually, is this not a perfect day for us to go through these fabric
...ng on and make our selections?”

...t on the He leaned back and propped his hands behind his head. “Oh, joy,”
...nd back dryly. “Can’t wait to get started. Selecting drapery. What man can resist
...e more fun?”

...to ride “I see your point. It is rather dull for you.”

y and I “I am exaggerating, Brenna. Why don’t you sort through them and let me see your selections? I have some Claymore estate matters that I need your attention. We can work side by side. Interrupt me whenever you find something necessary.”

“All right. That sounds nice.”

er when Yes, it was nice having her beside him as they each attended to their respective tasks. The doctor had wrapped a protective bandage around her head and had even given her some laudanum to quell the pain. She ought to have been exhausted and disheveled, but to Daire, she looked like a beautiful, delicate waif.

lect her Daire truly felt bad about what had happened. “Feel free to treat this as if it were your own, Brenna. Don’t overdo it. Take a nap if you feel tired. Tug on the bell pull if you require anything to eat or drink. Take your meals in here when you are feeling strong enough, you can join me in the dining room. All rooms, clear, because you are very thick about this, all is to be charged to your account.”

She pursed her lips, but did not object.

ast him Daire spent the next hour attending to Claymore estate matters. He was just finishing up when Felicity rushed in carrying a leather satchel that she had brought out to hold her designs for the Stoningham Manor garden.

why you “Stay,” he said, wanting her to serve as chaperone to replace the servant as you maid whom Thaddius had installed as watchdog over Brenna. The maid was the same one Brenna had accidentally bumped into this morning when she was darting out of his suite. This woman had a perpetual frown that Daire frankly, could not abide.

ike you Brenna smiled in relief when the dour woman left. “Felicity, I’m glad you’re here.”

“I had to come as soon as I heard you were hurt. What happened?”

We are Brenna told her the cleaned-up version, omitting Daire’s stupid remark that had shot her out of here like a fireworks rocket.

c books “Let me see your garden designs, Felicity.” Daire motioned for Felicity to take a seat beside Brenna and make herself at home. “Would you care for tea?” he said.

ist such She nodded. “I’d love a cup. It is so raw out there, but the rain has turned to a drizzle and should end soon.”

She and Brenna chatted quietly while he skimmed through her designs.

and then “These are excellent,” Daire said with some surprise. Yes, Brenna had required him that her cousin was good at her work, but this was professional. He felt it is he had few modifications to suggest and was surprised she had something this impressive together so quickly.

“You must have worked all night after yesterday’s tea party to come to these drawings,” he remarked.

Daire and Felicity nodded. “Yes, but I didn’t mind. I’m looking forward to looking these ideas into effect. With your approval, of course.”

Since Felicity obviously had a good eye for color and form, he suggested she assist Brenna in choosing the fabrics for Stoningham Manor and its suite bedding and drapes.

“I would love to help,” she said, scooting her chair even closer, or if Brenna’s and asking about her choices so far. “Oh, these are lovely.”

Brenna nodded. “I thought so, too.”

As the mantel clock struck the eleven o’clock hour, he excused himself and headed down the hall in search of Thaddius. It felt as though an eternity had passed since he’d run into his suite completely drenched, but it was more than late morning now, and only a few hours had gone by. “They haven’t turned have my friends started packing yet?”

“No, my lord. As far as I know, only Lord Hollingsworth is ready. The others are still dawdling about.”

“About? Blast,” he muttered. “Send one of your maids to rouse them. When they give her trouble, she is to tell them it is at my command.”

“Well, can you really blame your friends? It is not a day for Thaddius remarked. “Even the morning mail coach is several hours late, so glad.”

Thaddius swallowed hard, no doubt caught off guard by his harsh remark. “Yes, Your Grace.”

Daire noticed a look in the innkeeper’s eyes and understood what he was thinking. Would he behave like this toward Brenna when he tired of her? He had been kindness itself to Brenna this morning, but what about tomorrow? Would he curtly toss her out on her ear, as he was now doing with the Hollingsworths and their cousin, Lord Danson, all of whom had joined here year after year?

Daire knew he would never treat Brenna so uncivilly, for she was not a toady nor a leech. Nor would she ever be the wanton sort to hop from

had told to bed, or go out of her way to demean him as Gemma and Sarah had attempted to do at yesterday's tea party.

had put He would have to sink to the lowest depths to treat Brenna that way.

But he was not going to engage the innkeeper in that conversation.

As it turned out, Hollingsworth happened to walk by on his way to the dining room. "Ah, Claymore, have you had a change of heart and decided to join us in Bath?"

Daire walked over to the lord. "No, I meant it when I said my family would come first."

"Well, we shall all be pleased if you change your mind. I'm going to have a cup of coffee, and then I'll go and rouse that lazy bunch. Do not judge your sisters too harshly."

Daire arched an eyebrow. "It isn't my place. My conduct has to be better."

"We've all been rather dissolute, haven't we? I suppose their behavior is more shocking because they are women, and we have been taught that the fairer sex are delicate creatures. Ha! That is quite a jest. I lectured my sisters years ago. They were never going to be sweet things. But they have grown into beautiful women who know exactly what they want and how to use their wiles to get their way. In truth, it relieves the burden. They are a pair of nimble cats who will always land on their feet. If all goes according to their plans, they will be two of the richest widows in England within the next five years."

Daire cast him a wry smile. "Send word when they are packed and ready to be on your way. I wish you a good journey, Hollingsworth."

While you are in Bath, may you find yourself a beautiful, *young* heiress who dotes on you, provides a pot of gold for you once you marry, and a clear mind if you continue your wastrel ways."

To his surprise, Hollingsworth turned wistful. "These wastrel ways are tiresome, do they not? Did it not surprise you that Malvern, Burne, or Brennan have yet to stray? Nor does it appear they ever will."

"I noticed, but those Killigrew sisters are something quite special."

Hollingsworth nodded. "You liked the youngest one... What was her name again?"

"Chloe."

"Yes, that's her. But you did not appear put out at all when she

ah had Brennan over you.”

“Because I did not love her.”

y. His expression turned surprisingly sober. “I wonder what it feels now. be in love? Were you ever curious about it, Claymore?”

7 to the Daire nodded. “Sure.”

ided to “But I cannot see you ever falling in love.”

They stepped out of the entryway to allow other guests to walk i ly mustdining room and find their tables. “Why do you think I am not capable

Daire asked.

to have “Claymore, I admire you. In fact, I wish I were you. But I have rge myintelligence or steely resolve, so I will never be you. Let’s face it, competitive, cunning, and ruthless in getting what you want. A look een noin your eyes that chills me to the bone sometimes.”

Daire frowned. “What sort of look?”

avior is “I don’t know...predatory? You train your gaze on your prey at hose ofmove in with the stealth of a jungle cat. Of course, the ladies seem to stoppedthis masculine power and are happy to become your willing conquests.

young “My prowess is much exaggerated.”

ly what “I think you are actually quite modest about your abilities. But mves myis, you win over these ladies and they will do anything for you.”

feet. If “And?”

lows in “You always win. You always *need* to win,” Hollingsworth replied “You exaggerate.”

nd you “Do I? When have you not gotten your way? When have you e sworth.control of a situation and not come out on top? You give in to no one. ss who to me, the important question to ask is...will you ever find the woman will notdesires are more important to you than your own?”

Daire gritted his teeth, for hadn’t Hollingsworth just put his fir /s grow exactly the problem?

ss, and Hollingsworth cast him a wry smile. “They call it sacrifice, Claym

“I know very well what it is,” Daire said with an irritated growl when had Hollingsworth become so wise? Daire supposed he wasn’t t vas herman thinking about what he wanted out of life and sensing sor important was missing.

“Well?” his friend prompted him. “Have you met anyone e chose happiness you would put ahead of your own?”

The image of Brenna with her bandaged head and big doe eyes
into Daire's head.

like to *Bollocks.*

"No, Hollingsworth. I haven't."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," Daire said, trying not to sound impatient.

Hollingsworth patted him on the back. "Then I have one quest
e of it?"you."

Daire nodded. "Go ahead, ask it."

"My friend, are you lying to me or to yourself?"
r't your
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The image of Brenna with her bandaged head and big doe eyes sprang into Daire's head.

Bollocks.

"No, Hollingsworth. I haven't."

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Daire nodded. "Go ahead, ask it."

"My friend, are you lying to me or to yourself?"



Chapter Ten

BRENNA SPENT THE day being treated like a queen.

Goodness, one could easily get used to this pampering.

The inn's staff, at the duke's insistence, waited on her hand and foot. The suite, which was the finest in the inn, had now been turned over to her for the night. "Felicity, stop bouncing on the duke's bed," she called to her maid from the sitting room. "One would think you lived in a hovel and had never seen a proper bedchamber before."

Felicity ignored her. "I have never seen a four-poster bed this size. It's so massive. Why won't you come in here and stretch out on it? The *longue* will not be nearly as comfortable. You should sleep in here instead of out there in that narrow thing. What if you roll off it and bump your head again? But you won't fall out of this bed. It is the size of a frigate."

Brenna laughed. "Ow, don't make jokes. It only hurts my scalp where the doctor sewed the stitches."

She had taken a nap in the duke's bed earlier this afternoon because she had been too tired from too many comings and goings in his sitting room. But now the divine musk scent was on her skin, and she could not breathe in without catching the scent of him.

She had been tingling since waking up from her nap because of it.

What was worse, it had put wild thoughts in her head, thoughts of sharing the bed with her. Kissing her and wrapping his muscled arms around her. Even now, thoughts of those rain droplets sliding down his ruddy chest and taut stomach sent the butterflies in her stomach into a frenzy.

That bump on her head had definitely addled her senses.

It was much safer to simply spend the night sleeping in the sitting room, curled up on the *chaise* or the settee, or even on the carpeted floor.

Felicity walked into the sitting room. "Oh dear. Brenna, you look feverish. Are you running a fever?"

“No, I’m fine.”

Just thinking of the duke standing naked before me. Nothing alarmed about. Ignore the fact that I have lost my mind.

One obviously lost vital brain matter when taking a tumble over a and striking one’s head.

“Where is the duke, anyway?” Felicity asked. “I haven’t seen hours.”

“I don’t know. Perhaps he is still trying to get rid of his friends.”

“No, I think they departed hours ago. While you were napping. I th
not. His two lords, Hollingsworth and Danson, were eager to leave, but the
for the were not. Can’t say as I blame them, since they are not likely to find
cousin man than the Duke of Claymore, no matter where they search.”

Brenna said nothing, merely tucked a light blanket around her le
d never
smiled at the maid, a sweet girl by the name of Mary, as she broug
ze. It is supper tray for them and set it on the small *demi-lune* table beside Bren

chaise “Compliments of His Grace,” Mary said, bobbing a curtsy before t
and not

ur head Felicity drew up a chair beside Brenna. “Good heavens, he c
spares no expense for you.”

ere the “No, he doesn’t,” Thaddius said, walking in just then and draw
another chair beside Brenna. “We need to talk before Claymore
se there Felicity, you can stay. I want you to hear this as well.”

ow, his Brenna regarded him seriously. “What’s wrong?”

without Thaddius glanced around. “This. You have to be careful, Brenna.
am not saying the Duke of Claymore is a bad man. In fact, I like him.
has his faults.”

s of his “I am well aware,” Brenna assured him with a roll of her eye
around knows how to get his way...and he always seems to get his way, does

ck-hard “But he has also been very generous with you, Brenna,”
remarked. “Is this so terrible? He did not have to give up his suite for
have meals brought to us.”

g room, “That’s right,” Thaddius said with a frown. “Nor did he have to i
paying for Brenna’s stitches or lease her house at a cost that is doub
ushed. any other landlord in the area is charging. And he is now renovating
entire house at his expense. Does this not give you cause for concern?”

Brenna nodded. “Yes, of course. Have I not been vocal about it?”

did not push me into it. Albert's sabotage of my position at the school is to be that. The duke offered a practical and very generous solution. Not only will I make money off the lease, but I get a completely refurbished home, a tea cart process, and I will also be permitted to live there as his nephew's governess. He is paying me good wages for this, too."

Thaddius was not smiling. "Cousin Spencer at the bank says that he has deposited a hefty sum into your account to cover the renovations. We are not miser, I will give him that. But what is he doing, Brenna?"

She pursed her lips. "What do you mean? He wants to settle his estate on his wife and nephew here."

"What is he doing to *you*?" Thaddius said. "He is a womanizing scoundrel."

Barely a fortnight ago, he was taking women into his bed as a regular habit. Mostly those two promiscuous ladies in his party, Lady Gemma and Sarah. But they were not the only ones. He had only to glance at a woman and she would follow him wherever he led. He treated them almost as playthings, casually. Oh, always politely, but he did not give a fig about any of them once he had satisfied himself. To him, they were just disposable commodities."

Felicity cleared her throat. "Honestly, Thaddius. That is a little too much information for us. Brenna and I are still innocent when it comes to this sort of thing."

"I know, but it is all the more reason why Brenna in particular needs to heed my warning. He is circling you like a lion about to leap on its prey. Now, I beg you to be careful. Why is he here in Moonstone Landing, of all places? Why not anywhere else in England?"

"To find himself, I think," Brenna said. "He has obviously noticed that the Duke of Malvern and the Marquess of Burness are here. Why not he?" mention Viscount Brennan, who won Lady Chloe's heart. He is trying to make a home for his mother and nephew. But most of all, I think he is here to make a home for himself, an idyllic and safe place that he never had as a child. Do you not see how empty he feels inside?"

Thaddius tossed his head back and laughed. "Empty? This man has everything anyone could ever want, including exquisite women who will jump into his bed at the snap of his fingers. And now he has discarded them for a few very ladies who have warmed his bed for years."

"Is that not a good thing?" Brenna asked.

ool did “Perhaps. But what if he wakes up one day and suddenly decide
y will Ithe same to you?”

re in the Brenna inhaled sharply. “Thaddius! I am not one of those women!”
erness. “No, but it will be much worse for you because you are at risk of
in love with him. You do not have that toughness these other wome
ie dukeBrenna. In fact, I am sure he is drawn to you because you are s
ll, he isinnocent.”

She pursed her lips and frowned. “I am not a delicate ninny.”
mother “I know. You are intelligent, thoughtful, and can stand on you
which is more reason why the duke is attracted to you. I just don’t wan
hound.him break your heart. I won’t let him do this to my little cousin.”
r habit. “He won’t,” she said, although this was her fear as well. In truth, s
d Ladyvery afraid it was already happening. The Duke of Claymore overp
womanher in every way. She had never thought of men in physical terms bef
l quite she could not stop thinking of how wonderful his skin had felt agai
of themcheek when he carried her into his suite after she fell. Nor could she
posablethe magnificent body on this man.

Yes, she had noticed handsome men before. But she had never
o muchache to kiss them or run her hands along their sleek muscles.

hat sort Even Felicity had been bouncing on the mattress, breathing in hi
on the pillows, and urging her to hop onto that massive bed.

needs to Brenna closed her eyes a moment and emitted a soft groan. “F
ey. Justspeak to us politely, but we are not equals to him. I am painfully aw
/why notdukes do not marry schoolteachers. Yes, Cara and her Duke of Stra
are the exception, but I know this is something quite rare and not like
ed howto be repeated. I understand this. He is more likely to marry Lady Ge
Not toLady Sarah than ever—”

ying to “Those promiscuous cats,” Felicity interjected.

s trying “Yes, them, before he would ever consider me. Which is the poi
ad as atrying to make. He will *never* consider me suitable to be his wife. So
be very careful not to allow anything between us beyond a polite friend

ian has “And what of your professor?” Thaddius asked.

ho will Brenna put a hand to her head as it began to throb. “He is out
d thesequestion, too. I will never marry a man who thinks to win my h
undermining the thing I love most.”

“You mentioned it might all have been a terrible misundersta

Thaddius reminded her. "Give me the letters you wrote to him and your headmistress, and I shall post them in time for tomorrow's mail coach. I said you wanted to send them off as soon as possible."

"I haven't written them yet," Brenna admitted.

Thaddius slapped his hands on his thighs and rose to leave. "Well, if you are not too tired, then you must write them tonight. You need to do this, Brenna. Don't put it off."

He left her and Felicity to return to his innkeeper duties.

She and Felicity ate their supper, then Felicity helped set her up at the duke's writing desk so that she could write those important letters.

The writing desk was in the duke's bedchamber and not in the sitting room. Brenna felt like a trespasser, for being in the same room where the duke had so often felt so intimate, even though the duke was not around. "Why don't you write through more of those fabric samples while I finish my correspondence with Felicity?"

Her cousin laughed. "Not on your life. We've gone through enough of them for today, and my head is spinning. Besides, I think we're done with the fabric selections. The duke will be quite pleased by all we've accomplished. He seems to be pleased with everything you do."

"Oh, stop. He wasn't too happy I took a spill trying to *discreetly* clean up the spill of his room and managed to wake the entire inn." Brenna laughingly glared at him. "I cannot believe he did not sever all relations with me on the spot. He may as well have done that with the lease. Done with the governess offer. Done with me."

"If anything, your injury seems to have brought you closer."

"Don't say that. There is nothing between him and me." But Brenna wondered whether the duke would stop in to see her before retiring. She had heard he had taken over Lord Hollingsworth's room for this evening. Of course, most of his clothes remained here, and now Felicity was with him in his bedchamber, and...was her cousin foraging through the wardrobe, I will say. "Felicity! Get out of there. What you are doing is unforgivably rude!"

"He has wonderful taste in clothes."

"I know." He had wonderful taste in everything, in addition to his wit. He was witty, charming, intelligent, wealthy, and so handsome he made her ache and by looking at him. He even had an exquisite horse. This man had everything and yet he was so unhappy.

"Felicity began to dig through his drawers."

id your “For pity’s sake! Have you no sense of propriety? I am going to k
h. Youout if you do not stop going through his unmentionables.”

“Brenna, you are no fun. Where’s the harm? He’ll never know.”

“He will because he seems to have an instinctive sense about ever
, if youStop. You are distracting me, and I am almost done with my letter
do this,heard Thaddius. I need to hand them over to him tonight.”

“All right,” Felicity said with a huff, and put Daire’s clothes back i
just as someone knocked lightly at the suite’s door. “Oh dear. Do you
o at theis him?”

rs. The “I don’t know.”

. Felicity tossed Brenna a wicked grin. “Has he come to ki
ie sleptgoodnight?”

ou look “Honestly, Felicity.” Brenna rolled her eyes and gave her co
ndence,warning glance before she rose and crossed into the sitting room.

“Do come in, Your Grace,” she said, her heart beating a little faste
ough ofopened the door and took him in. He was a big man and filled the door
with our Dear heaven, she was doomed. He looked glorious.

d, since “How do you feel, Brenna?” He studied her with genuine conce
knew he was worried about her, but there was such a gentleness in the
run outrgarded her.

roaned. “Much better, Your Grace. Thank you for sending up our supper. Y
t. Donenot have to do it.”

“I know, but it is my pleasure.” He placed his hand lightly atop he
“Good, no fever.”

Brenna “Please have a seat,” she said, motioning toward the settee. “This
ig. Shesuite, after all. I’m sorry I have taken it over for the night.”

ing. Of He waited for her to sit and then settled beside her. “Don’t b
n her inhaven’t demanded anything of me, which is something quite unusual.
moire?good to be in the company of someone I know is not scheming to tal
me.”

Brenna blushed. “Good grief, why should I scheme when you hav
o beingme all of this without my needing to ask for a thing? You know I wo
che justhave insisted on any of it. In fact, I really ought to contribute sor
ything,toward—”

“No,” he said with a chuckle. “Have you gotten any rest?”

She nodded. “Yes, plus a bit of work done. Felicity and I finishe

ick youthrough all the fabric samples. I took the liberty of setting out our choi
adding their descriptions and designs in a new journal I started just for
decorations. Would you care to see what we've done?"

rything. He nodded. "Yes."

rs. You "I'll fetch the samples and your book," Felicity said, joining in
conversation. She brought the samples and Brenna's journal over and
in order them to the duke.

think it He quickly reviewed the items and then grinned at Brenna. "I should
known. You are remarkably organized and efficient. I suppose this
schoolmistress training in you. Since you have detailed the work samples
ss you even taken down all the measurements and made drawings for each
could ride to Plymouth tomorrow myself and have these ordered. The
ousin areason to bring you and Felicity along, is there?"

Brenna did her best to hide her disappointment. "No, I suppose not
r as she "The worst of the storm has passed and the rain has stopped. The
way. drying out, as well. I should have easy travels if I leave tomorrow." He
to her cousin, who had taken a chair beside them. "Felicity, is there a
rn. Sheyou cannot start on the garden work immediately?"

way he "No reason, my lord. I'll gather the supplies I need and start first thing
the morning."

You did "Good. Brenna, do you feel well enough to oversee your Uncle S
work? You know exactly what needs to be done, and I would not expect
r brow. to do anything other than make certain he is doing the right job,
available to him if he has any questions."

is your "Yes, that is a sensible idea." She would have liked to visit Plymouth
this was a trip she could always take at her leisure later. With a
e. Youchaperone, of course.

It feels Also, she sensed the duke was feeling on edge and eager to be away
ce from Moonstone Landing. Riding to Plymouth to put in his orders with the
company was as good a reason as any. Plus, it was productive and
e given keep them on their fast schedule to have much of the house ready
uld not mother and nephew by the time they arrived.

nothing No doubt he was feeling a bit out of sorts now that his friends were
Even though he had been the one to push them away, he was probably
regretting his decision. A man like him would be too proud to admit he
d going have acted hastily.

ces and Would he seek out female company while in Plymouth?
or these Was this really the reason he was eager to leave? Not that it was
her business if he stayed overnight and did whatever sordid things
bachelors did during evenings on their own.

in their None of her business at all.
handed “Well, now that we’ve sorted this out...” He rose to take his
tucking her journal under his arm. “Do you mind if I take it and the s
ld havewith me tomorrow? I’ll leave at first light, so I had better hold on t
s is thenow. I’ll pack a few items for overnight, as well. Do you mind if I
o well, moment to gather my belongings?”

room, I She rose with him. “Not at all. Do you need any help?”
re’s no He grinned. “I think I can manage to toss whatever I need into a
pouch all on my own.”

.” “I did not mean to imply you were incompetent.” She cast him
ie air issmile. “My father, however, was quite a child when it came to such
e turnedHe was helpless and needed me to tend to the task for him. But I thi
e reasontake it as a point of pride that you can fend for yourself and never
others.”

hing in He shrugged. “One learns in order to survive.”
The remark twisted around her heart, for it seemed everything
Simon’s every task he undertook, no matter how small, everything he mast
ect you strove to conquer, arose from this haunting need to rely only on him
and benever depend on others.

He did not even have a valet with him. What duke ever traveled w
uth, but valet? Was he that closed off he could not even trust a personal servan
proper He excused himself to stride into his bedchamber and fetch the few
he needed. The man did not waste time, and he meant to ride to Plym
ay from first light tomorrow. As he was gathering a few belongings, he mu
e fabric noticed Brenna had been at his desk, for he called out to her. “Did yo
l would your letters, Brenna?”

for his “Yes, just now.” She joined him in the bedchamber while he conti
dig into his armoire. Felicity remained in the sitting room, but coul
e gone. see them from her position. Although her cousin was meant to s
possibly chaperone, Brenna doubted she would ever rush in and stop the duk
e might attempted to kiss her.

Quite the opposite—she feared Felicity would be goading him on.

