

—•THE SECRETS OF NEDWORTH HALL•—



THE
True
HEIR

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MERRY FARMER

The True Heir

THE SECRETS OF NEDWORTH HALL

BOOK SIX

MERRY FARMER

THE TRUE HEIR

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Chapter One

NEDWORTH HALL, CAMBRIDGESHIRE – THE FIRST DAY OF THE HOUSE PARTY

It all began with a silly misunderstanding.

“Uff. If I have to travel one more minute in a stuffy carriage with the dullest woman in England, I do not think I will be able to contain myself. I will scream,” Lady Eleanor Fielding huffed, glancing out the window as the carriage made the turn onto the drive at Nedworth Hall.

Millie Silverstone sent her mistress a halfhearted, sympathetic look before pretending to be deeply curious about the countryside they passed through. She was just as worn out from the arduous journey from Kent as Lady Eleanor. Her body felt as though it had been beaten with a hoe for days. A

headache pounded behind her eyes and all the way down to the back of her neck. And she, too, had been trapped in trains and their current uncomfortable conveyance for days with the *actual* dullest woman in England.

But Millie would never express those sentiments aloud to anyone, let alone the Countess of Gillingham's daughter and only child. She sat on the carriage's rear-facing bench, hands folded in her lap, ignoring the vague nausea of travel, saying little so as not to annoy her mistress, and doing her best to enjoy the idyllic views and picturesque landscapes they traveled through.

In return, she'd been treated to Lady Eleanor's grouching about everything from the noise and stink of the trains that had taken them from Kent to London, then London to Cambridgeshire, to the food at the inns they had stopped at in their journey, to Robert, the groom Lady Gillingham had sent with them as a porter for the numerous trunks Lady Eleanor insisted on bringing to Nedworth Hall with her, and more.

The journey was over now, however. Millie actually smiled as the grand house of Nedworth Hall came into view when the carriage swung around the gravel drive in front of the house. From what she could see of it, Millie was already impressed with the grandeur and beauty of the house and its gardens. It was like something out of one of the books she had devoured as a younger woman, despite her mother's insistence that a farm girl shouldn't read so much. Lady Gillingham had graciously provided her with those books, and it would have been rude of her not to read them.

"Bother," Lady Eleanor sighed as the carriage rolled to a stop. She scooted closer to the carriage's window, looking out with her face scrunched in disapproval. "It looks old and drafty."

"I think it looks lovely," Millie said quietly, forgetting herself.

Lady Eleanor rolled her eyes. "Of course you would think it looks lovely," she said with more than a touch of derision. "You think a barn is pretty."

Millie lowered her head and bit her tongue. The barn in question was a fabulous, new construction that had been built on the Gillingham estate the summer before. It was a marvel of modern architecture, and it had been designed to hold the new threshing machine that Lady Gillingham had bought, at great expense, to improve the efficiency of her absent husband's tenant farms.

Millie's own father had predicted that farming throughout England stood perched on the precipice of immense change that would make farms more productive, and put the livelihoods of farmers everywhere in danger. He said he was almost glad that he hadn't had any children aside from Millie, because he wasn't certain he'd be able to provide a future for them.

"Before a footman comes to help us down from the carriage, we need to settle a few things between us," Lady Eleanor said, sitting straighter, perhaps as a way to look down her nose at Millie.

Millie dragged herself away from her observations of the manor house and blinked docilely at her mistress.

"God only knows why such scandalous characters such as Lord and Lady Cambourne invited me to their house party," Lady Eleanor went on, seemingly talking more to herself than Millie directly. "They are most certainly not the sort of company one would usually keep to be considered part of the respectable circles of society. But their invitation intrigued me, and so here we are."

"Yes, my lady," Millie said, concentrating on her hands folded on her lap.

In truth, Lady Gillingham had ordered her daughter to attend the house party at Nedworth Hall, though Lady Eleanor had wanted to spend the summer in Brighton with some friends instead. Lady Gillingham had insisted a great many gentlemen of good title and fortune would also be in attendance, and that had decided Lady Eleanor.

Lady Gillingham had also insisted, despite her daughter's vocal protests, that she take Millie along as a companion.

Millie had been shocked. She knew nothing about being a lady's maid, though her own mother had insisted that Millie had a natural gentility and prettiness that made her ideal for the position, despite her low birth. Lady Gillingham had always hinted that Millie was born for better things as well and had made certain Millie was educated and perhaps groomed to take up a position as a lady's maid one day.

"I fully intend to win myself the loftiest and most well-positioned gentleman at this party," Lady Eleanor went on, as if already scolding Millie for interfering with that aim. "Nothing less than a marquess will do. Which means I will rely on you to advance my aims whenever possible and not to interfere with anything or to blunder your way around and scare the gentlemen off."

"No, my lady," Millie said, lowering her eyes.

"I do not want any of the fine gentlemen to see that I have nothing more than a farm clod for my lady's maid," Lady Eleanor emphasized, raising her voice in a way that Millie would never dream of. "You must keep silent at all times and remember your place."

"Yes, my lady," Millie mumbled.

The lion's share of her excitement about getting away from home and seeing a greater part of England had already faded to practically nil. It had only been two days since she'd packed up her few belongings and gone away with Lady Eleanor, but already, she missed the simple life of home and the farm desperately. Being constantly sniped at and told she was nothing had not helped her homesickness at all.

Lady Eleanor let out an aggravated breath and squirmed in her seat. "This is intolerable," she huffed. "Where are the footmen to greet us? I need the facilities, and if they do not come soon, I cannot vouch for the continued cleanliness of this carriage. Not that it's particularly clean to begin with."