In any event, the duke was not likely to grab her and kiss her while any of was nursing a lump on her head and had on that unsightly bandage. If wealthy probably looked a fright, tumbling over one shoulder in an unruly cascade of curls.

“The ink ought to be dry by now, and I can seal them up,” she said, leaving, finding it almost impossible to breathe as the duke stared at her with a stony, unyielding gaze.

“Good—do it and I’ll take them to Thaddius for tomorrow’s mail,” she said, taking a letter. “Did you ask the important questions, or are you still avoiding the obvious?”

“Feel free to read them if you must. In fact, I would appreciate it if you would. I’m not very good at this sort of thing.”

She did not want to come across as too soft and ready to forgive, but she knew the duke would tell her if the letters, especially the one to Albert, were inadequate.

She watched him as he quickly read each. “What do you think?”

“They are good letters, Brenna.”

“You aren’t just saying this to appease me, are you?”

He grinned. “No, the thought never crossed my mind. You know your feelings about your beau. He is a horse’s arse.”

Felicity was listening in and laughed. “Well said, Your Grace.”

“Felicity! Do not encourage him.” Brenna frowned at him, then took the letters and properly sealed them. “Not every man can be as insufferably perfect as you, Your Grace.”

“Insufferable, am I?” He took the letters from her hand, tucked them into the inside pocket of his jacket, and then gave her chin a light twip. “I suppose I am. Sorry, little dove. You are not the only one who has a mouth full of opinions.”

“Which I voice tactfully.”

“This is why you are the perfect choice to be Matthew’s governess,” she said, already proved I am an utter failure when it comes to him.” He placed the journal in his travel pouch, along with the shirt, cravat, and other items easily needed for an overnight stay. “Do not berate me for being blunt about your beau. I told you I would never lie to you.”

He kissed her lightly on the brow, a gesture neither of them expected. He appeared as surprised as she was. “Couldn’t resist, little dove. You were looking up at me with those big doe eyes, and it just felt right. By the way,

hen she will not be back until the day after tomorrow at the earliest, so sleep here tomorrow night as well. I do not think you should be alone in your room at Cara's cottage yet, not after you put in a full day tomorrow at Stonemanor."

He said, "All I will be doing is watching the work. It isn't as if I will be doing anything with his heavy lifting."

"Good gracious, I do not want you lifting so much as a spoon. I am your coach. Brenna. Those stitches are still too fresh and might rip if you exert yourself. All the more reason to have you sleep here another night. I'll make sure that you Thaddius is aware. The inn's maids can look in on you through the door in the evening, if necessary."

He poked his head into the sitting room. "Felicity, that goes for you both. Keep Brenna company here tomorrow night. The inn's staff will attend to both of you."

Felicity chuckled. "You don't have to ask me twice. Sure, I'll stay. I'll get dinner, as well?"

Brenna gasped. "Felicity!"

He laughed heartily. "Yes, and pay no attention to Brenna's gasps. Anyway, Thaddius knows to ignore her if she dares take out her coin pouch."

Felicity sauntered to the doorway. "You don't happen to have a book that is interested in a wife of humble birth who enjoys toiling in gardens, do you?" Brenna noticed a shadow darken his eyes for just a moment, but he recovered quickly, setting his mask firmly back in place as he turned to them. Felicity and responded with a casual smile. "Sorry, no."

He then turned back to Brenna, running his thumb along the line of his strong jaw. "Take care of yourself," he said in a hoarse whisper.

She found it hard to draw her gaze away. "You too, Your Grace. Good night on your journey."

Felicity sighed and flopped back on the massive bed the moment that she left the suite. "Why can there not be more men like him in Moorings Landing? He must like you, Brenna. He treats you like a princess."

"Have you already forgotten Thaddius's warning? And look at how he treated his friends, bringing them along everywhere until abruptly dismissed, for them and packing them off to Bath?"

"Well, they had been moaning about going there ever since they arrived. Can you blame him for finally getting fed up and sending the

ep here They aren't exactly suffering, since they are traveling there in a
cousin carriage, and he's letting them stay at his townhouse in one of the
ingham crescents. This duke does not scrimp. Everything he does is the height
elegance."

ing any Brenna said nothing as her cousin rambled on about Daire's qualities.
Yes, he had many fine qualities.

mean it, But he was also a womanizer.

ourself. Her head began to throb, but it had little to do with the stitches, since
certain doctor had given her a little laudanum to ease that pain. She could handle
out the little physical pain.

The pain in her heart was the problem.

ou, too. Would the duke take any of the Plymouth ladies to his bed?

tend to He had promised not to lie to her.

Would he tell her the truth if she asked him?

Do we Did she dare ask him?

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em off?

They aren't exactly suffering, since they are traveling there in his fine carriage, and he's letting them stay at his townhouse in one of the finest crescents. This duke does not scrimp. Everything he does is the height of elegance."

Brenna said nothing as her cousin rambled on about Daire's qualities.

Yes, he had many fine qualities.

But he was also a womanizer.

Her head began to throb, but it had little to do with the stitches, since the doctor had given her a little laudanum to ease that pain. She could handle a little physical pain.

The pain in her heart was the problem.

Would the duke take any of the Plymouth ladies to his bed?

He had promised not to lie to her.

Would he tell her the truth if she asked him?

Did she dare ask him?



Chapter Eleven

DAIRE RODE OFF for Plymouth at dawn the following morning, feet restless as Scipio, who needed his daily run or else would be kicking his stall. They were going to make good time, Daire knew, for his warhorse was a sturdy beast and used to riding long distances under the best of conditions.

But the weather was no impediment today, for the air still held the cooling breeze of night, and there was no sign of rain. Indeed, the storm deposited every last drop of rain onto the village yesterday, leaving quagmires of mud but also a crisp, dry day ahead of him. The breeze carried the freshness of the sea and the sweet scent of honeysuckle that grew along the hedgerows.

Daire spurred Scipio past the field of poppies along Brenna's hills and resisted looking toward Stoningham Manor or back at the little village of Moonstone Landing, for he already felt a palpable tug, as though something connecting him to the manor and the village had wrapped itself around his heart and was pulling him back.

But it wasn't *things* that held him in this heavenly patch of Cornwall. It was Brenna.

For this reason, he had grabbed the samples and her journal and ridden off to Plymouth in the hope of putting distance between him and the woman he needed to slow things down between them. He needed to contain the fire that tore through him whenever he laid eyes on her. Hollingsworth had his finger on something yesterday, asking if there was anyone whose happiness meant more to Daire than his own.

The answer was Brenna.

Was it not obvious?

He took pleasure in spoiling her. Indeed, he wanted to do so much for her.

But to admit it, even to himself, was to give Brenna too much over him. He was not ready to cede power to anyone yet, and certainly this little dove with big green eyes and a gentle heart he could so easily

He tore along the countryside, eager to put that necessary c between him and the girl. Why else would he bother dealing with sor as trivial as draperies and bed canopies? Well, the days were passing, wanted to have as much put in order as possible when his moth ling as Matthew arrived.

g down He reached Plymouth by early evening and immediately sou his big business establishment whose samples he carried. The Dumbley & Ha e worst owners were just closing up as he arrived. Daire, with his usual ran bull approach to all business dealings, insisted they reopen for him, ar eld the had them hopping to his demands. It was amazing what offering rm had double the fee accomplished in very little time.

ite a bit Not only did the owners stay on to review all his sampl familiar requirements, but they left instructions for their workers to immediat ong the all other commissions and start work on his orders first thing in the mo

Brenna would purse her cherry lips and frown at him, but where ide. He harm in paying top price to jump ahead of the queue and get the work lage of It was not possible to have everything completed within ten days, a rope drapery, cushions, and bedding for his mother's bedchamber and und his parlor would be done first. Afterward, wagons hauling the other f items would begin to arrive on a weekly basis until all was completed.

vall—it Content with his accomplishments and bone weary, Daire next one of the Plymouth gaming hells owned by a friend of his, Ajax M hurried the newly installed Earl of Bradford. This newfound respectability dic girl. He well with his friend, for he had been merely a distant relative of the ire that cast off from his family, and never expected to succeed to the title. Bu put his always thought of Jax as far worthier than any of his useless relative ppiness though the man's line of work was not at all wholesome.

“Jax,” he said, relieved to find his friend at the elegant establishment he owned that managed to quietly prosper among the g this more dignified part of town. Yes, gaming and probably a h more bootlegging on the side was not exactly honorable, but Jax had never anyone and could always be relied upon to follow through on his word

“Daire, what brings you here?” Jax greeted him warmly and orde

control of his footmen to take Scipio to his stable. "Tell Grimm this horse is not to be treated like a king."

crush. "I had business not far from here, and hoped I might impose on your distance hospitality for a day or two."

nothing "Of course. You know you are always welcome here. Stay as long as you like." Jax ushered him inside and offered him food and drink. "I will be sitting down to supper. Care to join me? We'll dine and catch up with each other while I have a room prepared for you."

right the "Sounds good."

lyworth "Ah...would you care for some entertainment after we dine?" Jax paging motioned in the direction of several finely gowned ladies seated around so many gaming tables.

to pay Daire shook his head. "No. I've sworn off those amusements for now." Jax arched an eyebrow. "Sworn off the ladies? Dare I ask what happened?"

ely halt "Nothing happened. I just got bored. Same greedy look in their eyes, same meaningless romps. It began to feel dull and distasteful, my usir was the and their using me."

< done? Jax led him into his private dining room and crossed to the tall cupboard. He took out a bottle of brandy and two crystal glasses, then poured the liquid into each glass. "I know what you mean. I have been feeling restless lately, too. Perhaps this is the reason why. There's not an ounce of genuineness to any of it. Returning to London is even worse. The ladies in Plymouth are easily satisfied with coins or pretty trinkets. But in London, especially the Upper Crust ladies who frequent my copper hells, they will not sit your soul. I thought I was hardhearted, but I am a lamb compared to some of the earl's, them."

it Daire Daire laughed. "I doubt anyone would ever describe you as a lamb, even are almost as ruthless as I am."

His friend held up his glass in toast. "And almost as wealthy as I am because of it."

entry in After dining, they spent the rest of the night catching up over drinks. "How are we to be neighbors now?" Jax asked. "You in Moonstone Land? Did you cheat me here in Plymouth?"

.. Daire nodded. "I would hardly call us neighbors, but certainly we are much closer than between here and London. I am determined to set

is to bemother and Matthew in Moonstone Landing. I'll make more per
arrangements if they take well to the quieter life the village offers. Pe
on your will settle there too. I haven't decided yet."

"I beg to differ. It seems you have firmly made up your mind to s
; as you there. I've never heard you speak of anything with as much ent
was just before. What makes you reluctant to admit it to yourself?"

th each Daire sighed. "I don't know. Perhaps because it is such a big cha
me."

"One for the better, it seems. I will have to stop by and visit
e?" He Moonstone Landing. You have accomplished quite a bit in the few
at the since you arrived there. Secured a house, now having it refurbished
and out, and you seem quite confident in this governess you have
ow." Teaching girls at the Rainard Academy is not at all the same as tr
k what manage your nephew. He's a damaged lad...scared, angry, trusting
one."

ir eyes. He may as well have been describing Daire at that age. "If anyone
ig them it, it is Brenna."

Jax arched an eyebrow. "Brenna, is it? I did not realize the two of
pboard, on a first-name basis."

e amber Daire settled in one of the cozy tufted leather chairs beside the
g quite "Do not make anything of it. The villagers are all welcoming, and th
unce of refreshing innocence about them... Most of them, anyway. Sometime
ies here as though I have stepped through the mists of time and come upon a
London, new world where people are helpful and friendly."

can eat Jax settled in the chair beside his and chuckled. "Now I definitel
some of pay you a visit. In fact, let me ride back with you once you've finish
business in Plymouth. I have nothing pressing at the moment and ca
lb. You with a few days away from here."

Daire shrugged. "Suit yourself. You will find it quite dull,
as you Hollingsworth and Danson did."

Jax shook his head. "I think I will enjoy the change of pace. I real
ks. "Soto get away from the sophisticated women and discontented men wh
ing and here looking for a nightly thrill. People only come to my gamin
because they are dissatisfied with their lives. Some are more desper
we are others, but by and large they are unhappy people."

up my "And you, Jax?"

manent “Oh, I am quite happy making a profit off them. But this is not perhaps I want for myself. Unfortunately, one does not meet the right sort of here, and until I recently became Earl of Bradford, who would ever get rootstheir sweet daughters near me? No, it is time for me to look serioususiasm someone worthy to marry. I’m ready for it,” he said, his manner quite calm. “The ache grows inside me with each passing day. Do you think I will change for what I am looking for in Moonstone Landing?”

“I have no idea.” Daire had not meant to bring along a companion you in Jax was a good friend. Probably as close a friend as Daire ever had, although weekshe never allowed anyone to get truly close to him. But he was determined to insidetry harder, because Jax had always been generous, never asking for anything in return, not even in those hard days when Jax was obviously struggling to set up his gaming halls.



can do THE NEXT MORNING, Daire strode out of the gaming club on his way to see Mr. Dumbley & Hayworth and heard Jax call after him. “Wait for me, I am coming with you.”

hearth. Daire tried not to appear impatient. “Why? All I am doing is seeing to the curtains, for pity’s sake.”

as I feel His friend grinned. “Precisely. I need to see this for myself. The strange Daire Claymore ordering decorative fabrics. I promise not to laugh, not while we are in their shop. However, I reserve the right to tease you mercilessly afterward.”

ed your Daire groaned. “All right, come along. But I shall kick your backside when you get home. London and back if you give me a hard time about it.”

just as “I’ll be quiet as a mouse in the shop, I promise.” “Ha!” Daire shook his head. “Come on, then.”

They walked in to find the place already bustling. Mr. Dumbley was busy, but he needover Daire to the point of irritation, but he could not complain because everything was moving more swiftly than he ever expected. The seamstresses were following Brenna’s designs to the letter. The fabrics were all in stock. The delivery dates were all going to be met.

Daire was waiting for the hammer to drop, because things never w

what smoothly. But Brenna and Felicity had been quite thorough and precise. Mr. Dumbley had no trouble finding all the right patterns, which allowed Hayworth supervised his staff of seamstresses to make certain they were precisely for the precise measurements. "The styles drawn by your decorator are elegant and will always remain popular," Mr. Dumbley assured him.

Daire and Jax walked out by late morning, all arrangements in place, including delivery of the first completed items to commence next week. Everything was moving along with military precision, Daire thought, though packing up and leaving Plymouth immediately. It was early enough to be back in Moonstone Landing by nightfall, which fell late at the end of the year.

Jax must have sensed what he was thinking. "Stay the night and come back with you tomorrow morning."

Daire agreed, for no reason other than he considered it wise to keep a distance between him and Brenna. There wasn't much for him to do in Plymouth, but he joined Jax in a ride around the countryside in order to exercise Scipio and Jax's stallion. Whenever they were not riding alone, they rode beside streams and rivers that led into the sea. After they stopped at a quaint pub, where they had their fill of crab stew, rabbit, pasties, and ale.

The distraction did not prove much of a distraction at all, because Daire could not get his mind off Brenna and how disappointed she had looked when he announced he was coming here on his own. Well, perhaps he would use the excursion to Plymouth along with his family later in the summer. She would be pleased.

He grinned at the thought of her frowning at him because he had the intention of allowing her to pay for anything along the way, not even the purchases she made while browsing the Plymouth shops.

Perhaps he would buy her something now, something pretty to make her stop fussing her eyes.

Bollocks.

Was he that besotted with the girl?

Daire looked in at Dumbley & Hayworth later that afternoon, saw everything still in perfect order, then spent a quiet evening at the card tables in the gaming hell. He later shared a bottle of gin with his friend. "Be ready for the light," he told Jax.

cise, so “I’ll be ready,” his friend assured him.
ile Mr.
kept to
e quite



IN ALL, DAIRE had been away three days, but when he and Jax walked
place, Kestrel Inn, one would think he had been gone for years. The young at
k. Since on duty at the registration desk uttered a cry of surprise and hurried
t about wake Thaddius.

that he Jax arched an eyebrow. “Trouble?”
his time Daire shrugged. “I cannot imagine what it might be. He could n
given my room away, since I paid for it and left all my belongings there
I’ll ride to mention he had left Brenna sleeping there for at least one more night

Thaddius, his ginger hair sticking out from his nightcap and ob
leep that having thrown on his clothes in haste, rushed forward. “Your Grace
do in goodness you have returned.”

order to Daire frowned. “Why? Has something happened to Brenna?”

ong the Thaddius shook his head. “No, my cousin is fine. In fact, she has
erward, tutoring your nephew for the past two days.”

roasted Daire shook his head, certain there had to be a mistake. “What?”

Thaddius, realizing he was still wearing his cap, tugged it off and t
e Daire on the registration table. “Your mother and nephew arrived with
d when enourage the same day you left. They drew up in front of the inn
ild takes up time. I sent word to Brenna, who was still up at the house sup
d enjoy repairs, and told her to come here straight away because I was not
what to do.”

had no “Where are my mother and nephew now?”

ven any “They are settled at Stoningham Manor.”

Daire’s jaw dropped open. “In the house? But it isn’t ready for th
itch her In fact, that house is completely upside down.”

“That’s what Brenna, Felicity, and I tried to tell them, but your
would not hear of staying anywhere but there. Her rooms and your ne
rooms are in fairly good shape because Brenna had the foresight to ins
all was be completed first. All they are lacking are elegant beddings ar
n Jax’s curtains, but your mother did not seem to care about those. Her kitch
at first put the kitchen in order and have already started preparing meals the

quarters for your butler, footmen, maids, and cook are livable, and Brenna insisted they were not quite ready yet.”

Daire nodded. “They only needed to be swept clean and have a fresh coat of paint applied to the walls.”

“Brenna had Uncle Simon’s crew attend to that yesterday. The kitchen is up and running, and your staff is slowly unpacking all your room and furniture off to belongings.”

Daire raked a hand through his hair. “They weren’t supposed to be ready for another ten days.”

“Brenna has it all in hand, Your Grace. She got Duchess Henley to help.” Not your mother and nephew to St. Austell Grange for cream tea yesterday. They were out of the way during the dustiest parts of the world war last morning,” Thaddius said, glancing at the clock and noting it was nearly midnight, “she intends to take Matthew on a nature walk around Stoningham Manor. Then Lady Phoebe and the marquess have invited them to Westminster Hall for the afternoon. His nieces, Ella and Imogen, are visiting again as been thought your nephew might enjoy their company. They are a bit older than him, but I don’t think they’ll mind building sandcastles on the beach tomorrow. Does anyone ever grow out of that fun?”

Daire wouldn’t know, since his father had never allowed him and his brothers to enjoy their pleasures. But he liked that Brenna was already on task with Matthew around what has she arranged for the following day?” he asked with a grin, knowing she was quite efficient.

“Brenna got the fort’s commander, Major Brennan,” Thaddius said. “I’ll give your mother and nephew a tour of Fort Arundel, after which Lady Phoebe will take them for tea and cakes at Mrs. Halsey’s tea shop. You don’t need to worry for their comfort. Everyone is helping out so that Brenna can keep them busy yet. Work going at Stoningham Manor.”

“She appears to be handling this most efficiently,” Jax remarked. Thaddius nodded. “She’s good that way. Quite organized. Always been like that.”

“Seems I have nothing to worry about,” Daire muttered, amazed to find himself quite pleased by Brenna’s handling of things. Of course, he knew she was a wonderful staff member in every way. Was this not precisely the reason he’d felt the need to put distance between them? “Well, it is late, and I am sure Lord B would like to get to his room and retire to bed.”

Although “He’ll have the guest chamber across the hall from your suite
Grace. Do either of you need anything more? Refreshments? A bath
sh coat?”

Daire shook his head. “Yes to refreshments. Send a bath to each
kitchen tomorrow morning. The ewer and basin will do for tonight.” He turned
to his friend. “Jax, do you wish to sleep in or ride up to Stoningham Manor
in the morning?”

His friend cast him a lazy smile. “I’ll ride over with you to
respect to Duchess Juliana, but mostly I need to see this
parade of inefficiency, Brenna.”

Thaddius immediately frowned.

So did Daire. “You are not to interfere with her work, or treat
her as anything less than a lady. Have I made myself clear?”

Jax held up his hands. “Don’t bite my head off. Of course I
was a gentleman. I was merely curious about her, since I’ve never seen
one like her before. She must be something special.”

“She is,” Daire and Thaddius said at the same time.

Jax shook his head and laughed. “Dear heaven, I cannot wait
until tomorrow.”

Daire walked down the hall with his friend, and they parted ways
at their doors. Each got to their door and entered. Daire lit a taper and glanced around
his sitting room. None of Duchess Henley’s fabric books were here. Not

Brenna had made certain to return them as soon as possible. Nor was
there any sign that Brenna had been here except for the lightest hint of lavender
in the air. She had sat in here while working on the drapery designs. She
didn’t sleep in his bed when napping after taking that lump to her head. She
had been at his writing desk to write her letters to her beau and the headmistress.

Gad, he missed her.

Well, he would see her soon enough tomorrow.

He left instructions for Thaddius to wake him and his friend up
at six o’clock in the morning, which was much later than he was used to rising
early. There was no point in getting out of bed sooner. By the time they would
have washed up, dressed, and met for breakfast in the dining room, it
would be close to ten o’clock. He knew his mother would not be ready to see
him before eleven at the earliest, so he was not in any rush to ride
to Stoningham Manor.

He wanted to see Brenna, of course. But he also wanted to give her a day to get the day's work underway before he interrupted her.

Despite the long ride from Plymouth to Moonstone Landing, Daire had tried hard to fall asleep. He drank a glass of port before undressing and went to his room. He then fell naked onto his bed and closed his eyes. It took him a while with no stop thinking of Brenna and lose himself in dreams. Those dreams were not helpful either, since they were of Brenna.

He cast a wry smile into the dark.

So much for putting a little distance between them. He had not been five minutes before thoughts of her filled his head.

In truth, they had never left his head even while he was off in Plymouth. Come morning, he shaved, had his bath, dressed casually on the assumption there would be work required of him, and took a seat at one of the billiard room tables. He was having his morning coffee when Jax strode in.

He had also cleaned up and put on casual riding attire. "Sorry I'm late," he said, taking the seat beside Daire's.

"You're on time. I got here a little early. I'd like to head out to Stoningham Manor as soon as possible. Duchess Juliana will not be here to meet us yet, but I'm eager to see Matthew and the work that's been done as they've made the house so far."

Jax nodded. "Give me a minute to have my coffee and we'll be on our way."

The sky was a deep, bright blue and filled with tufts of white clouds under a sun that held no rain and provided occasional shade from the sun as the clouds blew them across the sky. Daire's heartbeat quickened as they rode along the field of poppies, their red petals looking particularly bright against the green of the meadow grass.

Jax drew up his mount to stare back toward the village and the shimmering sea. "Daire, this is spectacular. No wonder you wanted to bring them here." He shook his head and laughed. "Even I want to move here, but Daire arched an eyebrow. "I don't think the villagers will welcome each other."

"Dear heaven, I wouldn't bring that business here. No, I'd find someone else to respect it. Perhaps I'll buy the Kestrel Inn. That young innkeeper has done a good job with it. Do you think he would be willing to sell?"