Millie fought to hide her smile. There was something delightful about the fact that Lady Eleanor, for all her airs and graces, needed to piss the moment they'd arrived at Nedworth Hall.

“Oh, blast it,” Lady Eleanor snapped, reaching for the handle and throwing the door open so she could climb down onto the gravel. “I cannot wait another moment. Stay here and help the footmen see to unloading the carriage. Do not let them rifle through my things and steal anything!”

“No, my lady,” Millie said, indulging in a grin as Lady Eleanor dashed up the steps and let herself into the manor house.

With a breath of relief at finally being granted a moment’s peace from Lady Eleanor, Millie climbed down from the carriage and glanced around.

Nedworth Hall truly was magnificent. She had once been given a book of architecture by Lady Gillingham that had etchings of some of the grandest estates in England. Because of that, she could tell that the design of Nedworth Hall was Tudor with later additions on the sides. She assumed that there were even more expansions on the back of the house that had been made as the fortunes of Britain had increased.

The gardens and pastures of the estate were lovely and sprawling as well. From her vantage point on the drive, Millie was able to see long, rolling fields, a sort of small, wooded area of the sort that had been popular to plant a little over a hundred years ago, and beyond that, what she thought was a glimpse of the river they’d passed just before arriving at the boundary of the estate.

All in all, it would be a pleasant place to pass a few months that summer.

Or it would have been, had she not been there as Lady Eleanor’s drudge.

“I’ll just start to get these sorted,” Robert said, coming around the back of the carriage and beginning to unstrap the trunks. “Looks like they’re probably short on footmen at the moment, what with all the guests I imagine are here for the party.”

Millie hummed in agreement. “God helps those who help themselves,” she said, sharing her mother’s favorite adage.

She wasn't anywhere near strong enough to help Robert and the driver of the hired carriage take down the trunks, but she was able to wrestle some of the smaller carpet bags with her own and Robert's things out of the jumble of baggage. Beyond that, she did what she could where she could.

"I was told there was a new arrival that could use some help," an unfamiliar male voice turned Millie away from her work.

She stepped back from where she'd just pulled one of Lady Eleanor's hat boxes off the carriage and turned to see a devilishly handsome man walking toward her. Her heart already raced from the strain of her efforts, but at the sight of his tall form with broad shoulders and a trim waist, and the welcoming smile he wore, it beat even faster.

"I think Robert and the driver could use some help, yes," she said, stepping even farther from the carriage and putting on the very best manners that Lady Gillingham had taught her. She stood straight with her shoulders squared, but kept a demure countenance with her gloved hands folded in front of her as she smiled at the man.

"I would be more than happy to assist, my lady," the man said.

Millie nearly laughed out loud at being mistaken for a lady. The gentleman was well-dressed, though his clothing was worn and dusty, as if he, too, had traveled far and only just arrived, so she assumed he was one of the male guest's valets. He must have had as little experience at the job as she had at being a lady's maid if he would mistake her for her mistress.

"How far have you come?" he asked Millie over his shoulder as he helped Robert lift one of the larger trunks off the back of the carriage.

"From Kent," Millie answered, happy to oversee the men instead of attempting more manual labor—which she was certain she could accomplish, having been raised on a farm, but was loath to engage in, lest Lady Eleanor return and catch her at it and scold her. "We've come from Gillingham Manor, but by way of London."

“I’ve never traveled to Kent,” the gentleman said.

“Oh, it’s lovely,” Millie rushed to say a good word about her home. “This time of year, everything is so green and alive. The farms are all humming with activity, the meadows are just bursting with blooms, and everything always seems so right with the world.”

“What a lovely description, Miss—”

“Millie,” Millie answered before she remembered that, as a lady’s maid, she would be addressed by her surname.

The gentleman helped Robert lower the trunk to the ground with only the barest show of strain, then straightened and smiled at her. “What a pretty name,” he said, making Millie blush. “Mine is rather common,” he went on, a sparkle of mirth in his eyes. “Just David.”

“David,” Millie repeated, certain her cheeks were pink with delight. Good heavens! She’d only just arrived at Nedworth Hall and she was flirting with someone’s valet!

“Did you have a pleasant journey up from Kent, Millie?” David asked jovially as he turned to help a strangely wide-eyed Robert bring down the last of the trunks from the carriage.

Millie had no idea what made her so bold. She was not that sort of woman at all. But she found herself answering, “Yes, I believe I did, David,” cheekily using his name, despite all the rules and social conventions that said she should not.

When David’s smile broadened as he glanced to her while moving the last trunk, Millie’s stomach exploded into a fluttering mass of butterflies.

“Well, that is to say,” she rushed on, attempting to be proper, “it was a bit arduous, and I feel as though I’ve been tossed around like a loose potato in a wagon, but the countryside in this part of England is so beautiful.”

“It is that,” David said, looking specifically at her as he spoke.

Millie felt herself blushing harder than she ever had before. She had no business flirting with valets. She had not come to Nedworth Hall for the summer to find a husband, Lady Eleanor had. Her one and only aim should have been to serve the woman.

“I am sorry,” she said, letting her proper posture go so that she could join David and Robert in tidying up the back of the carriage and making certain all the straps that had held the trunks in place were secured. “I should not be conversing with strange men, however handsome and well-formed they are, when there is so much work to be done.”

David’s smile turned a bit confused.

“Right, if that’s all,” the driver said, coming around to face them. “You can pay me now so that I can get back to the train station and pick up the next lot.” He winked at Millie.

The flush heating Millie’s face turned embarrassed. “I’m afraid you will have to wait until Lady Eleanor returns,” she said. “My mistress has entrusted me with nearly everything but her purse.”

The driver laughed knowingly.

David’s smile dropped entirely into a look of even deeper confusion. “You are not a lady?” he asked.

A sinking feeling pooled in the pit of Millie’s stomach. “Oh dear. I fear there has been a misunderstanding.”

No sooner were those words out of her mouth than Lady Eleanor came rushing out the front door and down the stairs toward them, a man in livery behind her.

“Your Grace!” she called out, a bit manic. “I was told you had volunteered so graciously to assist me in my arrival.”

Millie swore she could feel the blood drain from her face, leaving her pale, wobbly, and astounded.

“Your Grace?” she asked, her voice shaking.

“Please don’t be alarmed,” David said, shifting closer to her as Lady Eleanor rushed toward them. “I am the Duke of Foxley. I should have said sooner, but I was captivated.”

That was all he managed to say—and that was more than enough to leave Millie completely speechless and frozen—before Lady Eleanor reached them.

“What are you doing, standing there like a dolt when a duke has come to help me?” Lady Eleanor demanded. “You should not be seen at all,” she snapped, then made a shooing motion to chase Millie away.

Millie found enough energy to swallow, blink, then lower her head and scurry to the far side of the carriage.

“You don’t have to go,” David called after her. “The fault was entirely mine. I was very happy to make your acquaintance.”

Lady Eleanor laughed nervously and positioned herself so that David couldn’t help but look at her. “These silly farm girls,” she said, waving a hand dismissively at Millie. “Their heads are as full of clods as their boots.” She cleared her throat, then said, “Allow me to introduce myself. I am Lady Eleanor Fielding, daughter of the Earl of Gillingham.”

She raised her hand for David to take. Millie felt a pang of...something she couldn’t place as David took Lady Eleanor’s hand and bowed regally over it while lifting it to his lips. “How do you do?” he said, sounding every bit like a duke.

Millie’s insides squeezed and pulled in every direction. On the one hand, she cursed herself for not seeing the obvious fact that David was not only a gentleman, but a duke. On the other, she’d liked him very much on sight, and in the short time of their acquaintance, she’d had a feeling like the two of them could have been friends. Or more. As wrong as it was, her heart burned with jealousy at the way David kissed Lady Eleanor’s hand.

With a sigh, she gave up any hope of taking Lady Eleanor’s place and focused on her work instead. It was blindly foolish to even consider entertaining an attachment to a duke. Things like that only happened in fairy tales, and Cinderella she was not. It was best to sweep David out of her

thoughts and concentrate on getting through the summer as Lady Eleanor's whipping girl.

"I do hope we shall have ample amounts of time to make each other's acquaintance more fully," Lady Eleanor said, concluding whatever conversation she and David had had while Millie had been busy arranging the luggage.

"We have the entire summer," David said, bowing to her.

As he stood, he looked straight at Millie and smiled. Millie felt herself blushing and smiled back at him before she could stop herself.

That was the only interaction there was time for, however. Another footman exited the house to join Robert and the other in carrying the trunks inside, and the driver stepped forward to ask for payment from Lady Eleanor.

Millie had to admit she was relieved to have David walk away, around the edge of the house and into the gardens. She needed to separate her body from him so that she could separate her heart from the hopes it had planted like seeds in the brief time of their acquaintance. She knew who she was, and who she was did not become friends with a duke.

"What an auspicious beginning," Lady Eleanor said excitedly, once they were shown into the house, where a maid met them to escort them to Lady Eleanor's room. "Do you not think?"

"It was a good beginning," Millie said, wilting on the inside. "I think His Grace liked you."

Lady Eleanor laughed conceitedly. "Of course he liked me. My mind is made up," she went on as they mounted the stairs and followed the maid to a wing on the right. "I shall be a duchess by the end of the summer, and no one will stop me."

Millie's heart sank even further. She would not be able to simply keep her memory of the few, blissful moments when a duke was kind to her. She would have to spend the next several weeks watching Lady Eleanor throw herself at the man. Worse still, her mistress would very likely attempt to involve her in her courtship.

“I think this will turn out to be the most memorable and monumental summer of my life,” Lady Eleanor finished with a happy sigh.

“Yes, my lady,” Millie said. She had the awful feeling that it would turn out to be the exact opposite for her.

Chapter Two

TEN DAYS LATER...

He was only a fortnight into the house party at Nedworth Hall and David was already seriously considering leaving.

“Come on, Foxley,” Lord Bygrave called to him as David stepped out into the garden with the morning post that Stanhope, Nedworth’s butler, had just handed him. “The ladies are in the rose garden, preparing for this afternoon’s performance of *Andria*. We thought we’d help them.”

David glanced up from the envelope addressed to him in Richardson’s—Fox Glen’s land steward’s—handwriting with a wince. Bygrave was with Lord Theydon and Mr. Covington, and they all wore jolly expressions of mischief.

In the ten or so days since the house party had started, he'd become friends with the gentlemen—though it was stretching things a bit to call Covington a gentleman. He was good company, despite his questionable origins, and ever since he'd engaged himself to Lady Patience Wycombe just a few days before, the rest of the gentlemen had taken it upon themselves to befriend the man with the purpose of bringing him up in society a little. Even though, from the sound of things, he and Lady Patience intended to live a quiet life managing the orphanage Covington's mother currently operated.