"I don't know. He just bought it from the old proprietor, Mr. Egdon."

er time Jax pursed his lips in thought. “Probably carrying a hefty debt on i
if he did not wish to sell, he might be open to taking on a partner to
e foundthe debt load that must be crushingly large right now. I would a
vashingkeeping him on at full wages to run the place, since I cannot see
while tobowing and scraping or indulging the whims of anyone. I’d destr
ere notbusiness within a week because I’m such an arse. But I canno
demanding people. I routinely toss out anyone I deem insufferable
gaming hell, no matter how heavily they are losing to the house
en backpowerful and important they might be. But it doesn’t work quite th
way in a hotel. People actually expect to be served.”

outh. Daire chuckled. “Come on. Aren’t you getting a little ahead of yo
chanceYou haven’t been here more than a few hours and are already planning
diningup half the village.”

Jax grinned. “Can you blame me? Did you not feel this way up
n late,”coming here? It is spectacular, Daire. One feels as though magic h
here.”

over to Daire fully understood his friend’s sense of awe.

lown to “It is a bit like stumbling into heaven, isn’t it? A man can heal in
done tolike this,” he said quietly. This was as close as Daire had come to ad
what Moonstone Landing and its occupants meant to him... What
on ourmeant to him.

Was she even aware how important she was to him? That he a
ids, theconsidered marrying her? He and Jax were alike in that neither care
ie windabout status or bloodlines. His father had tried to beat this sense of p
ong theand superiority into him, but all he’d made Daire do was detest eve
e greenSociety had to offer.

Lady Gemma and Lady Sarah would soon be among the richest la
nd theEngland, with lofty titles to boot. But Brenna was worth immeasurabl
o movethan them.

e.” What price could a man put on happiness?

come a What price on love?

Brenna was nowhere in sight as they rode up to the manor house
nethingswallowed his disappointment as Simon Angel hurried out to greet him
as done Daire introduced Jax to Brenna’s uncle and asked him to give then
of the work done so far. “My pleasure, Your Grace. Rain’s hampered u
n.” but hasn’t slowed us down at all indoors. Good thing, since we h

t. Even Grace's rooms mostly done by the time she arrived."

relieve To Daire's surprise, quite a lot had been accomplished, albeit more interior work, as Simon had indicated.

myself "We're doing our best not to disturb Her Grace," Simon remarked, "but we'll be doing quite a bit of banging and hammering in the coming days. We'll complete the noisy work as fast as possible, but it will take us a few days. I'm glad you have returned, Your Grace. Do we have your permission to keep to our schedule, or should we wait on the noisier work until Her Grace is awake? It will slow us down a little, but nothing that can't be handled with a little extra planning."

yourself? "Keep to your schedule, Mr. Angel. My mother is a late riser, but I'll try to endure a few days of discomfort to have this place in order as soon as possible."

on first "Very good, Your Grace. I'll let my men know to continue as usual."

happens "I expect my mother has not come out of her bedchamber yet, but she is my nephew?"

"Aw, what a sweet boy he is."

a place Daire arched an eyebrow in surprise. "Sweet?"

mitting "Oh, yes. Quite curious and helpful, too. Felicity and Brenna took Brenna on a nature walk, and then plan a quick stop to take a dip in the pool in the glade."

actually Daire's eyebrow shot up again, for there had to be some need for it. Helpful? The child was a devil's spawn, if his prior governesses were to be believed. Nor did Brenna's taking Matthew for a swim sound right. "Anything plans to swim?"

Simon shook his head. "Oh, dear me. No. That's why Felicity was so nervous. Brenna's afraid of the water. Any water. No matter how tiny it may appear."

"Timid, is she?" Jax asked.

Daire and Simon glared at him.

"She isn't timid," Daire said. "I'll explain later. You'll understand."

3. Daire "Lead on. I'm intrigued to meet her."

1. Daire was leaping out of his skin to see Brenna again. One would think that on a tour he had not seen her in years, but they had only been apart for three days.

is a bit, It was not long before they neared the glade. Daire could hear the sound of rushing water. The stream running beside the glade must have been

capacity after the storm earlier in the week. He also heard the liltingly theof laughter. He immediately recognized Brenna's melodic voice and slightly throatier trills of Felicity. His nephew was with them, for d. "But heard a child's gleeful giggles along with water splashing.

g days. He stopped and simply stared at the glade.

s a few Matthew laughing? Chattering, too.

mission Where was the sullen, withdrawn lad he had expected?

til Her Matthew emitted another gleeful shout, soon followed by a loud not beThen more laughter from the three of them. Was this not exactly what had hoped for with Matthew? This was the first time he had ever he she canboy respond to anything with joyful abandon.

soon as "Something wrong, Daire?" his friend asked. "You have the expression on your face."

l." "No. Finally things seem to be just right."

t where They walked closer, their steps quiet as curiosity got the better of them. Perhaps it was not right to spy on the ladies and Matthew, but Daire not want to interfere with their happy moment. He knew Matthew close himself up the moment he noticed his uncle.

him on Jax inhaled sharply and then elbowed Daire in the ribs. "Praise be by thehe whispered. "Am I seeing right? Who are these beautiful wood nymph

"Quiet," Daire warned, suppressing a groan. The ladies had taken mistake.their gowns and wore only their shifts. The fabric was so sheer that he e to besee the dusky outline of the tips of Brenna's breasts beneath the BrennaFelicity had her back to them, thank goodness. He would not look at

he was no lewd peeper. But Brenna? He wanted to devour the girl nt with"Take your eyes off Brenna, Jax. I vow, I'll blind you if you look at he

nquil it "Which one is Brenna?"

"The one on the rock."

"Suits me fine. I can't take my eyes off the nymph in the water. I s that's her cousin, Felicity? Gad, I'm going to spill myself if she turns me." Which she did a moment later, but Daire's gaze was still on Bren

Jax sucked in a breath. "Lord, I'm done for. I am going to ma hink hegirl."

Daire stared at his friend, who had obviously turned into a b e soundnitwit.

illed to "You heard me, Daire. Don't give me that look. I've never seen

sounds so beautiful in all my days, and I've seen plenty of beautiful women. I and them unclad."

he also "Don't go thinking lewd thoughts. Brenna and Felicity are innocent that sort of thing."

"Don't you think I can tell? I've seen enough used women to know the difference. Felicity is a vision from heaven. I am going to expire if she comes out of the water and takes off her shift... Oh, Lord!" he said, splashing, clutching his heart. "She's stepping out of the water. That shift is perched on Daire's arse. And look at her long, dark hair. No, don't look. I vow I will guard *you*, if you dare look at her. Felicity is mine and I am not letting her go."

"Shut up, Jax. Stop thinking with your privates."

oddest "Actually, I am thinking with my heart for once. That blasted organ has been numb for so long, I was sure it had died out long ago."

Daire snorted.

both of "Why the dismissive snort? Aren't you the thick one? What are you doing all this for if it isn't to woo Brenna? How long have you been in love with her? Is this why you have been coming back here all these years?"

"I met her less than a week ago. Jax, come back to your senses. I cannot propose to Felicity when you haven't even spoken to her."

"Oh?" The ladies had taken off their gowns to keep them from getting wet. Matthew, that lucky six-year-old, had taken off all his clothes and was cavorting in the water with Felicity, while Brenna, obviously in a bikini, was perched on a flat rock overhanging the pool and calling to her companions to be careful even as she tried to appear relaxed and cheerful.

"Daire could see the magnificent swell of her breasts spilling over her shoulders, dangerously close to revealing all their creamy splendor. Adding to her glory was the erotic tumble of her dark hair cascading down her back over her shoulders.

toward He was going to pass out if he did not suck in a breath.

na. Neither the ladies nor Matthew had noticed them yet.

try that "Jax, we have to go. They cannot know we saw them."

"Not yet. Let me die a happy man on this very spot."

abbling "Felicity and Brenna have seven uncles who are very protective of their girls. We both will die on this very spot if we are found out."

anyone "Oh, all right. Let's step back twenty paces, and then you ought

Most of out to them as though we have just arrived and are trying to find them.

“What are we, idiot schoolboys?” But Daire grabbed him and carried him away from the glade. Only then did he recover his breath and manage a

quiet laugh. “Bloody hell, Jax. This is not the introduction I had planned for you. Now the Jax grinned. “I cannot tell you how pleased I am to be here. Just tell me if I start to leer at Felicity. Isn’t she spectacular? No wonder your friend is suddenly having the time of his life. Who wouldn’t be in raptures while in the company of those two wood nymphs? My eyeballs are still throbbing from blindsockets. Dare I mention what my male parts are doing?”

.” Daire rubbed a hand across the back of his neck and took several deep breaths to calm himself, for his male parts were also misbehaving in a big way.

He and his friend were standing back, both of them laughing and talking when Matthew suddenly tore out of the glade with breeches half buttoned and his shirt hanging open. The boy was barefoot and laughing, but his laughter died the moment he spotted Daire.

On instinct, Daire bent on his haunches and held out his arms to the boy. “Matthew, I missed you. This is my friend, Jax. We came up here looking for you.”

To Daire’s disappointment, Matthew’s expression turned to one of fear and he raced back into the glade.

Jax frowned. “He seems terrified of you.”

“Not of me, but I closely resemble my bastard of a brother, who has been beaten and have beaten that boy mercilessly...just as our bastard of a father did to him.”

“He is so afraid whenever he sees me. I’ve tried to remain in the background and let my mother take charge of him. He doesn’t cower as much around me now, but he wildnor does he trust her yet. He fears to say or do anything around us, for a wrong step and he thinks we’ll show our true colors and beat him. The boy must have been receiving thrashings from his mother, as well. I’ve learned never to trust family.”

“Dear heaven,” Jax muttered. “My heart goes out to him. My heart goes out to him, but nothing like the ordeal he must have gone through.”

Daire nodded. “We hired governesses from the best agencies to look after him once I found him and took him in, but I think our choice of governesses compounded the problem. These governesses were trained to rule with an iron hand, completely the wrong approach to take with that boy.”

” “Well, you’ve finally done something right in hiring Brenna. His j
lragged genuine.”

anage a “I know.”

ed.” Brenna and Felicity emerged from the glade, now clad in their
t punch But they were holding their wet shifts in their hands. Daire tried to k
nephew imagination from running wild, for they must have been naked and
in the themselves off mere minutes ago.

in their Brenna naked?

He struggled to tamp down the fireworks exploding in his body.
al deep Unaware, Brenna cast him the sweetest smile. “Welcome home
; at the Grace. We did not realize you were back.”

“I arrived late last night.” Was that his voice, so thick and raspy?
quietly, “We were swimming, as you can plainly see. Well,” she said with
ned and blush, “Felicity was teaching your nephew how to swim. Master Mat
augther doing beautifully, and he also knows how to count to one hundred.
you like him to show you?”

he boy. Matthew began to sniffle.

king for Daire felt a jolt to his heart. What he would not give to have the b
him enough to give him a heartfelt embrace. “Matthew, that is rema
of fear Well done, lad. Perhaps we shall count together later. How about c
the poppies in the nearby field? Or we can count the birds we see.
clouds. Would you like that?”

io must Brenna spoke up for the boy, who was now hiding behind her and
o us. Heon her gown. “We shall like that very much.” She turned to the lad.
ind and be by your side, too. No one is going to hurt you here, Matthew.
her, but wants to do you any harm.”

for one Matthew just stared at Daire, his eyes shadowed.

he poor “Your Grace,” Brenna said with obvious heartache, “your nephe
So he’s sutter delight. Clever. Helpful. Funny. We have been having quite a lo
learning our numbers, and next week we shall start on our letters.”

ife was Daire smiled at the boy. “That’s very good, Matthew. I’m glad
enjoying your studies with Miss Angel. She is quite charming, isn’t sh

ok after Matthew just cast him another shadowed stare.

es only “I like her, too. I think she is an excellent governess. I wish mine
a firm nice when I was your age. But they were all quite horrid. What do yo
of our Miss Angel?” When he still received no response, Daire dec

joy was leave the boy as he was for the moment and introduce Jax to the ladies

He was about to do so when Matthew spoke to him from behind

“I can dress myself.”

gowns. Daire let out a breath. “I see, although you seem to have dress
keep his hurry. But that’s all right. I’m glad you were having fun. Was the
drying pleasant?”

He nodded. “Miss Standish said I was a wicked boy and
misbehaved. She said I was stupid and would never learn.”

Daire spared a glance at Brenna. “Seems to me that Miss Standi
e, You the wicked one. She should never have spoken to you so cruelly. Y
never hear a cruel word from Miss Angel’s lips, Matthew. In fact, I th
will box the ears of anyone who dares be mean to you.”

light Jax emitted a low growl. “A pox on all these charlatans w
thew isthemselves governesses and tutors. They hold themselves out as expe
Would all they are is bullies who single out children because they are too v
fight back.”

Daire thought back to his own childhood, to a time before his step
oy trust came into his life and that of his older brother. Their tutors and gove
arkable. were a cold-hearted lot, but their father had been the cruelest of al
ounting noticed a bruise on Matthew’s chest when he had run out of the glade
Or the him earlier.

He would ask Brenna about it later. Not that he suspected her
tugging laying a brutish hand on Matthew.

“I shall No, that deep bruise must have been put there by Miss Standish
No one of the governesses who came before her. He recognized those ma
he still had a few that had been so brutally beaten into his back that th
never disappeared.

was an Matthew screwed up a little courage and spoke directly to Daire. ‘
t of fun show you how well I can count to one hundred?’”

Daire would pull out his hair if he had to listen to the boy count th
you are way to one hundred, but he was not going to deprive the lad of the plea
e?” showing off. As he was about to nod, Brenna spoke up. “I think you
has many questions for us, Master Matthew. How about we shorter
were as today and you just count by tens?”

u think The lad nodded and immediately started. “Ten, twenty, thirty...”

ided to Daire smiled, for that was a much better idea. When the boy finis

. patted him on the head and congratulated him. "Well done, lad. An ad
Brenna.job. Give me a moment to properly greet the Misses Angel and catch
all that has happened since I've been away. Then you and I shall take
ed in awalk and you can tell me all about what you've done since arrivin
e waterHow does that sound to you?"

Fear shot into the boy's eyes again, and he stared at his toes.

always Brenna tweaked Matthew's nose. "Yes, we would love to take
with you, Your Grace. I hope you don't mind my being with you a
ish waststep."

ou will "Not at all, Miss Angel. I look forward to having you with us."

ink she Matthew's tension appeared to ease.

Daire now got around to the business of introducing them to Jax
ho callAngel, I would like to present a good friend of mine, Ajax Monteith,
rts, butBradford. He resides in Plymouth, and I stayed with him while atten
weak tothe Dumbley & Hayworth draperies. By the way, that business we
smoothly because of your excellent preparatory work," he told both
motherand Felicity.

rnesses Then he introduced Felicity to Jax.

l. He'd Felicity curtsied demurely.

toward Jax took her hand and bowed over it. "May I say it is an ex
pleasure to meet you."

of ever She shot a questioning glance at Daire, especially since Jax retain
of her hand. "The pleasure is all mine, Lord Bradford." But her tone w
or anyand she appeared decidedly uncomfortable, since Jax was not only
rks, forher hand but grinning at her like a besotted dolt.

ney had "Jax," Daire said quietly, knowing his friend was taking unca
liberties.

"Shall I Jax cleared his throat and released Felicity. "I hope you will allow
get to know you better, Miss Angel."

e entire Felicity shot Daire another disquieted glance. "Why, my lord
asure ofmerely the hired gardener."

ir uncle Jax arched an eyebrow. "Is that so? Well, I expect it is as respect
n it forprofession as any for a future countess."

Felicity's eyes turned stormy. "A future what?"

Daire groaned.

hed, he "I'm serious," Jax said, his gaze on the girl remaining as sha

mirablehawk's while he eyed her as though she was his prey.

1 up on Since when did Jax spill every stupid thought that popped into his
e a longAnd then compound it by spilling more stupid thoughts? Not that ac
g here.Felicity was stupid. In fact, Daire could not think of any women finer
Brenna or Felicity.

But to spout off about marrying Felicity upon a minute's acquaintance
a walkHad Jax taken total leave of his senses?
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hawk's while he eyed her as though she was his prey.

Since when did Jax spill every stupid thought that popped into his head? And then compound it by spilling more stupid thoughts? Not that admiring Felicity was stupid. In fact, Daire could not think of any women finer than Brenna or Felicity.

But to spout off about marrying Felicity upon a minute's acquaintance? Had Jax taken total leave of his senses?



Chapter Twelve

DAIRE WANTED TO throttle Jax but dared not say or do anything in front of Matthew for fear of frightening the lad. Brenna and Felicity were also daggers at his friend with their dark emerald eyes.

Felicity, obviously aware of Matthew's sensitivity, tried to keep her unaffected as she responded to Jax's statement. "And what makes you think an earl is worthy to be the husband of a gardener?"

Jax smiled. "Perhaps this earl is not quite the prize yet, but I assure you he will be trying very hard to prove himself in the coming days."

"Just how long do you plan to stay here?" Brenna asked, trying not to put her hands into fists as she rose to the defense of her cousin.

Jax glanced at Daire. "As long as it takes me to finish a bit of business at Moonstone Landing."

Felicity eyed him warily. "What sort of business could a man like you have here?"

"Do you mean because I am an earl? Or are you referring to what I was until a few months ago before I came into the title? I assure you, Miss Felicity, you were far worthier than I ever was back then. Indeed, you are far more than I even now. Do not be put off by a title I acquired merely through the fortuitous deaths of two uncles and several worthless cousins. Nor do you need to look askance because of the speed with which I have made my decision about you. I hope you do not consider me rude."

Felicity snorted. "How else am I to take your words?"

"As honest. When you've seen and done the things I have, you are quick to recognize a good thing when it comes along and not hesitate to take it for it."

Felicity merely shook her head and walked away.

Jax excused himself and followed her.

Brenna watched them with concern. "He won't do anything un-

will he?”

Daire shook his head. “No. He may come across as a dolt, but he is the smartest, finest men I know. He is serious, by the way. Don’t worry about your cousin. He will do right by her.”

“He had better,” she said with quiet determination.

Daire raked a hand through his hair. “I’ll make certain he does.”

“Will you? Or are you both cut from the same cloth?”

front of He frowned. “What does that mean?”

tossing “Do you really need explanation?”

ner tone recalling the kiss he’d taken on the first day they had met. But hadn’t I
ou think on his behavior ever since? Well, if he had kept his stupid mouth shut
ure you wouldn’t be walking around with stitches in her head either. But considering
his formerly debauched ways, he truly was on his best behavior

Brenna. Which was no small accomplishment, considering how thorough
t to curl the sight of this girl ravaged his senses.

iness in “You’ve come here and overwhelmed us all. You toss your coin
and everyone jumps to do your bidding...even me.”

like you “Brenna, you are the best thing in Moonstone Landing. How is it
of me to recognize it and rely on you? You are worth ten times what
it I was offered you. What price am I to put on all you have accomplished in a
of days?” He spared a glance at Matthew, who was holding tightly
Angel, gown and hardly dared to breathe. “And you know I am not merely re
worthier to the manor renovations.”

by the “Forgive me, Your Grace. Obviously, I spoke out of turn.”

I want He shook his head. “No, I always want you to speak your mind to
ade my friend’s behavior has rattled me, too. But he is serious, and I fully
Felicity will be a countess before the month is out.”

will be Brenna was talking about. She wanted to know Daire’s intentions toward
o reach He was not Jax. He needed time to open his heart even to someone
worthy as her.

He was not Jax. He needed time to open his heart even to someone
worthy as her.

“Well, it is not quite eleven o’clock yet, so I doubt my mother
receiving visitors for at least another quarter of an hour. How about we
toward, walk, the three of us? Matthew, do you have your shoes? Shall I help
them on?”

Brenna held out his shoes. "I have them right here, Your Grace. Sit on one of Matthew's. Show your uncle how well you put them on all by yourself." The lad seemed to take instruction from Brenna like a duckling from his mother. He sat on the grass and took his time struggling with one after the other shoe. Daire was twitching with impatience, but Brenna touched his hand, a sign for him not to rush the boy. "Well done," she said once Matthew had laced them up.

She then knelt down beside him and properly tightened the laces so they would not trip as they loosened. "It takes a little bit more strength than you have, Matthew, but he has just yet, being as he is only six years old. Isn't that the way it has been with you? But it all works out in the end, since he helps me with any heavy work that I am not quite able to do on my own."

She chattered away in a deliciously soothing voice.

Matthew nodded all the while. "I'm going to help Felicity in her garden. We're to grow strawberries along the hedgerows borders because they are my favorite."

Daire smiled at the lad. "That is an excellent idea. May I watch you? I have never planted strawberries and am curious to learn. Do you think Felicity would mind if I joined you? I can do some of the heavier digging if that is required."

"Miss Standish said that only nobodies like me—"

"You are not a nobody," Daire said harshly.

Matthew yelped and hid behind Brenna.

Daire sighed. "Matthew, I was not angry with you. It is Miss Standish who got my blood boiling. You are a fine young man. Never believe what she says. My father tells me otherwise. And never think anyone is better than you just because they carry a title. It means they might have more power than you, but they are not necessarily any worthier than you are."

The lad did not respond, merely buried himself tighter against Brenna's side. Daire sighed again. "Sorry, I bungled that, didn't I?"

"No, Your Grace. In time Matthew will learn that you won't ever be able to control him. I know this, but give him time to come around because he has a very difficult upbringing. Haven't you, Matthew?"

The boy nodded.

He did not speak to Daire again for the entire walk, not even when they ambled through the field of poppies and began to count them. "Ma-

t down, Daire said, feeling as though he were talking to himself, "I think purchase us some kites so we can fly them up here. Does that sound like it to you?"

nd then The boy looked to Brenna.

lightly She smiled and nodded. "That is a hearty yes."

he said The lad then glanced at Daire and gave a curt nod.

Well, small steps. He was glad Matthew felt a kinship to Brenna so he Felicity, even if the lad held a loathing for him.

th than

t right,

thing I



APPARENTLY, THE BOY'S kinship extended to Brenna's uncle and his work. Not an hour later, Daire noticed the boy smiling as he watched Simor paint the dining room walls. They had returned to the house a short time earlier. Daire had found his mother in her private parlor having breakfast.

While he greeted her, Brenna had taken the boy to watch the workers. Daire did not need long to greet Duchess Juliana. "What do you think of Miss Angel?" he asked, taking quick assessment of this woman he considered his mother, and finding her hair a little grayer than he last recalled, and her complexion a little paler. He hoped her fatigue was attributable to her journey from London and nothing more.

Duchess Juliana arched an eyebrow. "Seems the question to ask is, do you think of her, my dear boy?"

Daire avoided the question. "She seems to have worked a miracle on Matthew."

"Yes, and impressed me immediately. Felicity, too. They are very young ladies, and very kind. Matthew sensed it, too. He's already attached to them."

Daire sighed. "I never thought of myself as an ogre. But he is still afraid of me."

"Because you look so much like Morgan. There is nothing you can do about this for now. One can only hope the boy will grow out of it in time. He is still wary around me, as well. It is his family he distrusts because it is they who has hurt him."

Daire settled in the chair beside her. "What brought you out here today, Matthew?"

I shall early, Juliana? And why did you not simply settle into rooms at the like fun Inn? Thaddius would have known to give you the best.”

“London became intolerable,” she said, her smile faltering. “The horrid odors, and the house simply became too much for me to manage on my own, especially with Matthew acting out constantly. That last governess, Standish, was horrid. I caught her hitting him with a ruler. Then she had the gall to declare the boy was at fault for failing to learn his numbers.”

“He knows them very well. In fact, he counted for me just a few days ago and did it perfectly.”

“Oh, dear heaven. And still that horrid Standish beat the soul out of me. I sensed something was terribly wrong. Daire, it all became too much for me and my crew. I felt as though I had trapped the poor boy in a prison. So I dismissed her, Miss Angel Standish, packed up the household, and came straight here. I know it was a bit earlier than planned.”

breakfast. “But why stay at the house when the rooms have not been put right yet?”

“I’ve lived under far worse conditions, and so has Matthew, though I don’t think of child,” she replied. “I chose to move us in because there is room for us to consider to run around here. He could not have done so at the inn, although it is a lovely place to stay. We weren’t here more than fifteen minutes before long Miss Angel had us settled and Matthew was following her like a shadow everywhere she went. She told us that she was the governess you had, but she is what but she is obviously so much more.”

Daire nodded. “She is. I’ve never seen anyone operate as efficiently as she does.”

“When we told her we had not had our supper, she commandeered my uncle’s wagon, rode off to town, and returned with meals for us all, very quite mean all of us, the entire staff. Not only did she bring back meals, she also had a picnic hamper filled with strawberry tarts, lemon cake, and in fear cake, and tall bottles of lemonade.”

He chuckled. “Sounds like something Brenna would do.”

can do “Brenna, is it? I thought there might be something between the two of you. Hey you.”

family “It is only a professional friendship.”

“I see. By the way, she told me to tell you that she put all the money into your account.”

Daire threw back his head and laughed. “Did she now?”

Kestrel “Yes. She also said you would find it amusing. But I think it is that puts the smile on your face.” She cast him a knowing look, but eat, the press him with more questions. “While the staff and I settled in, sl my own, Matthew into the poppy field for a picnic supper. It was only to get l s, Miss of the way while everyone bustled in and out to unload our trunks. had the boy did not realize this. They were on an adventure. It was as tho world opened up to him in that moment. He thinks she is a fairy prince minutes Daire could not help but grin. “Sometimes I think so, too. I’ve ne anyone quite like her, Juliana. Clever, earnest, organized...innocent of him? Brave. Honest.”

for me. “Daire, are you opening your heart to the girl?”

ed Miss He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “My heart? What heart?”

it was “The one you keep securely hidden in darkness. But it seems tha pure sunlight, and you cannot hide from her.”

t yet?” His grin faded. “I don’t know. Maybe. Much too soon to tell.”

at poor He wasn’t like Jax, able to decide in a moment that a girl he’d see the boy not even spoken to yet—was the one he would marry. Yes, he’d ooks to immediate attraction to Brenna. But that was a far thing from being r s before make a lifetime commitment, especially to someone like her. She beli puppy a love match.

d hired, He, on the other hand, wanted anything but a love match. How c pledge to be faithful and loving when he had survived all these y ently as keeping his heart locked away?

Yet he had contemplated marriage to Brenna from the first.

red her More than contemplated it, since she was constantly in his thought . And Inow, he was eager to return to her side.

but she “Brenna is taking us to Westgate Hall this afternoon,” Julian ginger breaking into his momentary thoughts. “Would you care to come

After all, you are the boy’s guardian, and it would be appropriate for join us now that you have unexpectedly returned from Plymouth.”

two of “I’m here with Jax. It would be too much of an imposition for bot to simply show up unannounced at the marquess’s door. Enjo afternoon with Burness and his wife. Matthew will have fun with h eals onnieces, Ella and Imogen. His twin boys are probably a little too young with him, but it is good to have other children around no matter their a

“Oh, I agree.”

Brenna “Burness’s wife, Phoebe, is one of the Killigrew sisters,” he con-
did not “Henley, the eldest, is married to the Duke of Malvern, and Chl
he took youngest, is married to Viscount Brennan, who is commander of th
him outfort. I understand Brenna has arranged a tour of the fort for you and M
But the tomorrow.”

ugh the She nodded. “Your Brenna seems to know everyone and
ss.” everywhere. We met the Duke and Duchess of Malvern yesterday,
ver met duchess seemed particularly friendly with Brenna.”

. Kind. Daire nodded. “Everyone adores her.”

“Even you.”

He frowned. “Stop prying. Yes, I like her. What’s not to like? A
now going to warn me not to get involved with the hired help?”

t girl is “Ah, am I supposed to tell you that you ought to know better
entangle yourself with someone beneath your station? Well, you will r
this caution from me. If you must know, I was going to suggest y
n—and getting in your own way and court her. Daire, you are ruthless in goi
felt an what you want. So why are you holding back now? Grab her for yo
eady to before someone wiser comes along and claims her first.”

eved in Daire squirmed in his seat once again. These blasted chairs were m
delicate females and not men the size of him. “Someone has already
ould healong. Brenna met an Oxford professor while she was teaching
ears by exclusive Rainard Academy. He asked her to marry him.”

His mother frowned. “Oh dear. I did not realize she was
betrothed.”

s. Even “She isn’t.”

“Has she refused this professor? Then what are you waiting for, I
ia said, am serious. If you care for her, then you cannot let her get away.”

along? “She has not refused him, but I know she will never accept him.”

you to “You say this with such certainty. Why?”

“When the school term finished, she returned to Moonstone Lan
th of us contemplate his offer and tend to other affairs,” he replied. “Seems to
y yourshe needed to think this hard about his offer, then she ought to have d
is little immediately. But Brenna is soft hearted. I think she was trying to
to play gentle way to tell him they were not suited. While she delayed,
ge.” contacted her school’s headmistress and told her that Brenna would
returning next term because she was to be his wife.”

continued. Juliana gasped. "Oh dear. What an abominably presumptuous, arrogant thing to do."

"The headmistress, believing the churl, went ahead and replaced Matthew. I suppose this worked in my favor. She will never accept her professor immediately offered her the position as governess to Matthew. It was the worst indecision I ever made."

"No, the wisest decision you make will be revealing your feelings to the girl. No one is stopping you but yourself."

He laughed. "Leap into a lifetime commitment upon one acquaintance? What has gotten into you? This rushing thing is not like you at all, and it worries me."

Juliana reached for his hand. "My only thought is for your happiness. Do you have any idea how your eyes shine when you speak of her? You do not hate Morgan into a monster, and I could not save him. But I got to you in time. I know I did, Daire. You are not like them. You have a good heart. Do not be afraid to share it with Brenna. She will never hurt you."

"How do you know? How long have you known her? A day or two? You haven't known her that much longer. But she is soft and sweet, incapable of hurting anyone. The important question to ask is, will I hurt her? And you know the answer in every sense. Will I break her heart? Will I physically beat her? Will I cheat on her? Will I be faithless and shatter her spirit?"

"This I will answer with an emphatic no, to all of it. I know you better than you know yourself. I don't believe you capable of hurting her. Now, you must learn to believe in yourself." Juliana eased back into her chair and took a sip of her tea. "I've said whatever needed to be said. Daire? Impress me further because you will turn stubborn and do the opposite of what I want."

He rose with a sigh. "I'm glad you have arrived, albeit early. I think you will settle in nicely here. Let me find Jax. He'll want to greet you before I leave for Westgate Hall. You'll like Lord Burness and his wife."

"If she is anything like her sister, Duchess Henley, I am sure I will like her. Do you like her?" He grinned. "Henley is gentle. Burness calls his Phoebe a little spoiled, but you will like her very much. You'll meet their youngest sister tomorrow. I'll find a way to introduce you to her."

"Ah, Chloe. Yes, I've heard about her, too. You considered me a rival?"

"A halfhearted consideration at best. I acted because I felt remorse. I was almost running her down with my phaeton. We were never in danger."

us and falling in love with each other. She's a good soul, as are her sisters. The ship travels fast here, doesn't it?" He cast her a wry smile. "Is there anything Brenna needs? I can attend to it while you are paying your visit."

"No, not a thing. Brenna and Felicity have helped us organize the Wisesthousehold. We've settled in quite well. Even Cook is liking it here. The fish is fresh, and so are the vegetables available at market. She and her sisters to the maids look forward to walking down to the harbor every morning. Halsey's husband comes by in the early afternoon with the most delicious week's cakes and pies from the tea shop. I think we are quite well supplied."

He nodded. "Sounds like I am not needed at all."

"You are head of the household, Daire. Of course you are needed. Doreen is desperate by Matthew, only the boy doesn't know it yet. But go find your father and tell him to come in and greet me properly. He always was one of your nicer friends. The others are just leeches. I thought your fast-set heart would be here with you."

"I sent them away. Grew tired of them."

"It is about time, Daire. I am happy to hear it."

He strode out and found Jax in the garden with Brenna, Felicity, and Matthew. "Jax," he said, curious as to what they were doing. "Matthew is asking for you."

His friend nodded and immediately excused himself. "I'll be back, Daire, shortly."

Daire knelt beside Brenna as they watched Felicity and Matthew work in her soil. The boy had a small spade in hand and was mimicking Felicity's movements as she prepared the flowerbeds for their plants. "Strawberries are Matthew's favorite," Brenna said in a whisper, "so Felicity has set aside this little patch for Matthew to grow them himself."

"He seems to be enjoying the work."

"Because he does not view it as a chore. We thought it would be a good way to bolster his morale and learn he can create something out of nothing. He is going to help Felicity plant flowers, too. This boy needs to build memories in order to push out the bad ones that have dominated his harrowing life."

Daire nodded.

As they watched Matthew at work, Daire's thoughts drifted to the anger of Juliana's words about him standing in his own way. It was true. She

News could he not move forward? Logically, it was too soon to ask Brenna to marry him. But would his opinion change in a month from now? Or a year?

He did not bother to answer his own questions. Nor could he toss the coin into the wind, as Jax seemed able to do.

Yet he was falling in love with Brenna. Why lie to himself? Even when he saw her, she worked her way deeper into his soul. He could not look at her without his blood heating. His heart soared every time she smiled at him. But to be sure this was love? Or that he could handle it if it proved to be love? That would take time and a willingness to give up control over his surroundings, dismantle the barricades that had sheltered him for these years—for Brenna would never be satisfied with anything less than complete commitment from him.

He'd seen the damage his family had done to his brother. He still bore the scars of the damage to himself.

Right now, looking at Brenna and Matthew, he could not imagine hurting them. But what if he was wrong? What if there was a monster inside him and determined to come out?

He had spent so much of his life behind a carefully crafted façade that he no longer knew who the real Daire Claymore was.

Brenna, unaware of his thoughts, smiled at him.

He could have sworn the sun came out from behind a cloud at just that moment, shining its rays on her so that she truly looked like an angel. Meanwhile, Felicity and Matthew were still happily digging away in the garden.

Was he being a fool? Making up reasons not to grab at the happiness that had so long eluded him?



It was a good thing. AROUND NOONTIME, BRENNA and Matthew left the garden in order to enjoy themselves for their visit to the home of Lord and Lady Burness. She had early strolled indoors to see how Simon Angel and his workmen were progressing.

“Moving along quite nicely, Your Grace,” Simon responded with a smile because these Angels were the most contented family Daire had ever known. “Let me know if you spot anything amiss.”

So why

enna to “It is all very well done, as far as I can tell,” Daire replied.

year? Since Juliana had also retreated to her quarters to ready herself for the Burness visit, Daire strolled back outside. He saw Jax beside Felicity, looking off and sleeves rolled up as he assisted her with the heavier work that normally would have been done by Simon’s men if not for Jax offering to do it himself. “Gad, was his friend truly serious about Felicity?”

m. Jax stayed on at Stoningham Manor to assist Felicity as she worked on her garden designs. Daire simply shook his head and rode back to Moorland Landing, stopping first at Bedwell’s Mercantile in order to look for kites. “Yes, Your Grace. You’ll find them in the back corner. Let me know if you need anything more than a dozen,” Mr. Bedwell said, leaving his other customers to wait while Daire browsed through his shop.

more the Daire chose three kites, each of a different color. A red, a blue, and a yellow.

ne ever He was now eager to fly them with Matthew and Brenna, but this was not to be. He had to wait until tomorrow afternoon, since she had already arranged for a morning tour of the fort for the lad and then a treat afterward at Mrs. Fennell’s shop.

Matthew would adore the day.

Perhaps Daire would hold off on the kite flying until after tomorrow. He was feeling greedy and wanted to spend an entire, uninterrupted day with Brenna and Matthew. Kites, a picnic, and anything else they cared to do. He had no preference. He just wanted to be with them.

The afternoon invitation to the Burnesses’ turned into a dinner invitation since Matthew was having so much fun with Ella and Imogen. The messenger knocked at the door of Daire’s suite to deliver the invitation the marquess sent for him and Jax. “This just arrived for you, Your Grace. The messenger is here and awaiting a response.”

Daire read the invitation. “Let him know I have accepted on behalf of both of us. My friend is still up at the manor house. I had better get ready.”

“Very good, Your Grace.”

Daire had been working on the latest documents arrived from the north, pertaining to Claymore matters, but he set them aside to see what Jax had to say. He should not have left him alone at the manor with Felicity. Hopefully the presence of Simon and his crew were enough to keep

line.

for the Then again, despite owning some of the most lucrative gaming hel his coat of England, Jax was one of the most decent men Daire had ever met. t would all business and never dallied with the help. He was always discre

. Daire had never known him to seduce innocents.

To his relief, Jax was still toiling away in the garden when he r ked on “Felicity, do you mind if I take your assistant away now? We hav onstone invited to dine with Lord and Lady Burness.”

es. “Not at all,” she said, emitting a gentle laugh. “He’s been a m e show could not have asked for a better worker.”

he led Jax beamed with pride.

Felicity cast him a soft smile in return. “I’m well ahead of my s , and because of you. Thank you, my lord. It has been a pleasure.”

He bowed but made no move to take hold of her hand, since h s would cover in dirt. “The pleasure is all mine, Miss Angel. Sam l a late-tomorrow?”

alsey’s She turned to glance in surprise at Daire, obviously uncertain what

While Daire did not know what to make of his friend’s behavior, not doubt his honor. “I certainly have no objections,” he said, “if this ow. Hemy friend wishes.”

ay with Felicity cast Jax another smile. “Well, then. Yes, my lord. San lo. tomorrow.”

Daire was not one to meddle in another’s business. But he ha ritation, Felicity and Brenna, and now felt a duty to deliver another warning haddius friend as they rode back to the inn. “Jax, what in bloody blazes a ess haddoing?”

ssenger “Getting to know Felicity. Is this not what you insisted I do?”

“Just don’t behave like a nitwit and hurt the girl.”

half of “Hurt her?” Jax laughed. “Daire, do you not see I am already in lo o fetch her? I want to ride off this moment and secure the marriage license. T

reason I hesitate is because none of you, not even Felicity, will ever me if I were to propose. I’m sure she will club me over the head w London shovel. So, I will wait until she feels more comfortable around me. H was up it does not diminish my feelings for her. That girl is a gem. Frankly, I ty, but understand how she is still unmarried. For that matter, Brenna too. T Jax in something quite special about them.”

Daire listened quietly as Jax continued spouting their virtues. He listened in all with everything his friend said.

He was thoughtful. Thoughts of Brenna swamped him as they rode past the field of poppies, and toward the village.

Those poppies.

He rode up. Why did they stir his heart every time he looked at them?

He had never been so close to Jax. Jax drew his mount closer to Scipio as they rode, feeling the war swirling around them. “Let me turn the tables on you, my friend. You are a marvel. I bloody blazes are you doing with Brenna? If anyone is likely to be hurting, it is you, Daire. You do not get to have it both ways with a woman like her. I can see you care for her. You cannot contain your smile when she schedules you to see her. So what’s holding you back?”

First Juliana and now Jax getting on him? Was this what Daire was fated to endure throughout the summer?

He knew he was the problem. But time was also a problem. A day was not enough to propose to a girl he’d met merely a week ago. Why were Jax and Scipio being so thick about it?

“Bah,” Jax grumbled. “Go on, be stubborn. But I’m sure you fell for her within a minute of meeting her. You and I are alike in this way. We immediately know what we want. It is only a matter of figuring out how much time we are willing to pay to acquire it.”

“It? Doesn’t Brenna deserve better than to be treated as an object? She doesn’t she deserve to be kept safe? You know what my brother was. He turned out to be just like him?”

“First of all, you never were anything like him, or your father or grandfather before him. Nor will you ever be. You are no green boy with a pair of knee pants, either. Certainly your character is well formed by now. Have you ever raised a hand to a woman? Or to a child? When have you ever lost control of your temper?”

Daire said nothing, although he knew his friend was likely right.

“But it is all about control with you, isn’t it? You cannot bring your will to bear on anyone else to hold power over you. Well, my friend, it is true. Brenna already has that power, specifically over your heart.”

Daire snorted.

“She does, so just admit it and seek your happiness with her. I am not suggesting you behave like me. I know I am an impulsive arse. But I t

agreed instincts. They have never failed me. Having met Felicity, I know I will be happy without her. Simple as that. Is this how you feel about Brenna?

“You’ve been toiling in the sun too long.” Daire cut short the discussion, for he was irritated by everyone’s meddling in his business.

Wasn’t he already lecturing himself? And resisting the conclusion—he had to marry Brenna or get out of her life completely.

But life without this lovely girl would be a barren existence for him.

Daire and Jax rode over to Westgate Hall in the early evening. Juliana, and Matthew were there, all of them having a wonderful time.

Matthew’s cheeks were pink from the sun, and his shirt was pulled out over his breeches as he played spillikins in a quiet corner of the parlor with the boy.

Daire decided to leave the boy to his friends. In truth, he was relieved. Matthew would withdraw inside himself the moment he noticed his uncle arrived. But the lad was lost in the game with Ella and Imogen, who were fussing over him like a pair of mother hens.

Was this not exactly what the boy needed?

Daire greeted Burness and his wife warmly and introduced them to the children. To Daire’s relief, the children were to be taken upstairs to the quarters and fed there, along with Burness’s twin boys, who the mother claimed were little terrors and could not be set loose in decent company.

Phoebe laughed. “It is not so. They are wonderful boys. They build sandcastles on the beach until it is time for their nap. They all had a wonderful afternoon.”

“We will happily return the invitation as soon as Stoningham Manor is put in order,” Daire said. “Bringing Matthew to Moonstone Landing was the best thing I could have done.”

Brenna agreed and then excused herself to follow the children to the carriage. Daire stopped her. “Are you not dining with us?”

Lady Phoebe nodded. “Yes, Brenna. Do not be ridiculous.”

“But I am the boy’s governess. Is it not right that I should attend to myself?” The blush on Brenna’s cheeks said it all. She was the only one so late without a title, and obviously felt the class difference acutely.

Daire growled. “He will be fine with Burness’s nieces and his little girl. Burness nodded. “We have two governesses up there already. I am not mentioning Ella and Imogen are going to fuss over him, too. He will not notice your absence.”

ll never Daire smiled. "So you see, it is all in order. Join us, Miss Angel."
a?"

He knew it was brazen of him to demand it, especially after
rt their protestations he'd made when pressed on the matter of his feelin
. Brenna by Jax and Juliana. He would not have said anything were

obvious obvious Burness and his wife felt the same and wanted her at their tabl

Lady Phoebe took her by the arm and led her into the dining roo
1. you can see, we included you in our count. I am not having the place
Brenna, taken away. Besides, you will completely throw off our numbers if y
il time, your meal in the nursery. With you, we are a balanced table. Thre
it of his Three ladies."

girls. Brenna blushed, her discomfort still obvious. "All right."

worried Juliana cast Daire a disapproving look. It wasn't that she disappro
icle had Brenna. She disapproved of his stalling to do what was right.

to were *Bollocks.*

Was no one ever going to let up on him? No matter what anyone s
was not about to bare his heart to a girl he'd known less than a week
) Jax. not matter that he felt as though he had known her forever. Tir
nursery important. Actual days, weeks, months.

arquess Why was Juliana rushing him? Was there something going on w
y. that he ought to know about? She had looked a little wan. Perhaps
helped more than travel fatigue.

as time He would pursue the matter later.

Since they were only six in the party, the Burnesses had chosen
lanor is what they called their winter dining room, which was small and cozy.

g is the was seated across from him and beside Jax. The marquess and his wif
opposite ends of the table, while Juliana was seated beside Daire.

out, but By the time the soup course was served, everyone was on a fir
basis.

"Daire," Cormac, the marquess, said, "give the boy time to heal. I
) him?" come around to it, especially with Brenna's guidance."

present Phoebe nodded. "It took Cormac three years after he lost his arm,
was a grown man. Although I think children heal much faster. I notic
: boys." horrid welt on his chest. He told Brenna that his former governess
Not to him."

ot even "Those on his back were done by his father and mother," Juliana
pain etched in her features. "The boy was so badly bruised when Dair

him and brought him home. I do not understand how people can be so all the “Nor do I,” Jax said. “But we three men faced barbarity almost d ngs forthe battlefield. Perhaps life is meant to be cruel and we must g e it nothappiness wherever we can find it.”

e. Daire shot him a look.

m. “As He wasn’t going to mention Felicity, was he?”

setting Jax said nothing more.

ou take Conversation turned to Juliana’s plans for the next few days. She e men.toward Brenna. “Phoebe, tomorrow we shall be with your sister a husband, as I am sure the entire village already knows.”

Phoebe laughed. “Oh, yes. Our gossip lines operate with i oved ofprecision. Chloe and Fionn are very much looking forward to it.”

“The day after tomorrow will be a day of leisure, I expect. The won’t be ready yet for visitors, but perhaps by next week.”

said, he “I’ve purchased a kite for Matthew,” Daire said. “I hope to spen c. It didtime over the next few days showing him how to fly it.”

ne was Brenna smiled in approval. “He will enjoy it much more than he school lessons.”

with her Daire smiled back at her. “You’ll come along, of course.”

it was She nodded. “Of course. I take my job as his governess quite se. Does it not warm your heart every time you hear him laughing?”

“You have no idea,” he said, trying to keep the anger out of his v u to useam still shaking my head over the miracle you have accomplished Brennashort a time. I did not think it possible for the lad ever to feel any joy.”

ie sat at Brenna set down her fork, having hardly touched her fish course joy is always there within children. It takes so little to bring it out.

st-nameword. A compliment. A squeeze of their hand. A moment to listen t they have to say. And yet it is not something that ever happens for n He willthem.”

“Well,” Cormac said, “speaking as an adult who managed to and hecountless years of his own life behaving like an arrogant, tempera ed thatchild, it is a good thing there are wise women like you and my wife had hitworld, or else there would be no hope for any of us.”

Jax raised his cup of wine. “Hear, hear.”

added, They all raised their glasses in cheer.

e found

cruel.”

laily on

ab our BRENNA WENT UPSTAIRS with Phoebe to fetch Matthew once the evening
come to an end. Daire and Jax escorted them and Juliana to Ston
Manor before they headed back to the inn.

Once back at the inn, the two of them shared a bottle of port in
suite and reminisced about old times before each retired to their quar
smiled the night.

and her By morning, Jax had awakened early and was already up at the
house by the time Daire finished going through his morning
military documents. Once done responding to the most important ones, he st
the dining room. “Thaddius, when did my friend ride up to the man
e house asked, encountering Brenna’s cousin in the hall.

“Oh, quite early. No later than seven o’clock this morning, I wou
d some But Felicity rides up there with Uncle Simon, and he likes to start earl
Bradford mentioned something about helping Felicity move rocks.”

will his “Rocks?” Daire shook his head. “What rocks? Never mind. I’ll
myself.”

He was also eager to see Brenna. Mere hours had passed since he l
riously been in her company, and yet he was already missing her.

To his surprise, he noticed her walking across the poppy field w
oice. “I rode up. She waved to him and smiled. “Good morning, Your Grace.”
in this “Daire,” he said, dismounting and leaving Scipio to nibble on the
grass at the edge of the road. “I thought we had resolved last night
e. “The each other by our given names.”