“There's nothing more enjoyable on a sunny June afternoon than assisting a fine group of ladies in their efforts to entertain the assembled company,” Theydon said with a smile.

“Or utterly distracting them from their tasks,” Covington added with a wink.

David smiled. “Nothing would delight me more,” he lied. Though it wasn't all that much of a lie, since he did enjoy spending some of his time in company. Just not all of it, as had become his habit of late. “The morning post has just come, though,” he went on, holding up the letter from his land steward, “and I must read it and respond before the afternoon post goes out.”

Covington made a rude sound of scoffing. Bygrave and Theydon looked disappointed.

“You're much too involved in your estates,” Bygrave laughed. “Why, my father lets his steward have free reign with all of that.”

Foxley bit his tongue to keep himself from replying that that was likely one of the reasons Mr. Damien Dixon, Bygrave's brother, could squander so much of the family fortune as to make a noticeable dent. It would have been unforgivable to question another gentleman on the way he managed his estates.

And Bygrave's father had yet to pass and leave him the earldom. David had not been so lucky, God rest his father's soul.

“I will join you shortly,” he said, walking on toward Nedworth Hall’s vast and complex hedge maze. “Business before pleasure,” he added, holding up the letters again.

“You are a credit to your family’s name and your title, Foxley,” Theydon called after him. “A finer duke has never been seen.”

David’s friends laughed good-naturedly, and even though David smiled and waved at them in return as he marched on, his neck and face heated with shame.

He was not the finest duke that had ever been seen. He was a mediocre duke at best. The only reason he’d been saddled with the title and the responsibilities that came with it at the young age of thirty-one was because his beloved father had been killed in a storm in the Channel that had sunk the ferry he’d been crossing to France in the summer before.

“Oh, Father,” David sighed, walking on to the entrance of the hedge maze, then taking the path he’d marked out in the previous fortnight to a delightful dead end where someone had positioned a bench with two, pretty lemon trees in planters on either side. “I wish you’d never thought to go to France.”

He found his way straight to his favorite spot, breaking open the seal of the letter and removing the pages and pages of its contents as he did. Someone had left a lace shawl on the bench, proving that he was not the only one who knew of the secluded spot, but he set it aside without much thought as he dove into the letter.

“*Your Grace,*” it began in Richardson’s clear, blocky handwriting. “*I hope this report finds you well and enjoying your much-deserved holiday.*”

That was the only introduction Richardson made before diving straight into an account of the many problems that had struck nearly all of the tenant farms of Fox Glen, not to mention those of the two other estates David was now responsible for. It was a frustrating and depressing read, particularly as everything Richardson and the more experienced and knowledgeable tenant farmers had tried had been for naught so far.

None of his properties were in danger as of yet, and the Foxley fortune was very much secure, thanks to his father's and grandfather's wise investments, but he hated to hear Richardson's reports of the tenant farmers' distress and their worries about making ends meet. He would subsidize whatever shortfalls the farmers had, of course, but he couldn't—

David's thoughts were interrupted by the swishing of skirts moments before Millie Silverstone stepped around the corner and started into the dead end.

David had just enough time to notice her wan, ragged appearance and the patina of misery that covered her before Millie glanced up from the ground she'd been looking at, noticed him, and nearly stumbled to a stop with, "Oh! David!"

David immediately set his letter aside and rose to meet her, smiling with relief. His heart raced with pure joy at the sight of her. He had only had the opportunity to speak to the lovely young woman once since their encounter on the first day of the house party, but he had seen her and met her eyes across rooms or lawns every day.

"I—I mean, Your Grace," Millie quickly corrected herself, dropping into a deep curtsy, her eyes downcast.

"No, no, none of that," David said, ashamed of himself for how breathless he sounded. "We are friends, remember?"

Millie raised her eyes to him slowly, her cheeks bright pink and her expression abashed. "It was all a misunderstanding, Your Grace," she said quietly, her blue eyes as bright as the morning sky. "I thought we had discussed this. I mistakenly thought you were a footman—"

"And I erroneously believed you to be a gentlewoman," David finished for her. "Yes, we discussed as much last week."

He had seen very little of Millie during the first week of the house party. She'd been following Lady Eleanor like a shadow. Unfortunately, from what David had been able to determine, Lady Eleanor had treated her as such as well. Millie was invisible to her mistress, and the other titled ladies

of the house party, unless she was being useful in the form of fetching and carrying for Lady Eleanor.

The only reason he and Millie had ended up momentarily in a position to exchange explanations for their accidental, but admittedly lovely, introduction was because the guests of the house party had been engaged in a ball. Lady Eleanor had sent Millie to fetch something that had been left behind—Lady Eleanor was forever leaving her belongings behind, as if they meant nothing to her—and David had had more than enough of the noise and movement of the ball and had fled to the garden to enjoy a moment of peace.

He and Millie had nearly run headlong into each other in the corner of the rose garden. David had been embarrassed at being caught sneaking away from the ball, and Millie...well, he supposed Millie had been alarmed at finding herself alone with a duke.

He'd apologized for his forwardness and mistakes of that first day, Millie had graciously forgiven him and apologized for thinking he was a valet, and then the two of them had stood there, staring at each other in the moonlight, and, at least on David's part, wishing he actually *was* a valet so that he could spend more time in peace and quiet with Millie instead of overburdening himself with company.

None of the other, more suitable ladies of the house party had come close to sparking his attention the way Millie had.

"I've...I've just come to retrieve Lady Eleanor's shawl," Millie said, gesturing to the shawl that had been on the bench when David had arrived.