A kind “Well, that was last night. I did not really belong at the table.”

to what “That is utter nonsense. Do not forget Matthew called you
many of princess. So, you see? A princess ranks above everyone, even a duke.”

“I shall remember this next time I put on my fairy wings,” she saic
o botch soft laugh.

amental He joined her in walking across the field, having no idea where s
e in the going and not particularly caring so long as he was beside her. “Wher
boy now?”

“Assisting Felicity and Jax.” She frowned lightly. “I know I have
this before, but is he truly besotted with my cousin? Can he be trusted?”

“Yes, Brenna. He’s quite serious about her. If anything, I am holding him back. He’s chosen well, mind you. I like Felicity. But how could one know anything about a person in less than a day?”

She nodded. “I agree. One must be sensible about these things. Especially men in your position, titled and wealthy, who have only to tip their hats and their women will come running.”

Daire paused amid the sea of red petals. “There haven’t been words either of us, Brenna. Jax is serious, and so am I.”

“What are you serious about, Your Grace?”

“Daire.” He took her gently by the shoulders. “Not *what*, but *who* of course. Have I not been clear about it?”

“Actually, you have not. In truth, you constantly leave me in confusion?” he

She surprised him by drawing out of his grasp. “Is this some game you would say, Lord Bradford intent on seducing Felicity and your lady? Lord Daire set your trap for me? Do you think we are easy marks because we are approaching spinsterhood? Let me assure you, Felicity and I are not desperately unhappy women. We are quite content with our lot.”

“The thought never crossed my mind. You are both too beautiful and clever, and have likely been fending off beaux for years. As for me and you consider marriage a trap, then yes, we have set our traps for you and Felicity.”

She regarded him warily. “Marriage? You are suggesting this is a game for either of you?”

“I did not think I had been particularly secretive about my intentions. I am sure the entire village is waiting for me to say something to you.”

Her expression softened. “Are you saying it now?”

Daire swallowed hard. “I hadn’t intended to.”

Her smile faltered. “I see.”

“No, I don’t think you do. Blast it, Brenna. I did not intend to have a conversation with you at this time.”

“I understand. A man in your position... A girl in mine. How can I be right?”

“That’s just it—it can be. Everything already feels easy and natural to you. Give me time, will you? I’m fairly certain I already know what my heart will lead me. But as you’ve acknowledged, I am a duke, and a duke is one at that. No, it is coming out all wrong. You never cared about my

the one or title. You sought to know me. But I am a mess inside.”

How can “Yes, I know,” she said, her smile returning as they walked on the field. “I care about you, as you have probably guessed. Very much especially you said, it is not because of your title or the careless way you toss your head and about. Actually, I find this spendthrift habit of yours quite irritating.”

He laughed. “It gets me what I want, and I can easily afford it. I am not a spendthrift. How can I be when I know exactly where every farthing is? I am fully aware and completely in control of why and where each goes.”

Oh. You, “Daire,” she said softly. “Is this not exactly the problem? In truth, I was worried about you.”

Confusion.” He arched an eyebrow in surprise. “Why are you worried?”

How do you two “Seeing Matthew has helped me to understand you better.”

Having “Is that so?” His heart began to beat faster. He was not certain if he was ready to have her probe so deeply into his soul. But was this not fitting? Not sad, Inquisitive, determined, and compassionate to a fault? She wanted to help him and to save him.

How full and Did he not need saving?

Oh Jax, if She nodded. “Yes, quite so. He is a little boy and therefore I have learned to hide his fears. They are open to be seen by all. But you, as I have learned to hide yours very well. You are completely Matthew’s mess not inside.”

He growled. “I do not have fears.”

Oh. I’m “Everyone does, and you are no exception. You are afraid to let anyone into your heart because those who should have loved and protected you were the very ones who always hurt you. Were you raised cruelly? Never mind, I know the answer.”

“What has Juliana told you?”

How do you have this She cast him a wry smile. “Probably too much, to your way of thinking. She agonizes over you and still regrets being unable to save your brother. It ever haunts her to this day.”

How do you “There was nothing she could do about Morgan then, and there is nothing she can do about him now. My brother is dead. He could have saved me here my at one time, but he did not. He could have treated Matthew decently, but he did not. Do not waste a tear over my brother. He was never worth it.”

How do you wealth She gave him a worried look. “You think you are like him, don’t you?”

“We are of the same blood. We received the same beatings from the throughfather. We look so much alike that Matthew cannot look at me without such. As thinking I am his father come to beat him again. How are we different? For coins

“Your strength and spirit were never the same. You were always strong Daire. You were always kinder.”

How could she know? How could she trust him not to become a monster his father and brother had been?

He raked a hand through his hair. “Brenna, I am not having a conversation with you.”

She looked up at him with gentle eyes. “Perhaps at a later time, the He grunted. “No.”

Having made clear there was to be no more discussion about the changed the topic. “Where are you walking?”

“Nowhere in particular. I just like to wander through this field Brenna? poppies.”

“There’s something about them. I’m drawn to them too. I don’t know why.”

“I think I do.”

He groaned. “Gad, are you always going to have an opinion on a man, everything?”

But he spoke with gentle teasing, for he was more curious than angry.

He was also quite a bit amused that she, a complete innocent, had answered everything.

She cast him a heartfelt smile. “No, not on everything. However you tend to think a lot, and I am determined to figure you out. Do you mind being used as

“Do I have a choice?” he asked.

“I suppose not, for you cannot stop me from thinking about you. In many, a field of red poppies represents death. Blood. But it also represents

peace. Perhaps a peace found in death. But also simply peace. I think of my father. It what you see whenever you look across this field. Peace. Release. Freedom

from your agony. It is a field of hope for you. A field where you can find nothing into your dreams. Good dreams, not the nightmares that probably plagued

himself your childhood and perhaps plague your adult life, too.”

She pointed toward the sea. “Just look at this view... The water, bright and glistening. The sky, an even deeper blue and dotted with white clouds

and sweet grass, a deep, vibrant green. And those poppies. Bright red

ie sameswaying in the breeze. One feels transported to an idyllic place.”

without “Go on.”

?” “You are in another world here, a world where you can forget yo
ronger, and open your heart to new possibilities, allow yourself the happiness
seem determined to deny yourself. This is the essence of the problem, I
me the You don’t know what happiness feels like, nor are you certain you
it.”

ng this “Ah, Brenna. I had no idea you were such a philosopher.”

She frowned. “Please, do not mock me. I could not bear it from yo
n.” is what Albert and his professor friends did to me. What makes any
wiser? Why can I not think about things and wonder what might be
him, hesays men are the only ones capable of higher reasoning?”

“Forgive me, little dove. I was not mocking you or condescen
ield of you.” He took her gently by the shoulders and turned her to face

“Everything you have said is true. But so what? I do not live in a w
t know dreams. I go by hard facts. Knowing what I am will not necessarily
me. Knowing it and being able to do something about it are quite s
things.”

ion on “But that’s just it. I don’t think you know yourself. You have con
yourself that you are a horrible monster like your brother. It isn’t true.”

moaned. “Are you sure? Because I am not sure of this at all. Enjoying a
vers for poppies will not fix the darkness in me. Yes, it will soothe me for a

But what if I become angry? What if I ever raised a hand to you?” He
er, I do his head and tried to ignore the pain in his heart. “Looking at flower
l?” going to cure me. Do not be naïve.”

“And you ought to stop being a stubborn dolt.” She gave him a
ou. For frown, if there was such a thing. But this was Brenna, irritated with h
resents also wanting to hug him and love him. “You would die before ever
k this is me.”

reedom “Brenna,” he whispered, drawing her into his arms. “Matthew was
escapelike a little beast. Those marks on Matthew... I have the same ac
aunted back. Put there by my father. You did not see them when I had my s
because I was always careful to face you. They are not only etched
lue and skin but in my soul.”

ds. The “I’m so sorry you had to endure this, Daire.” She placed a hand
ed and cheek and gently stroked it.

“I adapted to survive. I adapted by remaining numb as I was but I have continued to survive by remaining numb to everything I face as an adult.”

“So you approach everything with logic and detachment?”

“Yes, it helped particularly to get me through the war. This is how I deal with those in Society. With business affairs regarding the Company estate. This is how I deal with cheats and liars, coldly cutting them off at the knees.”

“And you think you can deal with a loved one in this way?”

He drew her closer and rested his forehead against hers. “I don’t know how to deal with a loved one, little dove. I don’t know how to deal with you.”

You turn my feelings upside down. I cannot think straight around you. I cannot breathe when I am around you.”

“I suffocate you?”

He chuckled. “No, you simply take my breath away. Brenna, I crave you and I fear to hurt you. Meeting you has been the best thing that has happened to me, and also the worst. What will I do to you if ever we disagree?”

“Haven’t we disagreed on things already?”

“No, little dove. We haven’t yet, but it is inevitable we will fight something at some point. Do I let you win? Will I seethe with resentment afterward? Will I beat you?”

“Oh, Daire. You are looking at it all wrong.” She wrapped her arms around his neck. Her body was so soft and warm pressed to his.

“How am I looking at this wrong?”

“If you loved me, you would not care who won or lost. You would look at our differences of opinion as combat postures. We would lay them down and each other and come up with a compromise together.”

“And if we could not?”

“Then one of us would give in. Even if we both stubbornly held our ground, you would never hurt me. You are not capable of this. Your love is too good. Just ask Juliana—she knows.” She looked up at him, and he kissed her into eternity.

She sighed as his lips hovered over hers. “Daire, this is the way the world works. We willingly sacrifice to make the other happy. Yes, one of us is likely to sacrifice more. It is rarely an even balance.”

“Are you going to keep talking, Brenna?”

eaten. I She smiled up at him. "Do you wish me to keep talking?"
e as an He laughed. "No, you lovely, opinionated, bossy bit of goods. I
kiss you until we are both in flames. I want to lose myself in you."
"Lose yourself in me?"

v I now Gad, she was so innocent. She did not know what this meant.
aymore To be inside her.
f at the To make her howl with pleasure.
Scream his name.

"I'll explain it to you another time. Just know that I will not ta
t knowoutside of marriage, although my body has not stopped aching to know
ith you.since the day I met you."

you. I "Outside of marriage?"
"Do you think there can ever be anyone else for me?" He did not v
an answer, but lowered his head to hers and kissed her with all the
ve you.she had stirred in him. Molten heat poured over him like lava. He cove
ing formouth with his, aching to possess her, conquer her, gain her surrende
her love.

She was so sweet. Her lips tasted like honey. He dipped his tongue
it abouthier mouth, probing the velvet warmth, tasting tea and strawberries.
entment "Brenna, my little dove," he whispered, lifting her up against h
shuddering as her beautiful, softly rounded breasts pressed against h
er armschest.

He wanted to be inside of her and delve into her soul.

She responded with innocent ardor, her mouth soft and welcome
uld nottongue hesitantly matching his thrusts.

isten to "Brenna, what am I to do with you?" he asked, tearing his lips fro
"My smart-mouthed governess. My fairy princess."

She still had her arms wrapped around his neck and was trying t
l to ourhim closer still. She met the heat of his mouth again and again.
heart ismoment, she let out a soft cry. "Oh, Daire. Let me go. What have we
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of us is

She smiled up at him. “Do you wish me to keep talking?”

He laughed. “No, you lovely, opinionated, bossy bit of goods. I want to kiss you until we are both in flames. I want to lose myself in you.”

“Lose yourself in me?”

Gad, she was so innocent. She did not know what this meant.

To be inside her.

To make her howl with pleasure.

Scream his name.

“I’ll explain it to you another time. Just know that I will not take you outside of marriage, although my body has not stopped aching to know yours since the day I met you.”

“Outside of marriage?”

“Do you think there can ever be anyone else for me?” He did not wait for an answer, but lowered his head to hers and kissed her with all the passion she had stirred in him. Molten heat poured over him like lava. He covered her mouth with his, aching to possess her, conquer her, gain her surrender. Earn her love.

She was so sweet. Her lips tasted like honey. He dipped his tongue inside her mouth, probing the velvet warmth, tasting tea and strawberries.

“Brenna, my little dove,” he whispered, lifting her up against him and shuddering as her beautiful, softly rounded breasts pressed against his hard chest.

He wanted to be inside of her and delve into her soul.

She responded with innocent ardor, her mouth soft and welcoming, her tongue hesitantly matching his thrusts.

“Brenna, what am I to do with you?” he asked, tearing his lips from hers. “My smart-mouthed governess. My fairy princess.”

She still had her arms wrapped around his neck and was trying to draw him closer still. She met the heat of his mouth again and again. After a moment, she let out a soft cry. “Oh, Daire. Let me go. What have we done? What are we doing to each other?”



Chapter Thirteen

HOW HAD IT suddenly come to this? Had they fallen in love with each other? To what end?

This was so much worse than dealing with Albert's marriage proposal. Brenna and Albert had known each other a full year before he proposed. She'd known Daire a mere week and was already lost to him.

But his fear of ever loving because of his cruel upbringing was a wall that stood between them, and no amount of kisses would convince him otherwise.

His rank was also an enormous barrier, although he did not appear to care it as important as she did.

Was it possible he and his friend Jax, with respect to Felicity, were willing to ignore the demands placed on them by their titles and social commoners? They might have gotten away with it if she and Felicity were heiresses.

But they weren't.

Of greatest concern were her lingering doubts. Was she ready to tell him that Daire cared for her? He had every reason to seduce her, pretend to care for her. He wanted Stoningham Manor. Was this his way of tricking her into it? And had he brought his friend in on the ruse? Pretending to care for two spinsters. Lulling everyone into complacency.

Well, he had not attempted to lure her into his bed, although he could not help but to crave her body. Perhaps her doubts about Daire's feelings for her would resolve in time.

But this fear of his, this worry he had a monster lurking within him, was quite real. She saw the worry in his eyes and the genuine fear in Matthew's.

How was she to convince Daire that he did not have a cruel heart?

He needed time, just as he had said. He needed people not to push him and dismiss his fears as groundless.

She ran back to the house, leaving him alone in the field of poppies. In any event, she had to ready Matthew for their excursion into the fort. He would enjoy the tour of Fort Arundel and the new hospital built to take care of the overflow of wounded soldiers from Plymouth.

Once she and Matthew were ready, she knocked at Duchess Juliana's door. The duchess's lady's maid opened the door.

The room was dark, and it took Brenna a moment for her eyes to adjust to the lack of light. "Oh, my dear," Juliana said, her voice sounding weak. Brenna lay burrowed under her covers. "Please convey my apologies to Viscount Brennan. But do go on ahead with Matthew. He is so looking forward to the tour."

"Very well, Your Grace. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"No, dear. I shall be fine. A little too much sun yesterday, I fear brought on a megrim. I have these often."

Brenna did not know whether to summon Daire, but decided to wait alone for now. She would send word if Juliana took a turn for the worse. "Very well."

ly, were
l marry
ty were



AS EXPECTED, MATTHEW was quite fascinated by the fort and soldiers, his eyes broad and gleaming as the fort commander, Fionn Brennan, led them around.

Afterward, he escorted them to Mrs. Halsey's tea shop, where they met his wife, Chloe, and the four of them had tea and cakes together.

Matthew chatted with Viscount Brennan, excitedly asking questions. "This is what a soldier's life is like," he declared. "Or I might be a gardener. I'm going to plant strawberries."

The viscount was duly impressed. "We have a small garden beside the hospital. Did you notice it, Matthew? Would you like to plant strawberries there? I'm not sure the soil is rich enough or if there is enough sunlight. I'm not good with matters of gardening. But I would be grateful if you tried."

Matthew was overjoyed. "Yes! Miss Brenna, is that all right?"

He had taken to calling her by that name and Felicity as Miss Felicity.

3. distinguish them, since they both had the family name of Angel.
wn. Heheartily approved of the idea. "That will be a fun project. Give us a ce
e in the days to get our plants and proper soil and supplies gathered."

By the time they parted ways with the viscount and his wife, M
uliana's was floating like a bird in the air. Brenna took a moment to tha
viscount profusely. "Just look at him. Have you ever seen a happier ch
djust to "I know what his life must have been like, having lived through sir
κ as she is worth everything to see his smile."

viscount Chloe was equally gracious. "We will have you all over to Mo
d to the Cottage soon," she promised. "Please let us know if there is anything
do for Duchess Juliana."

"I will." Brenna thanked them again and walked off with Matthew.
: It has Daire happened to be coming out of the inn as they strolled by. T
immediately stopped smiling and ducked behind Brenna. "Matthew, h
leave it your father. Your Uncle Daire loves you. Has he not been nice to you?
worse. The lad nodded, but still was not convinced to trust him.

She saw the pain etched on Daire's face the moment he noticed th
saw his nephew already hiding behind her gown.

How awful the men in his family must have been to damage h
Matthew as they had. Despite her disappointing conversation with h
is smile knew Daire was struggling to overcome the hurt he had endured.

showed Was it truly because he wanted to marry her?

She dared not hope or think about it. Just because her cousin C
ney met found love, that did not mean she had a chance at the same happiness
remained an improbable outcome for her. Perhaps less improba
on after Felicity, because the Earl of Bradford, unless he was a consummate ac
: I want had taken them all in, seemed not to care a whit for Society's rules. I
growing he have Daire's concerns about a monster hidden within his soul.

But Daire? He had spent so many years in a very, very dark pla
side the grown quite adept at hiding his misery.

berries Instead of fretting about what might or might not be between
nt. I am Brenna put her thoughts toward establishing a relationship between Da
d." Matthew. How was she to fix these broken Claymore men?

"Good afternoon, Your Grace," she said, putting on a bright smile.
icity to "You seem to have enjoyed your time with Viscount Brennan
wife." Daire knelt to address Matthew. "Did you have fun touring the t

Brenna The lad nodded, but would not look him in the eyes.
uple of “What was the most fun thing you saw, Matthew?” Daire asked.
The boy was too scared to answer.

Matthew Daire rose with a sigh.
ank the “I’m sorry,” Brenna said softly.
ild?” He shook his head. “Early days, yet. I’ll keep trying. You
nilar. Itforgotten our kite-flying outing tomorrow, have you?”

Brenna gave Matthew’s chin a little tweak. “Kite flying, Matthew.
onstonegoing to have so much fun. I’ll pack us a picnic basket and we’ll n
we canafternoon of it.”

Daire began to walk along with them as they started toward Ston
Manor. “How is my mother, by the way? I see she did not join you.”
The boy “She had a megrim and sent her regrets. I suggested calling for the
e is notbut she dismissed the idea rather forcefully and insisted I take Matthew
” outing. Is she all right, do you think? I mean, other than these occ
headaches?”

em and He shook his head. “I don’t know. She isn’t all that much older t
—about a fifteen-year gap in our ages. But she seems frail, doesn’t she
im and Brenna nodded. “I’ll check on her when we return and send
im, sheHewitt if she is not feeling any better.”

Daire lightly touched her forehead. “What about you? When is he
out your stitches?”

ara had “Oh, a few more days yet. He said they must stay in a full week
ss. Thisshouldn’t hurt or take very long to take them out. I think the cut is
ble forquite nicely. It does not bother me at all. I haven’t required laudanur
tor andthat very first day.”

Nor did “Will removing your stitches take place in his infirmary? What tim
meet you there and hold your hand while he takes them out.”

ace and She arched an eyebrow. “Daire, that is hardly necessary.”

“I know. I want to be there for you.” He gave a pained laugh. “/
1 them,I’ve been such an arse holding you off. Honestly, Brenna. I don’t kno
aire andI am waiting for.”

“I do,” she said softly, motioning toward Matthew, who still had h
buried against her gown. “He shows it outwardly, but is this not you
and hisinside? He’ll come out of it in time, and so will you.”

fort?” Daire shrugged.

“I have an idea that I would like to put past you. I’ll tell you more when we meet tomorrow to fly our kites.”

“Why not tell me now? I’m intrigued,” he said as they slowly walked the high street toward the edge of town.

She shook her head. “Not yet. I have to think it through.”

“All right, little dove.” He escorted them up the hill to Stoneman Manor.

Brenna never tired of the magnificent view no matter the hour of the day. She knew Daire felt the same.

Matthew was exhausted from his excursion and the walk back. Brenna helped him wash up and then tucked him in bed for a nap while she went to see how his mother was faring.

They met in the parlor thirty minutes later. “How is Duchess Juliana?” Brenna asked, noting his furrowed brow.

“She insists that she is fine. Simply a megrim. But I’m not sure she’s beginning to think she hurried out here ten days early for a reason.”

Brenna began to fret her lip. “Shall I have one of the footmen send Dr. Hewitt now?”

“Let’s leave it for tomorrow. She insists she will be fully recovered tomorrow morning. Honestly, I cannot see anything wrong with her other than she’s taking a little pale. But that could also be a trick of the light. What do I know?”

“I’ll keep an eye on her,” Brenna assured him. “I expect to have a good night. Matthew will spend the evening playing with his tin soldiers, I’ll be healing him. He’ll fall asleep with very little difficulty tonight even if he manages to have a nap.”

“Summon me at the inn if you need anything. I’ll be around, just finishing up the last of my work. I received a full pouch this morning, and it has kept me much of the day to get through the most pressing matters. If I can’t get away from your cousin,” he said with a wry smile, “I’ll share a late dinner with him and a glass of port before retiring.”

“Sounds awfully dull, Your Grace,” she teased.

“Well, I could scrap all plans with Jax and simply do what I’ve wanted to do since the first moment I met you, but you will slap me if I go into elaborate detail. Can’t have you tearing out and tumbling over tea can we?”

She lightly patted the spot of her stitches. “Oh, don’t remind me.”

about it But Brenna smiled at him because she was not really upset
found her attractive. Not that she would make too much of it, because
liked updated not believe he could have eyes only for her when there were
more beautiful women in town who would appeal to him, not to mention
ton beauties he encountered in London.

ingham Just as he had his doubts, she had a few of her own.

He was ruthless, by his own admission. He knew how to kiss a woman
he day, gain what he wanted. He certainly wanted something from her.

Hadn't Thaddius warned her that Daire was circling her like a lion
home, did he just want her home? Or did he want her?

e Daire In her heart, she knew he was not using her. Daire genuinely liked
treated her well and respected her opinions. He did not spout trite flattery
iliana?" In fact, he was deathly afraid of ever admitting he might be in love
her.

e. I am Why did love have to be so complicated? Why did it have to be
confusing?

ummon "I have learned my lesson," she said with a soft laugh. "I will not
like a goose and tumble over tea carts just because you toss a saucy remark
ered by shall take it in stride and simply thank you for thinking I am pretty
e looks for you to take notice."

?" He groaned. "Pretty enough? There is no one more beautiful than
an easy Brenna. All I want to do is kiss you."

m sure. "Again?"

a solid He chuckled. "Again and always."

She noted the heat in his eyes, but had no time to respond before
nishing Matthew suddenly came hopping in and interrupted their conversation
is taken hungry, Miss Brenna."

tear Jax "Matthew, how is it possible? We just finished an entire lemon
supper Mrs. Halsey's tea shop." But she smiled at the boy and took his hand
very well. Since it seems you are not going to take a nap, let's see what
has prepared for us. Your Grace, will you be staying for supper?"

wanted to "I'm not sure yet. I'll reserve my answer until I see Juliana again. I
go into it another hour before I look in on her."

rts, can Daire remained with Brenna while she attended to his very
nephew. They sat with the boy on the terrace, since her uncle's men
working indoors and stirring up quite a bit of dust throughout the main

that heFelicity and Jax had finished their gardening for the day, and joined th
use shelemonade and more cakes while Matthew continued to dig into his j
severalhearty stew.

tion the “How was your outing, Matthew?” Jax asked.