"Here," David said, twisting to pick up the shawl.

They both took a step toward each other, and as David handed her the shawl, their bare hands touched.

David sucked in a breath, like the air had suddenly become charged, but he didn't pull his hand away.

Dammit, man, he scolded himself. *She is Lady Eleanor's companion and a common woman. She is both below your station as a potential bride and very much above being any*

man's mistress, even if you were the kind of blackguard to do such a thing. Step back!

“I will leave you to your correspondence,” Millie said, taking the shawl, nodding to the letter David had left open on the bench, but not moving her feet from where they were planted in the grass.

“Yes, that,” David said with a frown, glancing sideways at the letter, but also not budging from his spot close to Millie.

Millie matched his frown. “Is something wrong?” she asked.

For a moment, David found it hard to breathe. He had no right whatsoever to put a woman like Millie in danger of compromise by conversing with her alone. Lady Eleanor would very likely sack her without references if she had so much as a hint that the two of them did as little as looked at each other.

“It’s from my land steward at Fox Glen,” he said, despite every sensible part of him screaming in warning. “We’ve been corresponding since I arrived at Nedworth Hall about the alarming situation with my home farms.”

“Oh?” Millie blinked, and if David wasn’t mistaken, she looked interested. “What sort of problems?” she asked. “That is...I’m sorry, I have no right to enquire.” She hesitated, then rushed to add, “It’s just that my father is a farmer, and I grew up on one of the home farms of Gillingham Manor.”

David’s brow shot up, and he smiled warmly at Millie despite himself. “You speak so well for the daughter of a farmer.”

Immediately, he regretted what Millie could very likely see as an insult.

But rather than reeling back in offense, she laughed.

The sound was like golden gossamer distilled into sound.

“I am blessed to have Lady Gillingham as my patroness,” she said, lowering her face bashfully and picking at some of the lace on the shawl. “Lady Gillingham has always taken an

active role in the administration of her husband's estates, since Lord Gillingham spends more time on the continent than not."

A few pieces fell into place in David's mind. Gillingham was particularly fond of the villa he owned in Italy...and the young men who frequented the place. His father used to laugh about the man and wonder aloud how he'd begotten any child at all.

"Lady Gillingham took a fancy to me when I was but a babe, or so my mother tells me," Millie continued. "She took it upon herself to see that I was educated, and when it was decided that Lady Eleanor would come here, she insisted I become Lady Eleanor's maid and companion. But part of me will always belong to the farm."

David frowned. Something about that story tickled the back of his brain in a way even more niggling than everyone at Nedworth's search for Lord Carshalton's mysterious heir. But before he could give it any more thought, it dawned on him that frowning might give Millie the impression he didn't approve of her.

He could not have that.

"Perhaps you would be able to advise me, then," he said, as it was the only thing he could think of that would explain his frown without making her sad. He gestured to the bench, then moved with her to sit on one end while she sat on the other.

"I will do my best," Millie said, clasping her hands together on her lap with the shawl in her arms. "What seems to be the problem?"

David didn't think she realized it, but the way Millie looked at him, waiting for him to explain his troubles to her, held no deference or awe for his title at all. It was as if she were sitting down with the neighboring farmer's son to discuss their fathers' crops.

He missed that. He missed being seen and addressed as an ordinary man and not a duke so very much. For the last year, it had been as if not only had his father died, it was as if David

Sawyer had died as well and the Duke of Foxley had taken his place.

“Despite my and Richardson’s best efforts—Richardson is my land steward,” David began, “the crops in the largest of Fox Glen farms’ fields are coming up weak and stunted this year.”

“What crops have you planted?” Millie asked, far more like a farmer in the know than one of the house party’s titled gentlewomen, who were asking for the sake of conversation.

“Barley for the most part,” David answered with just as much practicality. “We have a contract with a brewery in Nottingham. Fox Glen is in Derbyshire, but closer to Nottingham than Derby proper.”

Millie nodded, her brow knitting. “When you say stunted and weak, are the young plants showing signs of yellowing and wilting?”

David’s heart beat double time, and he felt closer to Millie than if they were waltzing away in the ballroom. “Yes, Richardson has written of those things. I noticed them myself before I left.”

Millie inched closer to him. “Are there nodules on the roots of the plants that might be consistent with nematodes?”

Every sort of emotion burst within David at once at the word “nematodes” coming from Millie’s lips. She was the loveliest woman he had ever known. Despite her severe hairstyle and the grey clothing she always seemed to wear, she was beautiful. But it was her artlessness and the light of intelligence in her eyes that drew him toward her.

At the same time, it ached like a blow to the gut to know that he could never have her. They were the proverbial fish and bird. Their worlds were so vastly different and so strictly separated. She was forbidden in every way.

Which meant he had no choice but to savor every fleeting moment with her.

“Nematodes, yes,” he said, smiling and stretching his hand out on the bench, as if tempting the universe to let their hands

touch so that they might dream of things that could not be. “That’s what Richardson thinks as well.”

“Nematodes are the Devil’s own pest,” Millie said. She smiled suddenly and oh so warmly. “That’s what my father always says. He says they’re vicious little creatures that hide from sight, but their devastation is, well, devastating.”

David laughed, adding charming to Millie’s list of attributes.

“How has your man, Richardson, suggested ridding yourself of them?” she went on, her face serious again.

“He’s suggested turning up the soil around the plants to expose them to the sun,” David said.

“Yes,” Millie nodded. “That’s the only way to kill them.”