The boy smiled. “I saw soldiers and an old fort and ships in the
Tomorrow, Uncle Daire and Miss Brenna are going to take me to fly
oman toWe’re going to have a picnic, too.”

Brenna looked on in surprise. The boy had been listening, after
on? But had even mentioned his uncle by name. Was he getting over his
Daire?

her. He “We are going to weed the flowerbeds tomorrow,” Felicity sa
ery. cheer.

ve with Jax laughed. “What fun. I cannot wait.”

Since Jax seemed to be occupying Matthew, Daire took the opport
o be soslip away to look in on Juliana. Brenna knew he was concerned ab
mother. She felt the same. Perhaps they were both overreacting, but
run offensed this lovely woman was not suffering merely from a megrim.

mark. I Daire returned a few minutes later, settling in the chair beside B
enoughbut ever careful not to get too close to Matthew and upset the boy.

“How is she?” Brenna asked.

an you, “Same. Claims she is feeling much better. I don’t think she is.”

Brenna nibbled her lip. “Then is it time to summon Dr. Hewitt?”

“I left instruction for her lady’s maid to report to you immediatel
takes a turn for the worse. If she passes a peaceful night, I’ll look in
because tomorrow morning and decide what to do then. The doctor will be sur
n. “I’m if she shows no improvement.” He looked around. “Your uncle and h
are packing up for the day.”

cake at Jax reached out and took Felicity’s hand. “If you wish to stay
d. “Oh, Daire and I can escort you home later.”

at Cook She shook her head and rose. “No, I’ll see you all tomorrow. I er
work immensely, but it is physically strenuous and tires me out.”

I’ll give Jax rose along with her. “I’ll ride up early tomorrow to help you.”

“All right.” Felicity cast him a soft smile.

hungry Daire stared at his friend, but said nothing.

in were Brenna wondered what Daire was thinking. What were *both* the
n floor. thinking?

them for Matthew had now finished his stew, so Brenna bade both men
plate of evening and went upstairs with the boy to ready him for bed. It was ea
but he needed to wash up and play with his soldiers, and then Bren
going to read to him.

harbor. She peered from the nursery window an hour later and saw the tv
r a kite striding down the lane toward Moonstone Landing. The house sudde
quiet, even though there was a full staff.

all. He Later that night, shortly before retiring to bed herself, Brenna sou
fear of Duchess Juliana's lady's maid. "Oh, Miss Brenna. I don't know. S
slept all day and not eaten a thing. She could barely hold down he
id with added honey to it to thicken it a little. She ate none of Cook's stew."

The stew had been delicious, which added to Brenna's concern. I
Daire ought to have called for the doctor.

unity to When she mentioned it to Juliana's maid, the girl shook her head
out his Miss Brenna. Give it until tomorrow. She's had these episodes before.
Brenna more frequently lately, but I'm hoping the fresh country air will clear
lungs and have her feeling better in no time."

renna's



TO BRENNNA'S RELIEF, Daire's mother did appear much better the fol
day. She came down in time to join her and Matthew for breakfast
y if she terrace, and seemed quite comfortable as she watched Brenna and M
on her toss around a ball on the grass afterward.

moned Daire arrived by late morning and went straight over to Juliana. "F
is crew you doing, darling?" He gave her a light kiss on the forehead.

"I am in the pink, my boy. Do take Matthew and Brenna on your
longer, He will never tell you, but he is excited to learn how to fly a kite
prepared a picnic basket for you. Daire, why are you still frowning at r
joy the "I am concerned for you."

"Well, don't be. You must stop frowning. I'll have Betty bring
embroidery, and Jax and Felicity will keep me company should it l
necessary while you are off on your adventure."

"All right. But you must tell Jax at once if you do not feel well. W
se men promise me?"

a good Juliana nodded. "I will."
rly yet, Brenna had been listening in on the exchange and now took Ma
na washand to walk over to Daire.

 He cast her a soft smile. "Ready to fly kites?"
vo men She nodded.

nly fell Matthew surprised them by addressing Daire directly. "I'm ready, I
 Daire let out a soft breath. "I'm glad, Matthew. We will have fun."

ght out They walked into the kitchen to retrieve the picnic basket, which
she hashauled over his massive shoulder. She and Matthew carried the kite
r tea. Iblanket for them to sit on while they ate. The head butler had aske

ought to set up chairs and a table for them in the field beneath a sha
Perhapsbut Brenna did not want the formality. "Blanket will do, Mr. Greggso

wanted Daire and Matthew to stretch out and look up at the sky, comr
d. "No, the shapes of clouds, set aside their anguish.

A little The picnic basket and blanket were placed under a nearby sha
out herwhile Daire prepared their kites and showed her and Matthew how
them in the air. It was not long before she and Matthew were laughi
running through the poppy field, while their kites caught the wind
above them.

 Matthew had chosen the yellow one, while Brenna had taken the re
llowingleft the blue one for Daire. After helping them get their kites in the air
on thejoined in, his expression lighter than she had ever seen before.

Matthew It was not long afterward that Brenna's kite got tangled in the tree
ripped. "Oh, no. Daire, I think I've broken it."

low are He strode over and gave her his while he climbed the tree to retriev
 "Yes, it's torn," he called down to her from a high branch. "I'll see
outing. Bedwell can have it mended. Use mine in the meanwhile, Brenna."

 Matthew looked on in surprise. "He didn't yell at you."
ne?" "Nor would he yell at you had it been yours that got ripped, M
 Accidents happen."

out my Daire hopped down from the tree. "Shall I help you get the kites
becomeagain?"

 Matthew shook his head. "I can do it, Uncle Daire. Look." He t
vill youoff through the field, cheering as his kite caught the breeze and soared.

 "Blessed saints," Daire said in wonder. "Did you hear what he just
 "Yes. Isn't it marvelous?" Brenna watched the boy, his littl

bobbing as he ran. "I think I ought to sit this one out. Why don't you and Matthew's your kite and join your nephew?"

"I'd rather have my arms around you as I pretend to care about you make that kite soar." Daire sighed when she tossed him a stubborn "All right, I'll go play with Matthew."

too." "He called you Uncle Daire and wanted to show you his accomplishment. Is that not amazing?"

h Daire "Yes, did I not just say this very thing? Brenna, I am sincerely curious and at this breakthrough. However, I still want to hold you in my arms. Even if I hesitated because you are the one responsible for making this day happen."

de tree, "Remember when I told you I had a plan?"

n." She He nodded. "You mentioned something yesterday. What did you have in mind?"

She kept her eyes on Matthew as he tore back and forth across the trees his heart as light as the butterflies flitting along the flowers. "We each have a fear. Mine is water. Matthew's is fear of getting beaten. Yours is fear of being angry and will turn into a monster and beat him...or beat me. You never will, but that cruelty isn't in you. But we are not going to think about it today. We shall start tomorrow, weather permitting."

ed. This He arched an eyebrow. "Start what?"

r, Daire "Overcoming our fears."

He groaned. "You are not my governess. I have no intention of being done of your students."

She folded her arms across her chest. "Fine, then we'll start with me. Be my student. You are going to teach me to swim."

if Mr. "Brenna," he said with a soft ache to his voice. "Truly?"

She nodded. "I don't want to be afraid of the water. It is long past time I conquered my fear, especially since Matthew also wants to learn to swim. Felicity cannot be with us all the time. She went through this ordeal as I did, and yet she is not afraid. So why am I still so cowardly? I have to stop holding myself back. It is time. Don't you agree? Will you help me?"

hen ran "You do realize it is highly inappropriate for us to swim together. I might say it would compromise you if ever we were caught."

said?" Her heart sank. "Oh... You're right. I did not think of it that way. I should have, of course."

ou take He caressed her cheek. "I'll teach you, little dove. I will also step do the honorable thing if ever we are found out. Never doubt it."

helping "I don't doubt it, Daire. I know you are honorable. But I'll ask Fel n look,help me once she finishes the landscaping job. It was never my inter trap you."

shment. "I know." He gave her cheek another light caress. "Nor could y me, unless I wished to be caught. Do not bring Felicity into this. I an heeringto teach you."

n more "No matter the consequences? That sounds awful."

He emitted a heavy sigh. "No, it sounds wonderful. Surely you doubt...there is no one else for me. I know I have not made my feelin; have inenough. Well, I never had doubt about my feelings for you. But monster ever truly be in love?"

ie field, She wanted to scream that he wasn't a monster, and yes, he coul have alove. Who else could ever make her happy? But he would not li hat you anyone telling him what to think or feel. He had to come to the rea , Daire.himself.

ay. We He slapped his hands on his thighs. "I had better see to Matthew."

Brenna's head was still a whirl of confusion as she set out their fare while Matthew and Daire flew their kites. She watched them ru and forth for several minutes more until calling them over. The pair comingback and sank onto the blanket quite exhilarated and hungry. Brenna t

Cook had overstocked their basket, but the chicken, ham, apples, chee me. I'llbread were all devoured within minutes. Since tearing across fiel thirsty work, the lemonade and ale were also polished off with due effi

Brenna laughed. "I don't think there is so much as a crumb to be fo t time four plates."

how to The two Claymore men then stretched out on the blanket to sti e sameclouds. "I see a bear," Daire said, pointing to a cluster of tufted clouds.

ardly? I "I see a hawk," Matthew said, scrambling closer to his uncle and p u teachto a wispy string of clouds toward the horizon.

Brenna's heart filled with happiness.

r? One She held her breath and simply watched nephew and uncle as they their game. Daire was so gentle and patient with the boy.

way. I "No rain tomorrow," she whispered, praying for another beauti such as this one. She was serious about getting over her fear of water

up and important that both Claymores saw her do it, because they needed her as the example and prove it was possible to get over one's fears, although Brenna did not want Matthew there for her first attempt, which could very easily have been a trap because she was a coward.

She smiled again, watching those two.

Matthew appeared to be well on his way toward healing. He was laughing at Daire's jests and talking to him without hesitation.

After finishing their cloud game, Daire and the boy flew their kites.

Daire helped Matthew untangle his kite string when it got caught in the gorse bushes. Brenna sighed, knowing she was falling even more deeply in love with Daire as he knelt beside Matthew and the two of them worked on unraveling the knotted string together.

The lad ran across the poppy field cheering like a Pictish warrior once his kite was liberated.

Yes, liberation.

There was something quite freeing about this place, something that helped these Claymore men open their hearts and feel joy.

Daire walked over to her, grinning from ear to ear. "Don't say it, Brenna. I know this afternoon has been a triumph. Matthew chattered the whole time. He called me Uncle Daire and forgot to be afraid of me. We still have to hurry to go, but it is an incredibly good start."

"How does it feel?"

"Miraculous."

As the clouds began to thicken, Daire suggested they head back to the house. Matthew skipped by his side, and then, without hesitation, he ran to Daire's hand when he held it out to the boy.

Daire cast Brenna a look of surprise, but he was happy and his eyes were filled with love. It was a feeling he was not used to having.

Brenna kept quiet as she watched them, standing back and trying to show her elation.

Daire thought he was helping the boy open his little heart, but did not realize he was doing the same, opening his heart to let the boy in?

Would Daire let her in next?

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Chapter Fourteen

DAIRE WENT UP to Stoningham Manor the following day, arriving drenched the bone because the rain had fallen in torrents. Scipio was not too far with him, his mount having gone soft during their daily rides across the countryside in what had been idyllic weather until now. “Where is even Greggson?”

He had not expected Simon and his workers to be here, since that which remained was mostly outside work and could not be done in a storm. How could Felicity work outdoors on such a day. He had no idea where she had gone, but he would not be surprised if he were paying a call on Felicity and her family. His friend had not left Felicity’s side since the moment they arrived and everyone in the village had noticed...including Lady Dowling.

He only hoped Jax knew better than to fall into that widow’s trap.

Should he have said something? Given warning? He would make a point of mentioning it the next time he saw Jax.

Not that his friend was ever likely to rise to her bait. He had eyes only for Felicity.

“Duchess Juliana, Miss Brenna, and Master Matthew are in the parlor room,” the stately Greggson said, helping him off with his coat and waistcoat and then watching as Daire removed his cravat. “Your Grace, you are quite soaked.”

“There’s no help for it. I cannot remove all my clothes, can I?”

“No, I suppose not. Shall I search for something for you to wear? A simple livery? It isn’t perfect, but you have none of your own clothes here.”

“My fault. I should have thought to bring some up before this.” Daire had heard a lively country air being played on the pianoforte and a young woman delicately singing. He recognized Brenna’s sweet voice. “Just bring me a cup of tea. I’ll join the others. Thank you, Greggson.”

He raked his fingers through his hair to put himself in some kind of

But his shirt and riding breeches were still damp and plastered to his back. “No help for it,” he muttered, striding in and unwittingly disrupting Brenna’s song.

Juliana was sitting on a settee, embroidering while listening to Brenna play. Matthew had his tin soldiers and was lining them up in various formations in a corner of the room. He scrambled to his feet, but Brenna would not approach. “Good morning, Uncle Daire,” he said with an aching hope that she would attend to his voice.

“This was a huge advancement, and one Daire had no intention of letting it go to waste. “Good morning, Matthew,” he said with equal cheer. “You’re all to be enjoying your soldiers.”

“I am. I’m setting up the armies.”

“Would you like to learn about battle tactics?”

The boy’s eyes lit up. “Would you teach me?”

Daire nodded. “Yes, but give me a few minutes to dry off and have my tea.”

Brenna was a vision of loveliness seated at the pianoforte, her pale blue muslin that seemed to enhance the pink of her cheeks and the sweetness of her lips. But she shot to her feet now. “Oh dear. Your hair is a point you are completely...wet. Let me fetch you a towel.”

He grinned. “I’ll be fine. Don’t let me interrupt your dulcet tones.”

She blushed, no doubt remembering the last time she had seen him. “My singing voice is adequate, at best,” she said, making one of those breathy sounds that shot heat through him. “I’ll ring for tea.”

“Already done, Brenna. Go on with what you were doing.” He turned to Juliana. “How are you today, darling?”

She smiled up at him. “Quite well. But you will catch a chill if you wear those wet clothes.”

“Must you all comment?” Daire laughed. “I can hardly take them off if I?”

Brenna’s face was once more suffused with color, and she made one of those breathy sounds that put his heart in spasms because he wanted to be a cup of tea badly.

He was in no danger of catching a chill. No danger at all.

“I’ll have Greggson light a fire,” Brenna said, obviously wanting to get Daire over him.

s body. He smiled, quite liking the tender attention she was paying him. "It's already too hot in here."

Her pretty eyes widened, for she understood his meaning, observing a little warmth herself, which had everything to do with his battle and nothing to do with the inclement weather.

She licked her lips.

He wanted to kiss her.

Instead, he grabbed a wooden chair and sank his large frame into it, letting keep playing. Ah, Greggson, just in time."

The butler handed him his cup. "Will you require anything else, Grace?"

"No, Greggson. This is perfect," Daire said with a nod of dismissal.

Brenna plunked her delicate derriere back down on the piano stool.

Daire listened to her play another lively air and sing while he drank my tea. His insides were warmed by her sweet voice as much as by the hot

This was another moment he wished to hold on to—Juliana in her gown and embroidery, Matthew humming along while playing with his soldier and Brenna, his little dove, seated at the pianoforte.

This was what his heart needed. This was what his heart ached for.

He thought back to the lazy hours in his own sitting room at the

Inn when Hollingsworth, his sisters, and Danson were with him, all of them doing absolutely nothing worthwhile. Just griping, yawning, passing little comments about others in the *ton*. How dull and empty their conversations had been.

How full and rich this scene in the music room was in comparison.

When he finished his tea, he walked over to Matthew. "Shall I join you and your soldiers?"

The boy did not need to glance at Brenna before he nodded. "Yes, of course, Daire."

Indeed, a breakthrough.

Daire stretched out on the carpet as he taught Matthew how to set up his battalions. "There is an order to these army formations, because one must protect one's flanks from attack as well as maintain strength along the middle. Where will you position your cannons?"

Brenna was watching them out of the corner of her eye, just listening to the soft tune so as not to disturb their conversation. Juliana was watching

n. “Notwell.

Daire engaged in play for another half-hour before the luncheon was finally over. “Are you hungry, lad?”

The boy nodded.

“Leave the soldiers where they are. We’ll return to the game later.” Daire rose and held out his hand. The boy looked up at him, then smiled and

Daire turned to Brenna.

She cast him a delicious grin. “Well done,” she mouthed.

Indeed, he could not have felt prouder.

Matthew held his hand while they walked down the hall to the dining room. Daire noticed only two places had been set, and quickly motioned

Greggson to have two more added. “We dine as a family from now on.”

Daire had done nothing but play tin soldiers with Matthew, but he considered it one of the most productive days he’d ever had.

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ers, and



THE SUN WAS out the following day as Daire rode up to the manor house in the morning. Simon and his workers were fixing the roof. Jax was already at Kestrelgarden helping Felicity.

Daire seemed to have gained an unpaid worker in Jax, who had a definite interest in ever leaving Felicity’s side. He was not sure whether to step in and draw Jax back a bit. Since no one in Felicity’s family was expected to interfere, he decided not to.

He kept telling himself that Jax, despite having a reputation as a womanizer and the capability of being ruthless in his dealings when needed, was extremely honorable at his core. But what if, despite his intentions, Jax decided Felicity was not right for him?

“Jax,” Daire said, coming upon his friend and motioning him over.

Jax left Felicity’s side and strode to him. “I know what you are getting up to. Drop it, Daire. I haven’t changed my mind, nor will I ever.”

“All right, but you must understand I feel responsible for Brenna. It’s my job to bring her home to Felicity.”

“I know, and rest assured, Felicity will soon be my responsibility. I’m not planning on waiting the week before officially asking her. But I will be present for them as

as soon as the week is up. I hope you will ride over to the parish church on bellme to obtain the license.”

Daire nodded. “Just let me know when you are ready.”

He supposed this ought to have calmed him. And in truth, it did. Daire made the decision to marry Felicity, rash as it was, Jax was going to take it, and protect her to the day he died.

He had also laughed off Daire’s warning about Lady Dowling last night as they sat in Daire’s sitting room sharing a bottle of port. “Such worry is a waste of time in the *ton*,” he’d said. “She already approached me, and believe me, I immediately felt her trying to spin her little web around me. But Felicity is solid in my heart. Every minute I am with her only confirms how right my instincts were. No, I’m ready to make that commitment. But I have to know it out what to do about my gaming debts. I don’t think Felicity knows yet how I made my fortune.”

Daire’s advice was to be forthright and tell her. “Jax, you cannot base your marriage on lies.”

He’d felt quite wise and proud of himself when giving that advice. He was still watching Jax help out Felicity with the gardening work in the garden. Felicity whispered something. Jax nodded and then approached again. “Daire, would you mind if we took your nephew for the day? I had not said something about the fort commander setting aside a patch of garden in and Matthew’s strawberries and other plants. Felicity thinks it is a good thing to be doing it.”

Daire chuckled. “I don’t mind at all. He’ll be thrilled.”

This would also give him time alone with Brenna. He had to change of clothes for himself in his pouch because he was going to visit her today. Since he had not completely taken leave of his senses, he was not about to strip down naked. He’d brought along a pair of old breeches to cover his privates, and a fresh set of clothes to change into after the swimming lesson.

Jax’s plan worked out well, because Daire did not want Matthew and Brenna and also could not swim, with him as he was teaching Brenna. Having to keep eyes on both of them would prove difficult, especially if Matthew fell in. I only went into the water as Brenna was fearfully clinging to him at the same time. Daire knew that sharing a swim with Brenna was also a major risk to himself. He knew the consequences if they were discovered. She would

ch with compromised. He would be honor bound to marry her.

In truth, he *wanted* to marry her.

She was probably right about his never being able to hurt her. Having wanted to do was love her and protect her.

o honor *Love her.*

Yes, this was what he was—in love with her.

st night He chose a moment when Simon and his workers headed back to men are gather more supplies. Daire's staff had been with him for years, first v e me, I was a viscount and now as a duke. Not one of them would talk licity is happened upon him and Brenna in the water, although the glade wa ght my remote and no one was likely to wander by there.

o figure Nor would Juliana ever gossip about such a thing if she found o t this is they were doing.

Brenna hurried to the glade with her own pouch that doubtless co build aa clean shift and gown. He had already stripped down to his old breech was waiting for her. "Shall I help you off with your gown?" he asked hard not to cast her a wicked grin, because she was shy and p k when doubting the wisdom of her decision.

ch him She blushed. "I can manage it."

Felicity "All right, Brenna. I'll be here whenever you are ready." She den for skittish as a filly let out to pasture for the first time.

day for He stepped into the water and waited for her to join him.

After several minutes, she poked her head out from behind the tree "Ready yet, Brenna?"

icked a "I don't know. This might be a mistake. My shift..."

work on "Little dove, there is nothing you can show me that I have not of his seen."

pair of She gasped. "On me?"

ge into "No, love. On other women." Well, he'd seen a bit of her, too. I was not the time to admit he and Jax had been spying on them in the w, who "Don't change your mind. You need to do this."

leep his "All right. I know. Give me a moment." He heard her inhale soft jumped then she stepped out from behind the trees.

:. Daire was glad he was in the water up to his waist, for his resp step for Brenna was one of immediate arousal. Did she realize just how sh ould be fabric of her shift was? And how beautiful her body appeared beneath

She set his blood on fire.

There was something quite sensual about having only glimpses of
All dark shadow between her legs, and softer shadows at her bosom.

He was glad the water was on the cool side, because he needed
the heated mess she was making of his body.

This was about Brenna conquering her fears, not his notching
town to conquest.

When he He held out his arms to her. "Come to me, love. Don't be afraid
if they water will not be over your head."

She fairly "You have to hold on to me, Daire."

"I will, love." He nodded. "I won't ever let you go. All right? To
out what are just going to have you stand in the water. No swimming. No floating
your back."

He maintained *Dear heaven.*

He hesitated and He would expire if she ever went on her back with her breasts thrust
, trying the wet shift clinging to her body, and those stiff little buds straining
probably the fabric.

He began to sweat.

Had he thought this was a good idea when she suggested it?

It was as Well, he wasn't complaining. He just did not think he could control
body's response to her. It might prove a little embarrassing, but she
going to be safe with him.

She said. "Come into my arms, love."

Her hair was piled atop her head in a mass of dark curls. Her body
beautiful.

She already She put a toe in the water. "It's cold."

"A little cool, but you'll quickly get used to it."

She hiked her shift above her knees and carefully stepped in.

But this *Gorgeous legs.*

He glared. "That's it. Take another step toward me." His arms were still held
her.

He tumbled, and The stream rushed by behind him, its water clear as crystal. But the
also a crystal blue, had a gentle flow that should not have frightened him
in response to It was quiet and lapped gently within the secluded glade. He said not
a word, merely waited patiently for her to take another step deeper.

He asked it? "Daire," she said in a shaky whisper.

“You can do it, love.”

The wind rustled through the leaves, although he could hardly hear for the stream’s current rushing past them in a steady *whoosh*. Brenna now almost within reach of him. He leaned forward and took her hand, wrapped an arm around her waist as he slowly drew her up against him. “There, love. You did it.”

She was shaking and clinging tightly to him. “Daire, please don’t let me go.”

Their bodies were pressed together, her soft breasts against his chest, legs tangled with his because she seemed afraid to set them down, as if the sand beneath their feet was unsteady.

It wasn’t. She simply did not trust that her feet would find firm ground. She thought they would slip out from under her, so she held on to him with her dear life. She was a little thing, and so scared.

He wrapped both arms around her, holding her close and inhaling the warm scent of her skin. “You’re doing great, Brenna.”

She laughed. “You are too kind, Your Grace.”

“No one has ever described me as kind,” he said with a wry smile. “You *are* doing great. Perhaps not quite the fearsome pirate yet, but it’s your first time, love.”

“Why do you call me that?” Her eyes were closed and her lips pressed against his neck as she spoke.

“Love?”

She nodded.

He sighed deeply. “Because this is what you are to me. It’s true, Brenna. I am in love with you. I’ve loved you from the moment I set eyes on you. I have also realized something very important while holding you.”

She opened her eyes to look at him. “What have you realized?”

“That I don’t need another week or month or year to be certain of my feelings for you. Nor do I need more time to know I will never hurt you. I love you now and will love you forever, little dove. I want to marry you.”

She gasped. “You do? What changed your mind?”

“It wasn’t a change of mind so much as gaining confidence in another decision. I always knew you were someone permanent. What I did not know was myself. Would I turn into my brutish forebears? I know the answer. I could never lose control and beat you like a dog of a father did to

would sooner die than ever lift a hand to you.”

ar them “I know,” she whispered. “I never doubted it, not for a moment.”

ina was “Then you had more faith in me than I had in myself. I’m beginning to understand how love works. It is just as you said, not about control but about making the other person happy. I think you could ask anything of me, to catch the stars in the celestial sky for you, and I would do all in my power to let me to accomplish it.”

“I would never ask you for anything so impossible.”

est. Her “When there is love, I think nothing is impossible. Is this not what you have been trying to tell me? Is this not what all the tales surrounding Moonstone Landing prove? A ghost who falls in love? Moonstone shimmer in the night whenever true love is present? How do you feel about me, little dove? Would you have me for a husband?”

ing the “Are you asking hypothetically, or are you truly proposing to me, little dove?” “True proposal.” He chuckled. “I would get down on one knee, little dove, and I would put us both underwater, and I do not think you are ready for that.”

She laughed and held him tighter. “Oh, it is much too soon for me. But am I not nearly brave enough yet?”

is your “Will you marry me, Brenna?”

“Are you sure, Daire? I am only your nephew’s governess. No ties, no connections. You will be cut from Society, perhaps even by your friends.”

“If you are referring to Hollingsworth and his family, I assure you Brenna, I am not too enamored of my wealth to cut ties with me. As for Jax, I think it will be a race to see who gets to the altar first. Besides, you are not without powerful supporters, your cousin Cara and her Duke of Strathmore, the Killigrew sisters and their titled husbands, duke, marquess, and viscount. You’ll also have the support of Jax, the earl. That’s quite an impressive start.”

He kissed her on the brow. “You’ll always have me, little dove.” She nodded. “I love you so much, Daire. I cannot think of anything more wonderful than to be your wife. I love you. I love your strength and kindness. I love that you burst into my life with all your bullheaded determination. Does this mean we are betrothed?”

Does this mean we are betrothed?”

He smiled. “Are you accepting me?”

“I cannot imagine my life without you. It would be a sad one, indeed, if I were to lose you.” She nodded. “Yes, I am accepting. I could never love anyone else. I could never love anyone else.”

I trust you with my heart, with my hopes and dreams. Even with my fears. Can we get out of the water now?"

Her sweet body was still trembling.

"You just got in, love. Can you give it another minute?" He wasn't asking to force her, but she really needed to stay in longer. He was holding tight to her. She was safe in his arms. That fear she had built up over the years needed to come down. "Put your arms around my neck and just talk to me about anything that comes to mind. Do this for me, Brenna."

"Must I?"

"Yes." He knew she wanted to tear out of the water, but she might go in again if he let her out now.

"You're right. I am being a coward."

"No, love. It isn't cowardly. Don't think of it that way. Pretend we're on land, for this is little different...just wetter."

She laughed softly.

"What's on your mind, love?"

"Daire, that day," she said, and he knew by the soft ache in her voice she was referring to the long-ago incident when she had been trapped on the sinking schooner as a child. "The waves were so high as they swept across the deck. We all held on for dear life, grabbed on to whatever we could reach—the closest mast. A stair rail. The wheel of the ship. But the waves were relentless, they crashed all around us."

He kissed her on the cheek. "Go on, love. You can tell me."

Tears started to roll down her cheeks. "Even though we were all so young, we understood the danger and knew we were about to die. The Felicity, William, and me. We were all there, so little and helpless. My father stared at each other, too scared to talk or scream. This is what real fear does—it simply paralyzes you. We held on and closed our eyes as the waves swept over us. After each wave, I would open my eyes with such fear, wondering more whether one of us had been swept overboard. I shuddered with relief when I saw them all still there. I know they must have been thinking the same thing. *We survived this wave. Will the next one take us?* Still, we held on and waited for the next wall of water to hit."

"Sweetheart," he whispered, glad she trusted him enough to let her feelings be heard.

"Suddenly, Captain Arundel, this warrior angel, climbed aboard."

greatest loomed over us. He took William first because he was the littlest. Then he took Cara. He took all the children, one at a time, and told us we were safe. He wasn't going to let anything bad happen to us."

"He kissed her tears as they rolled down her cheeks. "And look how brightly you've accomplished since. I hope you know he would have been so proud of you. As I am, Brenna. I am yours, and I will always protect you. I will come to you if ever you are in danger, I will always come for you."

"I do know. I trust you with all my heart. I would brave anything and with you, Daire. Although I'm not really being brave right now, but never. She took a deep, shuddering breath. "He died saving us. Why did he die? He was such a good man, so brave and fearless."

"I don't know, little dove. But he saved you, not only for all the important work you did at the Rainard Academy and will continue to do as my daughter. He saved you for me, as well. I now have my chance at happiness because you are here for me. Just as you are here for Matthew. He is conquering his fears because of you. I am conquering mine because I now have you."

"Daire, do you think the moonstones will shine for us?"

"Without a doubt, love. They'll shine brighter than the sun for us."

"I think so, too. I'm glad you kept coming back to Moonstone. I can't find. A year after year, even though you could not find a suitable house."

"I knew there was a reason I had to keep returning. You know I never found a house. It was, and has always been, about you. I had to find you. When I did, I knew you were the one. I felt it to depths of my desire. All very soul, Brenna."

"Cara, He tucked a finger under her chin. "Look at me, love. Let me kiss you. We just She nodded and raised her gaze to his.

"He covered her mouth with his, pouring his heart into a gentle kiss. He wanted hot, passionate ones would come later, but not now. She was so frazzled, wondering thought she might shatter like crystal. He deepened the kiss, but kept it brief. Each hand then ended it slowly.

"She smiled at him.

"He could not resist kissing her on her pert, wet nose. "I think there will be a double wedding. You and me. Jax and Felicity. I'll take Jax with me tomorrow morning and we'll obtain the licenses."

"And marry here in Moonstone Landing? At St. Peter's Church? Trask will be delighted. I'm sure it will draw his biggest crowd yet."

Then he think Jax is ready to marry Felicity?"

ould be Daire laughed. "He is champing at the bit. He would have married day he met her, had I not held him back."

ok at all "Felicity and I survived the schooner together. As I mentioned, proud of Arundel took William first. Then he took Cara. The wave swells were for any bigger. Felicity and I were the last. We held hands, afraid to fall off the

Those waves were so big, time and again knocking us over. We thought for you would die together. But we were happy that Cara and William were safe. "I am I?" made us feel more at peace, knowing they would survive the squall. I have to we did not. Felicity said she loved me, and I told her that I loved her. We held on to each other and wrapped our arms around each other. Then important Arundel lifted us up."

uchess. "Dear heaven, Brenna." He kissed her closed eyes, her cheeks, and because lips. He then buried his lips against her soft neck.

ring his "Nothing would make me happier than to marry on the same day as Felicity."

"I love you, Brenna. I love you so much, my Moonstone governess. I tipped her chin up so that she met his gaze. "Kiss me, little dove. Kiss me, my angel. A double wedding it shall be."

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“Felicity and I survived the schooner together. As I mentioned, Captain Arundel took William first. Then he took Cara. The wave swells were getting bigger. Felicity and I were the last. We held hands, afraid to fall off the deck. Those waves were so big, time and again knocking us over. We thought we would die together. But we were happy that Cara and William were saved. It made us feel more at peace, knowing they would survive the squall even if we did not. Felicity said she loved me, and I told her that I loved her. We held on to each other and wrapped our arms around each other. Then Captain Arundel lifted us up.”

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“I love you, Brenna. I love you so much, my Moonstone governess.” He tipped her chin up so that she met his gaze. “Kiss me, little dove. Kiss me, my angel. A double wedding it shall be.”



Chapter Fifteen

SEVERAL DAYS LATER, Daire and Jax returned to the Kestrel Inn, each with a marriage license secured in his breast pocket. They marched in just as the mail coach rumbled to a halt beneath the inn's sheltered portico. Daire reached for the mail pouch to be handed over to Thaddius, since there was like to be correspondence in it for him.

Several passengers descended, a young husband and wife, a gentleman who carried himself with a superior air. Daire took an instant dislike to him, for he could tell by the cut of his clothes he was not *ton*.

Not that he was enamored of most members of the *ton*, who were vain, aimless and insufferable as the friends he had recently dispatched to B.

This man was pretentious.

However, Daire, in a frame of mind to be generous, moved aside to let these new arrivals to register.

The husband and wife went first, obviously not used to an inn as fine as this one. They were a sweet couple, and Daire realized they were probably newlyweds splurging on a wedding night and had never been to an inn as fine as this grand. That they rode here in the mail coach was a strong indication they were not a couple with means and had to scrimp on their fare. Their clothes were modest as well.

But they looked happy.

As they chattered with Thaddius, Daire heard them mention their childhood sweethearts. "I knew I had to marry her the moment I met her," the man said, obviously still madly in love with his wife. "But it took me a long time to gain her family's approval. I never gave up, and here we are finally together."

The insolent man behind them grumbled impatiently.

"Thaddius," Daire said, calling him aside a moment. "Give these newlyweds a nice room and put it on my charge. Their meals, as well."

His eyes widened and he tossed Daire a lopsided grin. "That's all right, sir."

generous of you, Your Grace.”

Daire shrugged. “Every once in a while I lose my mind and decide something nice. Do not go blabbing about what I’ve done. Keep yourself. Tell them they are lucky winners of some contest they’re running.”

Thaddius rolled his eyes and hurried back to his desk. “Well, look. You are our thousandth guest this year. Congratulations, Mr. Angel. Welcome with Davenport.”

They turned to each other, looking pleasantly muddled, and then waited back to Thaddius. “My word, you are a popular establishment. Congratulations to you, Mr. Angel. We heard the Kestrel Inn is a wonderful establishment.”

“Well, put your coin purse away, Mr. Davenport. Just sign our register. That’s all we’ll require of you, because your room and meals are here tonight.” Thaddius, obviously unable to keep a secret, turned his countenance toward Daire and winked.

“My word,” the husband said, shaking his head in awe.

His wife had tears in her eyes. “That is most generous of you.”

“Not at all—it is our pleasure.” Thaddius winked at Daire again.

The man behind the young couple grew more impatient. “Do you want to move along? Others are waiting in queue to register.”

Thaddius summoned one of his attendants to take the Davenport couple’s bags up to their room, and then turned to the grumpy man with apologies for the delay, sir. We’ll have you comfortably settled in the inn with an eye. Just sign the register, please.”

As the man signed, Thaddius hastily opened the mail pouch and looked through it. “Your Grace, these came for you.” He handed Daire three letters. “I think that’s everything. I’ll deliver anything else I might have missed, and here’s one for my cousin. May I put it in your custody, since I expect you will be seeing her shortly?”

“Yes, of course.” Daire took it, noting it was from the headmistress of Rainard Academy. Brenna had been eagerly awaiting her response. “Thank you, Thaddius.”

The man cast Daire an insolent look.

Were he not in such pleasant humor, Daire would have punched the fellow. No one shot him a look of disdain and got away with it. A

Daire itched to give this man a comeuppance, he turned away and wanted to do to shrug it off when the man began to snipe at Thaddius. “This is completely intolerable. I demand to speak to the manager.”

“You are looking at him,” Thaddius said, still smiling, but Daire felt the undercurrent of annoyance in his tone. “We are a busy establishment at that! We strive to accommodate all of our guests. If you are displeased with our service, then may I recommend the Three Lions Tavern?”

“A tavern? For a man of my stature? Do not be ridiculous. Show me your room.”

“At once Mr., er...Swan...”

“Swanson. That’s Professor Swanson to you. Professor Albert Swanson. What the blazes?”

How did this oaf dare set foot in Moonstone Landing after the way he mistreated Brenna?

“Brenna’s Albert?” Thaddius asked, his eyes wide in alarm as he looked at Daire, who studied the man.

No wonder he had taken an instant dislike to him.

Priggish arse.

Daire shook his head slightly, motioning for Thaddius to keep quiet about his betrothal to Brenna. She and Felicity would be along soon. He

Brenna would want to speak to Albert Swanson and gently break the news about their impending marriage to him.

Not that her Albert deserved to be handled politely. Daire intended to blink of present for that conversation, his purpose to scare off this windbag if he had a chance he thought to insult Brenna.

Thaddius gave a quick nod in understanding.

But he had no sooner registered the man than Brenna bounded in. “Your Grace,” she said, addressing Daire formally, since they were in public, “I think you are going to love what I have chosen for—” She came to an abrupt halt. “Albert? What are you doing here?”

“I’ve decided to give you another chance. I’m here to take you to Oxford, at great expense and inconvenience to myself, I might add.”

Jax, who had been standing next to Daire, muttered, “What an arse. It ought to be interesting.”

Brenna’s smile faded. “Thaddius, hold up the mail coach. They’ll take me through ship this man back to Oxford, or to blazes, for all I care. Albert, how do

is about show your face here after what you did to me!”

elay is “Me? Why, you ungrateful girl! I asked you to marry me.”

Daire blocked the man when he started toward Brenna, not at all caught the angry look on his face. “Keep your distance,” he said with a vent, sir. growl.

with our Brenna tipped her chin in the air. “Thank you, Your Grace. But this fight, and I would like to finish it. You needn’t involve yourself.”

ve me to He glanced at Jax, who was struggling to contain his laughter.

Daire did not think the situation was particularly humorous, other than this officious prig was about to get his arse set afire by Brenna. He would not interfere, to protect her, but she would only take it as though he had interfered in her.

he had She curled her hands into fists and took in a lung full of air. “Albion, you or did you not attempt to destroy my career?”

glanced “Are you referring to that girls’ school?” the prig said with a cold smile. “Surely you are not serious.”

“Yes, the very one. It happens to be an elite preparatory school where I taught mathematics and literature. You sabotaged my teaching position about underhanded attempt to force me into accepting you. Do you dare deny it? She placed her hands on her hips and pursed her rosebud lips in that knowing way Daire adored. “I am merely awaiting the proof of your reprehensible behavior from independent sources.”

ed to be “The proof? I do not owe you an explanation for my actions. I do not think I would allow my wife to demean my standing by having her work our marriage?”

“You find the work I do demeaning?” Brenna approached him. “You do not find yourself another woman’s dreams to stifle and crush, for you shall find your hands on mine. I will never marry you.”

came to “Ungrateful girl! You ought to be kissing my hand that I even deign to ask you. What are you other than a spinster with no prospects? Who brought you back to you think to find in this miserable rabbit hole?”

Daire growled.

se. This Brenna shot him a warning glance.

How could he keep out of it? The man was insulting his betrothed. He was going to flatten the oaf.

are to Moonstone Landing. He took a step forward and once again met Brenna’s glower.

Grace, I asked you to keep out of this,” she said.

He did not want to argue with Brenna, but he was not about to put himself liking this man insulting her. Then he remembered he had the letter just warning from the headmistress of the Rainard Academy. “Brenna, take a moment to read this.”

Her eyes widened as she took it from Daire’s hand, gasping and recognizing the sender’s name. She opened the letter and quickly read and her chin shot to the moon again. “Aha! You wretch! I knew it. The headmistress has confirmed your heinous act by letter to me. I have my proof. You shed to be a boonder and an ignorant oaf. I demand you leave Moonstone Lane now on pain of faith once! Thaddius, what are you waiting for? Stop that coach!”

Thaddius ran out with arms waving in order to hail the driver before he departed, but he did start on his return route. “Horace! Wait! The professor is returning to Oxford.”

But Albert did not appear quite finished with her yet. “Fine, I shall go where I am appreciated. Go find a slovenly tavern keeper to marry you where I can be an angel. But do not think to come crawling back to me when you realize you are on your own in a world where no one will have you. How are you going to manage now that you have no money?” “No work? And no proposal of marriage from a gentleman? You are alone in a kissable world, and I was willing to take you on as my wife. I deserved your gratitude, but I was much mistaken in believing you were a sensible young lady of good breeding. You are no better than an alewife.”

“An alewife?” Her eyes became dark, fiery emeralds. “Her work after gratitude, you condescending oaf!” She grabbed a cane out of a nearby rack and went at him like a harpy.

Daire gave a hearty laugh as he caught her about the waist before she fell. He never smashed the cane down on the poor man’s head. “Love, I think he’s message.”

Albert stared at him in surprise. “Dear heaven, is she your mistress?” “Mistress!” Brenna raised the cane again. “I am His Grace’s beloved, which is the only reason I do not hit him over the head with this cane now for preventing me from hitting *you*.”

Jax was laughing.

So was Thaddius.

Daire struggled to hold back his own laughter as he held on to her. “Your least wait until we are married to do me in.”

She leaned back against his chest and groaned. “You know I would have really hurt you.”

arrived “I know, love.”

ment to Daire might have felt some pity for Albert if he looked at all would have been contrite. But he merely looked down his nose at all of them, climbed upon the coach, and kept his gaze forward as the team galloped off.

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“He called me an alewife.”

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l returndemented witch. Are you terribly disappointed in me?”

u, Miss He kissed her on the nose. “I am in danger of being more in love with you than ever. Brenna, you came so close to having your spirit crushed. I have no doubt. Deep down you knew he wasn’t right for you. This is why you came in to come back to Moonstone Landing. You were searching for the same attitude, was—the one person who could make those moonstones shine for you.”

demure “Daire, what if the moonstones don’t shine for us?”

He sighed. “They will. I’ll bet my dukedom on it. I promise you, Brenna, they are going to glow brighter than the sun for us.”

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Daire wrapped his arms around her. “Love, why are you crying? You were marvelous in chasing him off.”

“He called me an alewife.”

He caressed her cheek. “Well, you did go at him like Attila the Hun with that thick cane in hand. He certainly deserved it.”

“You would have handled it with far more tact. I flew at him like a demented witch. Are you terribly disappointed in me?”

He kissed her on the nose. “I am in danger of being more in love with you than ever. Brenna, you came so close to having your spirit crushed by that boor. Deep down you knew he wasn’t right for you. This is why you had to come back to Moonstone Landing. You were searching for the same thing I was—the one person who could make those moonstones shine for you.”

“Daire, what if the moonstones don’t shine for us?”

He sighed. “They will. I’ll bet my dukedom on it. I promise you, Brenna. They are going to glow brighter than the sun for us.”



Chapter Sixteen

DESPITE DAIRE AND Jax having obtained licenses, Brenna and Felicity's family insisted on having the banns read in St. Peter's Church each Sunday. Daire was not a patient man and meant to set down the law with the Angels, but Jax was the voice of wisdom this time. "They are insisting on it for the sake of the girls, Daire. They are nothing as far as the church is concerned and already bound to be looked down upon, although we know they are a thousand times worthier than we are."

"And your point?"

"Having the banns read allows them to come into the marriage with respect. Everyone now knows it is not some rushed, patched-up affair. You must give Brenna this respect."

So Daire did, although the wait to have her in his arms and in his bed was utter agony. It was worth it when he saw the happiness in her eyes as she stood before the altar and exchanged vows.

She was a shimmering ball of sunshine.

Vicar Trask, quite euphoric because of the size of the crowd attending his wedding sermon, put on quite a show for his flock. He added a dash of brimstone to what should have been a simple wedding ceremony. Much of his fiery speech was aimed at Daire and Jax for their debauched past. His stentorian voice resounding with calls to repent and forsake their wicked ways—which was completely unnecessary, since they had quite reformed and did not need to be lectured about it.

Finally, the vicar ended his theatrical performance and got down to business at hand. "Do you, Brenna Angel..."

"I do," she said, her smile taking up her entire beautiful face.

"I do," Daire said at this turn. "With all my heart."

Jax and Felicity then exchanged their vows.

The crowd erupted in cheers, Matthew and Juliana loudest of all.

was glad these wedding plans had seemed to revive Juliana, who had been looking very well upon first arriving in Moonstone Landing. She seemed to be thriving now, the megrims fewer and farther between, and healthy color added to her cheeks.

Matthew threw himself into his uncle's arms.

Daire lifted him and carried him as he and Brenna made their way from the church to the Kestrel Inn, where the wedding breakfast was to take place. Although most of the Stoningham Manor renovations had been completed on Sunday, the stately house was not quite ready for the entire village to descend on it. However, he and Brenna were going to spend their wedding night upon it. He had planned it all out, giving Juliana and Matthew his suite at the Kestrel Inn while he and Brenna were to sleep in the duke's quarters that had been expanded and decorated just for him and his wife.

The wedding breakfast continued through the day, and he and Brenna did not leave the inn until well into the evening. They rode to Stoningham on Monday at twilight, but as they passed the poppy field with its sweeping view of the sea, Daire ordered their driver to stop the carriage. He climbed out and

helped Brenna down. She looked like a fairy princess in her gown of ivory silk and lace. "Drive on, Mr. Poe. Duchess Brenna and I will walk the rest of the way."

"Very good, Your Grace."

Brenna arched an eyebrow. "Why are we here, Daire?"

He turned her to face the water as it now caught the hues of the sunset, the lilacs and pinks, and the distant burst of orange, all now shimmering on the water. "We're going to wait until nightfall," he explained, standing behind her and wrapping her in his arms as they both watched the sun sink into the cove.

"Oh, you're looking for the moonstones already, aren't you?"

"Yes, love."

"But Daire, it is high tide. I don't think we'll see them for hours until the tide rolls out. We ought to come back here in about six hours."

"No, I intend to have you naked in my bed by then. We are not going to haul our arses out of bed, get dressed again, and stumble our way down the stairs in the dark."

"We could take lanterns," she said with a light chuckle, "something we should have thought to bring with us now."

had not “Not necessary. And I do not appreciate your logical suggestion. But she teased. “This is about magic. The magic of our love. Those moonstones, and going to shine for us whether low or high tide.”

“Oh, have you ordered it so?” She nestled against his chest as they waited for the last rays of the sun to disappear on the horizon. “Tossing a few buckets of money at the moonstones will not help in this matter. Money doesn’t matter here. I don’t care how wealthy you are, or how bullheaded and demanding you are. You cannot bribe nature, Daire.”

“I am not bribing anyone or anything. Nor am I tossing my money around. I am tossing my heart at them. A heart, I may add, that is committed to you from this day forward into forever.” He gave her a kiss on the cheek. “You should be doing the same instead of lecturing me, little dove.”

“Your heart? Oh, Daire. That is the most romantic thing I have ever heard of. You know I am yours and will love you eternally whether the moonstones shine for us.”

“Now who is the cynic?”

“I am being sensible.” She turned to glance up at him with a playful smile. “It is a matter of the tides. It is high tide, Daire.”