“The trouble is, the plants themselves are so delicate that his efforts so far have damaged more of the crop than we can afford to lose,” David went on, quickly forgetting that he was speaking with a woman who was essentially a servant.

Millie hummed. She then tilted her head to the side. “Have you considered planting tomatoes?”

“I beg your pardon?” David blinked.

“I know they are an unusual crop, to be sure,” Millie said. “But they resist nematodes, you see. As do certain varieties of peppers and peas.”

“Peppers and peas?” David sat straighter, as if he’d never heard of such a thing. “Do they even grow in England?”

Again, Millie laughed. The sound filled him with excitement. “They certainly aren’t usual,” she said, “but they will grow here. It may take a few growing seasons to rid the ground of the nematodes entirely, but if you employed a combination of turning the soil to burn the nematodes out and planting resistant crops, you could refresh your farms enough that you wouldn’t have the same problem in future years.”

“I shall write to Richardson this very morning to let him know about your recommendations,” David said, smiling brightly.

Millie's expression shifted yet again, this time to alarm. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to dictate how you and your steward should manage your farms."

"I didn't take it that way at all," David said, reaching toward her again, without thinking. "I asked for your advice, after all, and I'm glad you gave it."

"It isn't my place to advise a duke," she said, lowering her eyes. Her entire body seemed to deflate into the poor, beleaguered Miss Silverstone that David had watched from afar too many times as Lady Eleanor bullied her.

"Please, don't," he said softly.

Millie peeked up at him in confusion.

David tried a different approach. He smiled and glanced around at the dead end. "This is a magic hedge maze, you see," he explained. "There are no titles or stations within it, simply people. I am not a duke here, and you are not a lady's maid."

Millie softened and smiled. "Your Grace, that is absurd," she said, her eyes teasing him.

"I beg your pardon?" He feigned offense. "What did you call me?"

Millie laughed, then raised one hand to cover her mouth and the sound. For a moment, her eyes glittered with devilish delight before she said, "David, be reasonable."

He was in love. He was utterly, hopelessly in love.

And he would likely die a bachelor, giving the estate to his brother, Lawrence, by default, because no other woman could ever take Millie's place in his heart.

David, be reasonable, he repeated to himself in a far more disappointing tone. Millie could never be his.

But he wouldn't let her go without some sort of symbol of all that could have been, if only they were who they'd originally thought each other to be when they'd met. He twisted to the potted lemon tree beside his end of the bench. Whoever had cultivated them, likely in a hot house, had

ensured that they were blooming at precisely that moment. He plucked a small branch with a sweet bundle of flowers, then turned and offered it to Millie.

“For you,” he said, thrilling as his fingers brushed hers once more. “To take a little maze magic with you into the rest of the world.”

Millie’s smile was pure divinity as she took the blossom and raised it to her nose to breathe in its scent. “Thank you,” she said in a soft whisper. “I shall always remember lemon blossoms and nematodes when I think of you.”

David burst into laughter. That made Millie laugh as well.

He could kiss her. The idea tickled at the back of his brain. He could lean in and touch his lips to hers, and no one would be the wiser.

He started to move when the shrill shout of, “Miss Silverstone! You wretched girl. Where are you?” sounded over the tall shrubs of the maze.

Millie gasped and leapt to her feet. “I must go,” she said, stepping away from the bench. She made it nearly to the turning at the edge of the dead end before pivoting back to him. “Will you let me know what Richardson says?” she asked, looking so beautifully vulnerable, despite the subject of her inquiry.

“I most certainly will,” David said, standing. “You’d better go now, before the ogre breaks the spell.”

Millie laughed softly, stared at him for one last, lingering moment, then dashed around the corner of the maze and out of sight.

With a sigh, David sank to sit on the bench again, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and burying his face in his hands. Of all the women for him to fall head over heels in love with nearly at first sight, it had to be someone he absolutely could not, under any circumstances, have.

Chapter Three

ONE WEEK LATER...

“**B**ring me the blue shawl,” Lady Eleanor snapped at Millie midway through the morning, just over three weeks into the house party. “No, no, not the peacock one, the blue one, blue! Are you blind as well as deaf, you clod?”

Millie did her very best to ignore her mistress’s insults as she dashed from one end of Lady Eleanor’s guestroom to the other, searching for the shawl in question. She had half a mind to think that Lady Eleanor had changed her mind about what she wanted to wear on purpose so she could snap at Millie for fetching the wrong one.

“Can you do nothing right?” Lady Eleanor asked in clipped tones as Millie handed her the lovely, silk brocade

scarf that had caused her mistress to receive so many compliments from the other house party guests in the last few weeks. Mr. Sands in particular had noted that it brought out the porcelain quality of Lady Eleanor's complexion.

Millie wasn't convinced that it was porcelain so much as her mistress overindulging in the plum tarts Nedworth's cook, Mrs. Seymour, had baked specially for them all a few afternoons ago, and the force with which Lady Eleanor had been sick because of it a mere half hour before Mr. Sands had made the comment.

"I need to look perfect for what I am about to do," Lady Eleanor said, snatching at the shawl and draping it around her shoulders, then going to stand in front of the long mirror provided in the room to survey her reflection. "Everything must go exactly to plan."

"To plan, my lady?" Millie asked, stepping up behind her mistress and attempting to help by arranging the shawl's fringe so that it draped becomingly.

Lady Eleanor twisted to smack Millie's hand, her eyes never leaving her own reflection. She posed and preened for a moment before sighing and turning away from the mirror.