He kissed the curve of her neck again. “Stop reminding me. You know I am sensible about it. Those moonstones are going to glow for us with a brilliance never seen before.”

“You love me that much?” She gave a lilting laugh.

“Yes, I do,” he said with an ache and a joy he felt to the limit of time. “How can I not? You are beautiful beyond description. That I love you is going to fit perfectly to mine. But this is not merely about my desire for a desirable wife. You have given me something I never imagined possible. Peace, happiness. A true family. Matthew, despite throwing the occasional childish tantrum, is no longer that scared, battered, angry boy.”

Brenna nodded. “He is happy.”

“Yes, but most important is that he has learned to trust and to laugh. Most of all, never to fear me. I want him to know that if I ever raise my hand, it will never be to hit him.”

“He will, Daire. He does.”

“I hope so.” It was no small thing, for Daire was determined that Claymore going forward would never suffer the rages or beatings Matthew had suffered. “Look, little dove. The moon is now rising.”

ns,” he She sighed and rested against him as the night breeze swirled
nes arethem. “It is a full moon, so big and silver. We’ll need its light to m
way back to the manor.”

waited “Greggson will have torches lit for us. We’ll only need to walk
ll yourthem to find our way home. Here we go, darkness falling.”

nstones They stood together in silence.

ou are. Brenna burrowed against his chest while his arms remained
around her. He breathed in her light lavender scent along with the sal
wealthsea carried on the cooling breeze. The grass was also cooling beneath l
pletelyand the poppy petals were furled.

e neck. “Oh, Daire. It is high tide.”

“Have faith, love. Be patient.”

r heard “All right. I cannot believe you are the one reminding me to be p
: or notshe said in jest.

But the minutes passed, and Daire began to think he had approach
matter with his typical bullheadedness and demanded the impossible.

kissable Yes, it was high tide. And he had not taken Brenna to bed yet.

Was this something he should have done first? Made her his own?

are not What did it matter? She was already so deeply etched in his heart.

with a And then they saw it. No more than the slightest glimmer of light,

Then a sparkle.

And more sparkles.

depths Each little burst of light shone as a different color beneath the dark
body of“Little dove, look.”

finding “I see it, Daire. Oh my. It’s beautiful.”

ossible. The sparkles of colored light now dazzled as they danced bene
asionalwater.

Brenna began to hop excitedly. “Oh, Daire! You were right.”

“See, you ought never doubt your stubborn husband. I knew it
igh. To happen for us. It had to happen, for no one but you could ever cla
er raiseheart.”

“This is momentous,” she said in awe.

He cast her a wicked grin. “Indeed, it is. I am about to have the t
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Chapter Seventeen

BRENNA HAD NOT needed to see the moonstones sparkling to know that Daire and she were to have a good marriage, but she found it nevertheless heartening to have the confirmation. After all, it was not every day that a schoolteacher turned governess married a duke, especially one as handsome and perfect as Daire.

He lit several tapers to give their bedchamber a candlelit glow. The light enhanced the gleam in his deep blue eyes, and she noted their warmth. “Let me help you out of your gown, love.”

She nodded, eager to finally have his hands on her, to feel the roughness of his fingers slide along her skin with a magical gentleness. “Shall I help you out of your clothes, too?” she asked.

He laughed softly. “You may, if you like. Otherwise, I’ll just tear them off, because I am so impatient to have at your sweet body. But I see that your thrifty wife is appalled at the thought of my ruining perfectly good clothes. Yes, we shall go slow. I want you to savor your first time.”

She smiled. “You have such a wicked grin on you.”

“Because I know what is in store for you.” He removed his jacket, waistcoat, and cravat, then turned her slightly so that she had her back to him. He set to work on the buttons and tapes down her back. “This moonstone gown of yours is quite nefarious. She must have put a hundred buttons on this gown.”

“Twenty at most, Daire.”

“Well, seems like a hundred. There, done.” He turned her around to face him and then kissed her softly on the lips, a deep, exquisitely perfect kiss that had her heart beating faster and her body heating. “Feeling warm, love?”

She laughed. “Yes, as I’m sure you fully expected. Oh, and my garter is off.”

He had slipped it off her shoulders and over her hips sometime during their kiss. It now pooled at her feet, so she stepped out of it and

retrieve it. Daire took it from her hands and set it aside over one of the cushioned chairs beside the hearth in their large bedchamber. He had his own clothes over the matching chair beside it.

He nudged her over to the bed and sat her on it, then knelt to remove her shoes and stockings. She shivered as his hands ran up her legs and he removed her garters. "You have the prettiest legs," he said, his voice low as he slid the stockings off her, his fingers exciting her as they skimmed over her thighs.

Then he leaned forward and feathered kisses along her thighs.

She shivered again as heat coursed through her body and turned her head to look at him. He was wearing a white shirt that hugged his muscled contours. His dark trousers outlined his powerful, long legs.

There was not a hint of softness on his body except for the look in his eyes as he studied her. "Help me off with my cuffs, love."

She was glad to assist, but her hands shook because she had never been so excited like this. She got them off, and he quickly did the rest, removing her shirt in one flexing move that fascinated her as he casually displayed his sculpted torso.

Dear heaven.

No wonder women did not resist him.

He stood before her wearing only his trousers, his body so sleek and powerful, she could see him as a war god on a fiery chariot.

"Here we go, little dove. Hold on to the bedsheets, because I am going to make you soar." He nudged her onto her back and settled over her, and she felt his weight sink into the soft mattress. Then he cupped her breast, though his hand was frustratingly between his palm and her skin. But as he squeezed, she found the sensation somehow heightened by that bit of added friction. She closed her eyes and just let him do what he did best.

It did not take her long before she was indeed grabbing the bedsheets. "He played her body with exquisite finesse, his hands all over her, cupping her breasts, stroking her thighs, clasping her hips. She emitted a sigh of contentment when he finally removed her chemise, eliminating that last barrier between them so that she felt the heat of his skin against hers. "Brenna, my little dove, you are so beautiful."

He made her feel that way, the way he worshipped her body, teased

the large, suckling her breasts, kissing every inch of her, covering her mouth with his tongue. He tossed her, probed and delved, exciting her and teasing her with his tongue.

He moved down her body, suckling each sensitive spot. She seemed to glow everywhere. Along her neck, her breasts, where she felt herself slowly so powerful that her entire body turned to flames, and between her legs as if she were on fire. She cried out softly.

"I have you, love," he whispered, keeping up his intimate onslaught. She grasped his head, clung to his shoulders, felt boneless and breathless as his hot mouth closed over the bud of one breast and then moved to the other.

Her eyes shot open when his fingers slid up her thighs and he touched her there.

"Trust me, love," he said, now working with prowess and taking her in his possession of her body.

She closed her eyes once more and simply felt his touch, breathed in the musky, male heat of him.

There was a fire in her body that raged and intensified with each touch. A sensation of pleasure. A feeling she could not name began to build within her.

She called out Daire's name, not certain what she was asking for, or if she did not want this exquisite sensation to stop.

"You're almost there, love," he whispered.

Almost where?

Then she felt an exquisite build and release, a beautiful shattering explosion of shimmering stars. She soared above herself, her body losing itself to the pleasure Daire had evoked in her. "Daire."

"I love you, little dove." He kissed her and quickly undid his pants, stroked his trousers aside to free himself and enter her.

It was not long before he soared, and she joined him again, surrendering herself because she thought she had spent every bit of herself. But they met as magic in their coupling, in their bodies joining as one. She breathed in his heat of him, felt the delicious weight of his body atop hers. She kissed his damp skin as he thrust into her and cried out in pleasure as he spilled himself between her.

When they were done, he rolled onto his back with a joyful chuckle. "I knew it would be spectacular. I knew you would taste like lavender and honey. So sweet, little dove."

h his as He took her into his arms and kissed her lightly on the forehead.
you, Brenna.”

ed to be “I love you too. Daire, I did not think I could ever be this happy.”

isations He kissed her again, this time on the lips. “Nor did I ever da
s. myself hope of finding the peace and contentment that had eluded m
my life. But I have found it with you. I would not be surprised
it. moonstones were lighting up the entire coast of Cornwall at th
eathlessmoment.”

l to the She smiled. “They could be. Indeed, they must be after tonight.”

They fell asleep wrapped in each other’s arms.

hed her



ing full

COME MORNING, DAIRE sat up suddenly, and the abrupt motion waken
d in the “Sorry, love. But I think Matthew is here.”

She rolled toward him and said sleepily, “There must be some n
ch newWhat time is it?”

hin her. “It’s early yet. Not quite six in the morning.” He slid out o
nly thatgloriously naked, and hastily donned the trousers and shirt he’c
yesterday that were strewn atop the plump chair. “I thought I was im
it, but listen. Do you hear him?”

“Yes.” Brenna slipped out of bed too.

like an Daire paused to smile at her. “Good morning, beautiful.”

t to this She blushed, for she had not been wearing any clothes either. She
around for something to cover herself. “I cannot put my wedding gow
tossingon.”

He strode to the armoire. “Here, take my robe. Your clothes are ne
prisingin the duchess’s dressing room. I told the lady’s maid we hired for you
ere wasstart until tomorrow. I had not planned on either of us getting out of be
l in thetoday.”

sed his She blushed again.

lled his “Ah, my sweet wife. We’ve only just started exploring each oth
had my way, I would have you in my bed all week. But I suppose w
ckle. “Inot have even a day to ourselves.”

ler and He watched her slip into his robe that was much too big for her, a

“I love helped her roll up the sleeves. “Gad, you look better in it than I do. Let me see what is going on, then I am taking you straight back to bed.”

He took her by the hand, and they followed the sound of Matthew’s cry to the nursery. The boy was crying.

Brenna and Daire rushed to him.

Daire took the boy in his arms. “Matthew, what’s wrong?”

“One of the maids at the inn said Brenna wasn’t going to be a governess anymore.” He reached out for Brenna, so Daire transferred the boy into her arms.

“Matthew, no one is going to take my place. I will always take care of you. But I am now something more permanent than a governess. Do you know what that means? The word permanent?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“Well, it means that I am never going away. *Never*. I am not just working for your uncle, but I am now his wife.” And after last night’s mistake, Brenna certainly felt every bit claimed by Daire. “It also means I am your aunt now. We are not only friends, but now related to each other. This means we belong to each other for all of our lives.”

“Then you’re not leaving me?”

“No, Matthew. We are a family. Your uncle and I shall always love and protect you. We love you.” She feathered the boy’s face with kisses until he was laughing.

That seemed to satisfy him.

Brenna was about to put him down because he was the size of a small child, but Claymore, which meant he was already almost as big as she was even though he was only six years old. But he was all lanky bones.

When she tried to put him down, Matthew reached out for Daire in the next door.

“All right, up you go.” Daire wrapped him in his solid arms.

The boy threw his arms around Daire’s neck. “I love you, Uncle Daire.” Brenna’s heart burst with joy.

Daire looked at her, his heart no doubt fuller than it had ever been. “I love you too, Matthew. Never doubt it.”

Matthew was still hugging Daire as he asked, “Am I in trouble?”

“You ought to be,” Daire said, not sounding very severe, “but Brenna and I just spent a very good night, and we are feeling quite...please don’t worry about yourselves at the moment.”

it's find She smothered a laugh. "Does anyone know you are gone?"

Matthew shook his head. "I dressed myself and was quiet as a mouse. Then I ran out of the inn and came up here."

She ran her fingers through the boy's hair to put some order in his windswept curls. "You could have gotten lost, Matthew. What you did was dangerous."

be my "No, I wasn't lost. I followed the lights."

the boy Daire shrugged as he exchanged a look with her. "Greggson put out the lights last night."

care of Matthew shook his head. "Not those lights. The ones across the Do you field."

"Like dewdrops?" Brenna asked, wondering how the morning dew had formed a glistening pathway up to the house.

merely "Yes, in all pretty colors from the water all the way up to the house. I followed the pretty colors."

int. We Daire grinned at her. "I had no idea my essence was so potent."

long to She laughed. "Oh, Daire. Put away that silly grin. Yes, you are wonderful and masterful. Satisfied?"

"Not nearly, but I hope to be after we get this young man back to his room. Matthew, can you stay in here and play quietly with your tin soldier while Brenna and I get dressed?"

The boy nodded.

Daire led her back to their bedchamber, closed the door, and then fell onto the bed, falling onto his back on the mattress with a soft *whoo* and thought he loves me."

Brenna came to his side. "Hearing it from his sweet lips... wonderful, wasn't it?"

He grabbed her by the waist and hauled her atop him. "Alright. Wonderful as burying myself inside you."

"Daire!"

"I love you." "All right, I am elated. It is nothing I ever thought to hear. Certainly not expected it so soon." He kissed her on the lips. "But I love you."

Everything good has come to me because of you." He untied the strings of her robe and started to take it off her. "Do not turn prim. I am merely a man with you to undress and wash up. Then we'll have to find you a gown to wear."

"That boy is going to wander in here if you don't stop wasting my time."

nuzzling my neck.”

mouse. “Is this what fatherhood will be like?”

“Very likely. Do you mind terribly?”

nto his “Sharing you with others? Especially miniature others who resemble you?” He laughed. “No, little dove. I will endure it with manly aplomb.”

Despite Daire’s attempts to distract her, Brenna managed to wait until he then pull out one of her gowns from the duchess’s dressing room. Daire had already dressed and then helped her, taking his naughty time about it, and finally returned to Matthew and walked him back to the inn.

poppy Matthew was smiling from ear to ear now that he was walking between them, holding each of their hands. “Do I get an extra reward for my good night Brenna?” Daire muttered.

Goodness, he was so gorgeous with that wicked smile of his. “Yes, I just love. You have been a very good boy.”

Matthew looked up at her. “Do I get a reward, too?”

Daire snorted. “You shall have an extra serving of pie at Mrs. Huxley’s tea shop. I shall make certain Thaddius is aware and notify your grandmother when she wakes up.”

the inn. The boy cheered and took off at a run across the poppy field.

while Daire wrapped his arm around Brenna’s waist as they strolled into the inn. “What sort of reward do you have planned for me, love?”

“Oh, you are the expert. I shall let you choose. I only know what you have taught me last night. I sense there is much to be learned from you. I’m proud.” “Heyou know, I am an able student.”

“Good, because I am a very thorough teacher.”

It was Which he indeed proved to be later that night.

They fell asleep entwined in each other’s arms after a wanton, most shocking, and utterly delicious coupling.

Daire nudged her awake in the middle of the night. He wrapped his arms around her and led her to the window. “Look, little dove. The moonstones are never shining again.”

ou too. “Oh, how lovely. They must be shining for someone else.”

g of his “No, love. For us. Can’t you see? They are pointed toward us.”

ssisting He seemed so proud, and she realized it had nothing to do with moonstones. “I’m proud because moonstones represented his ability to love.” activities in bed, during which they had been quite active.

ig time He was proud because moonstones represented his ability to love.

opened his heart to her, a heart he'd believed to be damaged beyond re-
Brenna knew those moonstones had to be shining for someone e-
she was not going to tell him otherwise. This was his pride. This was h-
ible me And perhaps he held so much love in his heart that those moo-
mb." needed to shine for them two days in a row.
ash and "I love you, Brenna."
ire was "I love you," she whispered back, looking forward to eve-
t. Theywonderful that marriage to Daire was bound to bring.

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He had

opened his heart to her, a heart he'd believed to be damaged beyond repair.

Brenna knew those moonstones had to be shining for someone else, but she was not going to tell him otherwise. This was his pride. This was his joy.

And perhaps he held so much love in his heart that those moonstones needed to shine for them two days in a row.

“I love you, Brenna.”

“I love you,” she whispered back, looking forward to everything wonderful that marriage to Daire was bound to bring.



Epilogue

*St. Austell Grange
Moonstone Landing, Cornwall
July 1824*

“THE BLASTED MEETING of the Ladies’ Hospital Auxiliary,” Daire murmured, spurring Scipio to a gallop, his heart in his throat as he rode with all speed toward St. Austell Grange, home of the Duke and Duchess of Malvern. “*I’m fine, I’m fine,*” she says. *I’m weeks away,* she insists. *Trust me to know my own body, Daire.* Nobody knows Brenna’s body better than I do. Scipio, why on earth do you listen to her?”

Jax was right behind him, probably muttering the same thing to himself about Felicity, since their wives—both of them—seemed to have died during the auxiliary tea by going into labor at the same time.

But these cousins were as close as sisters. They had almost died together, got married together, and were now bringing new life into the world together. No doubt one of them had gone into labor and set the other one off.

As soon as he reached the elegant manor, Daire leaped off Scipio and ran past the Malvern butler, who barely had time to dive out of the way before opening the door. “Where is she?”

“Both ladies are comfortably settled upstairs, Your Grace. The nurse and Dr. Hewitt have been sent for.”

Cain met him and Jax at the foot of the staircase. “Your wives and the ladies and her sisters have everything under control. You need to calm down.” “Calm down?” Daire and Jax blurted at the same time.

Cain laughed. “Yes, although I understand how hard it is to do. I’ve been through this before. Follow me. I’ll take you to your wives, but you stay beyond a few minutes. They’re going to be in pain, and you will be able to bear it.”

“Oh, Lord,” Daire muttered. “We won’t bear it? How about them?”

“They need to push and sweat and cry out. They won’t do it while hovering beside them.” Cain motioned for them to follow him up the staircase. “I will personally remove each of you if you are not downstairs within five minutes.”

“I’m not leaving her,” Jax insisted.

“Yes, you are. We’ll wait in my study. Just be prepared—this may while.”

“How long?” Daire asked, his heart in his throat as Cain led them the hall of bedchambers.

“I have no idea. Could be a few hours. Could be thirty hours.”

Daire was sorry he’d asked.

uttered, Could Brenna hold out for thirty hours of pain? She was his little d
peed to delicate and refined. She might be carrying a boy who was going to be
ine, sheas him.

ire. Ha! He could tell by the fear in Jax’s eyes that he was thinking the same
h did I of Felicity.

Cain knocked at one of the doors along the hall.

is horse Hen popped her head out. “Oh, excellent. Daire, you’re here. Co
rupted but you mustn’t stay long.”

Daire nodded and entered. “Cain gave me the warning.”

ogether, Hen nodded and quietly left the room. “I’ll be back in a few minutes
ogether.

Daire strode straight to Brenna, who was lying in bed and
remarkably beautiful despite her discomfort.

and tore “Look, Daire. This is the peach room. Did you notice the wall color
ay after the draperies?”

He laughed despite the turmoil in his heart. “Did you ever tell Hen
midwife sneaking up here the day of their annual village tea?”

“No, should I confess it now?”

re fine. “Dear heaven, no. It shall remain our little secret. How are you
own.” love?”

“I’ve had better days.” She smiled up at him. “You are allowed
ve been me. I won’t break.”

cannot He leaned over gingerly and kissed her softly on the lips. “I lo
l not belittle dove.”

“I know. I love you too. I’ll see you when our little boy cries out v
” full set of lungs.”

you are “A boy? Are you sure?”

She shook her head. “No, but the midwife lore is that if you carry it back as I have done, then you are carrying a boy. But if your weight is across your waistline, as Felicity’s was, then you are carrying a girl.”

He knelt beside her bed and took her hand in his. “Another piece of / take a Do we not have enough of them in Moonstone Landing?”

“We’ll soon find out if this midwife tale is accurate. How are M n down and Juliana?”

He ran his thumb in a slow circle over her hand. “They are fine. Ph taking Matthew home with her so that he can play with her boys a visiting nieces. He won’t notice a thing. Juliana is on her way l love, so Stoningham Manor to prepare the nursery.” He let out a ragged e as big “Brenna, how can I leave your side?”

“I know it is hard, Daire. But I don’t want you to see me in pain. Y ie things suffer worse than I will because there is nothing you can do to help me will drive you mad. Go downstairs and have a stiff drink while I do need to do.”

He heard the click of the door and saw Hen slip back inside.

“Brenna, I love you.” He hugged her as gently as he could man left before she noticed his tears. When had he ever cried in his life? N es.” that he could remember, not even after his father’s brutal beatings. looking the open sores and welts, not a single tear had ever fallen.

Nor had he ever shed tears during the war, despite his hearta or? And soldiers, hardly more than boys, fell all around him.

But now?

He would never recover if he lost Brenna.

He did not go immediately to Cain’s study but strode outside in a calm himself down. He walked to the gazebo overlooking the cov feeling, chatted there with Brenna at last year’s village tea, thinking she was th beautiful girl he had ever seen and knowing he was going to marry her to kiss she straightened himself out enough to be a proper husband.

Jax and Cain were in Cain’s study by the time Daire composed ve you, enough to return. The three men shared a bottle of port. “I’ve had n prepare a bedchamber for each of you,” Cain said. “You’ll have time with his home and collect a change of clothes, if you like. This could take th night.”

Neither Daire nor Jax dared leave.

“I’m not going to sleep,” Jax grumbled.

“Did you when Henley had your children?” Daire asked.

Cain cast him a wincing smile. “No. In fact, Hen threatened to h
of lore? tied down and tossed into our storage room if I did not stop pacing
caged bear.”

Matthew



ioebe is

and theAs MIDNIGHT APPROACHED and both ladies had been in labor for ove
back to hours, Henley suddenly burst into the study. “Jax, come upstairs ar
breath. your daughter. Mother and daughter are doing well.”

“Thank the Lord,” Jax muttered, and tore upstairs.

“And Brenna?” Daire asked.

Henley forced a smile. “She’s taking a little longer. She’ll ge
what I Daire.”

The night wore on.

Cain remained with him the entire time. Jax joined them once Felic
age and his daughter had fallen asleep. They tried to cheer his spirits.

But how could they?

“I need air.” He rose to walk back to the gazebo.

“It’s four o’clock in the morning, Daire,” Jax said. “It’s pitch d
ache as there.”

“I know the way. I won’t be long. I’ll suffocate if I don’t get out.”

He made his way in the blackness of the night, his ears attuned to
and flow of the tide as it rolled into the cove, of the crash and who
order to waves as they swamped the beach. “Keep Brenna safe. Please, help h
e. He’d had never prayed in his life, had never believed. But he prayed now
re most safety. He bargained now with everything he possessed, even his ow
: if ever “Take me instead.”

He heard nothing but the sound of the waves.

Then he saw the glimmer of moonstones, and his heart lurched. “
ry staff high tide.”

He thought of their wedding night and Brenna’s sweet body agai
e entire and her logical brain insisting the moonstones glowed only at low ti

they didn't. For her, they glowed at all hours.

He hurried back inside and took the stairs two at a time.

He had to know. Whatever it was, he had to know.

ave me He heard a baby's wail just as he stepped inside.

g like a "Daire," Brenna said in a hoarse whisper, "we have a boy."

He came to her side. "So I hear. He has a lusty set of lungs. How about my little dove?"

"Sore, but I'll recover."

"I need to kiss you." When she did not object, he leaned over and pressed their lips with exquisite care. "I love you. I love you with every ounce of my being."

"I know, Daire. This must have been so hard for you."

He groaned. "Me? You're the one who did all the work... Suffered the pain."

It there, "I'm not suffering anymore. What brought you rushing up here just as my son popped out?"

"I saw the moonstones. They shone...even at high tide."

city and She closed her eyes and laughed. "Stay with me, Daire. Hold me close. Sleep. Are you sure it is high tide?"

"Yes, love. Not a doubt."

"Well, isn't that something? Are they shining very brightly?"

ark out "Brighter than the sun, love."

She closed her eyes and sighed as she nestled against his chest. "How just wonderful?"

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The End

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The End

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