"This will never do. Help me change into the pink organdy," she said, throwing the precious blue shawl to the floor and stepping on it as she crossed to her bed full of gowns to search for the pink organdy.

"Yes, my lady," Millie said, no idea what her mistress was on about or why she had gutted her wardrobe and left every gown she'd brought with her scattered throughout the room.

"Don't bother with *shawls*," Lady Eleanor said, as if Millie had stopped to pet a stoat instead of picking up after her. "Help me with my buttons!"

Millie's heart raced from exertion as she skipped to the side as much as she dared to drape the rejected shawl over a chair, then moved to undo the buttons running down her mistress's back. It wasn't her place to question why Lady Eleanor wanted to change her gown for the third time that day

—and it wasn't even lunchtime yet—it was just to do as she was told.

That simple task had become harder and harder with each week that had passed at the house party, though. Lady Eleanor had begun her tenure at Nedworth Hall by trying to be nice to her fellow ladies. She had abused Millie terribly in front of them, which was an embarrassment at first, but in the last week or so, Millie had become so used to being shouted at, ordered around, and put down in front of the other guests of the house party that she'd become numb to it. The very fact that she was allowed to remain in the presence of the titled and wealthy female guests instead of being banished to back halls, like other servants, was an astonishing privilege.

It meant that she'd been able to see David. Not speak to him, of course. Not in company. The two of them should not have even exchanged looks when they were in company together. David was so far above her as if to be laughable. She was beneath his notice. And yet, every day, they were able to trade smiles across a room, say a fleeting good day to each other as they happened to pass in the garden, and otherwise remember that the other was there. And on a few occasions, David had subtly come to her defense, deflecting Lady Eleanor's ire, or just standing close enough to her that Millie could pretend he was her champion and that she was a princess in a fairy tale, caught up in some evil spell that only love's first kiss could break.

“Will you stop daydreaming!” Lady Eleanor shouted at her, twisting enough to slap Millie's hand when she lingered too long with the buttons. “I have half a mind to order you home and to have mother send another maid to tend to me, but just this morning, she refused my suggestion.”

“This morning?” Despite her mistress's cruelty, Millie's heart lifted. “Have you received a letter from Lady Gillingham?”

Lady Eleanor stepped aside to finish removing her gown and to take up the pink organdy one. She sniffed sullenly, and without looking at Millie, said, “Yes. It's on the dressing table.

She wrote a few words for you as well. You can read it after I'm dressed and ready," she added in a raised voice.

Millie had only glanced to the dressing table to locate the letter, which she managed to do easily. She hadn't moved a muscle away from Lady Eleanor, but she was snapped at anyhow. There was no point in taking any of it to heart, though. If she did, she would always be disappointed with her lot.

"Sometimes I think Mama likes you more than she likes me," Lady Eleanor said with a sour pout.

Millie kept her lips firmly shut. She would not walk into *that* lion's den for anything.

Instead, she moved forward to help her mistress don her pink dress. As soon as it was in place and buttoned tightly, Millie stepped back and forced herself to smile at Lady Eleanor.

"It looks lovely," she said. "You look as beautiful as any of the roses in Nedworth Hall's gardens."

Compliments with Lady Eleanor could go one of two ways. In this case, it made the woman smile as she moved to stand in front of the mirror again. "Yes, I think the pink is best," she said. She then scowled at Millie and snapped her fingers. "Well? Where is the lace shawl to go with this?"

Millie rushed around the fashionable carnage of the room to find the shawl in question. Her puzzlement about why Lady Eleanor was trying so hard to look pretty in the middle of an ordinary morning was answered as soon as Millie brought her the shawl and draped it over her shoulders.

"Three weeks have passed, and two of the other ladies have already found themselves engaged," she said, apparently speaking to her own reflection. "I refuse to be outdone by a bunch of simpering ninnies. Lady Angeline is a milksop *Irishwoman*," she spoke the word with extreme distaste, "and she's managed to nab a marquess. And Lady Patience is simply horrible, but she's engaged herself before me. I will not let any of the others beat me to the altar."

“Mr. Sands is rather fond of you,” Millie suggested.

Lady Eleanor squeaked and turned to her as if furious. “Mr. Sands?” she yelped in indignation. “Is that what you think of me?” She turned back to the mirror, then went on with, “Oh, no. I’ve set my sights much higher. I shall marry the Duke of Foxley. I shall be a duchess.” She smiled at herself in the mirror as if she were already a duchess.

Millie winced, her heart sinking. Of course, she knew that David would have to marry. He was not her knight in shining armor at all. He was a duke and a peer of the realm. As the daughter of an earl, Lady Eleanor was, in fact, a suitable woman for him to betroth himself to. But the idea of the two of them together made her stomach hurt as if she’d eaten too many plum tarts.

“I was not aware that the duke has shown you any more interest than he has the other ladies of the house party,” Millie said, half to herself.

Lady Eleanor turned to her with a venomous look. “He hasn’t. That is why I must see to it that he has no choice but to consider me.”

Millie did not like the way those words made her feel.

Even less so when her mistress went on with, “I need your help.” She moved away from the mirror to her vanity and started sorting through her jewelry. “The only way Foxley will stop long enough to realize I am his future Duchess is if we are discovered in a compromised position.”

“My lady?” Millie asked, pressing a hand to her stomach to still its roiling.

“Foxley usually takes his correspondence into the hedge maze at this time of day to read it in peace,” Lady Eleanor went on, picking up a pair of pearl earrings and fastening them to her ears. “I need you to go ahead and make certain he is there alone. I will venture into the maze and find him. Once I do, I need you to fetch Lady Cambourne or one of the other chaperones. Bring them to the maze to discover us. I’ll throw myself at Foxley so that it looks as though he has importuned

me. That way, he'll be forced to offer for my hand." She smiled as though it were a brilliant idea.

"Yes, my lady," Millie said hesitantly. There was no way she could allow Lady Eleanor to do anything as cruel as trapping David into a marriage he didn't want. "Would you like me to go to the hedge maze now to see if the duke is there?" she asked, knowing she had to take some sort of action.

Lady Eleanor turned to her with a bright smile. "Yes," she said. "That is precisely what I just said. Go! Go now, and if he is there, do your best to keep him there."

"Yes, my lady," Millie said, curtsying.

She then fled the room, intent on doing whatever she could to warn David of Lady Eleanor's plan.

Leaving the house and fleeing into the hedge maze felt as if she had been let out of prison. She understood well why David spent so much of his time hiding between the high hedges. The only way most of the maze was visible was from a platform located at the center of the hedges, but the corner that David favored wasn't visible even from that platform.

Millie knew the dead end well, though. She'd only been there the once, to retrieve her mistress's shawl, but she remembered that conversation about David's home farms so well that the path to that bench was locked forever in her memory. Just like the now dried and faded lemon blossom David had given her was locked in the tiny jewelry box Millie had brought with her.

Thankfully, David was in the exact same spot where he'd been during that conversation a week ago as Millie rounded the corner. Once again, he was reading a letter with a deep frown etched in his brow.

As soon as he glanced up from his letter and saw Millie, however, that frown vanished.

"Millie," he said, brightening considerably. He stood to greet her. "What a wonderful surprise."

Millie smiled and flushed under the compliment despite herself, but that smile faded by the time she was within a few feet of David. “I am happy to see you again as well,” she said, “but there isn’t time for pleasantries of conversation.”

“Is something the matter?” David asked, his expression dropping into concern. He stepped into her, grasping her arms and holding her just short of an embrace. “Are you well? Has Lady Eleanor been too cruel to you?”

Millie shook her head, leaning into David’s arms without thought. “I am perfectly well, but you may not be unless you are careful.”

“Whatever do you mean?” David asked.

Millie grasped his arms as he was holding hers and shifted even closer so she could speak quickly and quietly. “Lady Eleanor has hatched a plot to try to get you alone. She wants to be your duchess, and she’s decided the best way to do that is to have you compromise her.”

“Good God,” David said, his eyes going wide with horror.

“She sent me to check whether you are here in the maze, because she knows you like to read your correspondence here when the weather is nice. She’s on her way down now in an attempt to catch you alone, and she’s asked me to bring Lady Cambourne by to discover you.”

“You would never do such an underhanded thing,” David said, his smile returning.

“I would not,” Millie agreed. “But that does not mean my mistress will not be successful in her scheme. You must be careful not to ever let her trap you alone.”

“I promise you, I will not,” David said. “I have absolutely no interest in Lady Eleanor, or anyone else except—”

He stopped so suddenly that Millie felt as if he’d dropped her off the edge of a precipice. More than that, there was something flashing in his eyes as he looked at her. She suddenly became aware of how close they were standing and how warm David’s arms felt against hers. Her face was turned up and her lips were still parted from panting after racing

through the maze to find him. It would take nothing at all for him to close the gap of a few inches between them and to bring his lips to hers.

“Foxley?” Lady Eleanor’s shout from somewhere else in the maze shattered the moment, prompting Millie and David to leap apart. “Foxley, I know you’re in here.”

“Quickly,” Millie whispered, dashing back to gather up the pages of the letter David had been reading. “You must go.”

“I’ve no wish for you to be found here either,” David said, taking the letters from Millie with one hand as she returned them to him, then grasping her other hand and leading her out of the dead end. “I know more than one way out of the maze. We can avoid Lady Eleanor and get to safety easily. And with any luck, your mistress will be stuck in here for hours.”

Millie giggled at the idea, though she felt a bit bad for it. “You are wicked, David,” she said, utterly forgetting who she was, who he was, and what was proper.

David glanced back at her as he drew her around a corner, laughing as well. The warmth that danced in his dark eyes was heavenly. The color on his cheeks as they hurried through the maze, turning corners and seeking a way out, was beautiful.

“Hello?” Lady Eleanor called again, closer than Millie thought she was. “Is anyone there?” Foxley? I can hear you moving.”

“This way,” David said in the barest of whispers, doubling back the way they’d come and taking another path.

Millie couldn’t remember the last time she’d had so much fun. All of it was wrong, and there would probably be some sort of retribution for it later, but for the moment, she reveled in the pounding of her heart, the feeling of David’s large hand encompassing hers, and the rush of excitement as they wound their way through the maze.

“I say, hello?” Lady Eleanor called out again, this time from far away. “Oh, blast. Help!”

“We should be guaranteed to escape now,” David said, slowing his steps a bit as they reached what Millie could tell

was the outer ring of the maze. “The exit is just up ahead.”

“Oh,” Millie said, realizing too late that she sounded disappointed. “That is, I am so glad you’ll be able to escape without being compromised.”

David stopped within sight of the maze’s exit and turned to face Millie, still holding her hand. “I’m certain I could have discovered a way to avoid marrying Lady Eleanor, even if we had been caught alone,” he said, smiling. “This house party isn’t exactly an example of the highest moral standards in England.”

“It’s been quite wicked so far,” Millie agreed, knowing she should move, but unable to convince her feet to work. “I have it on good authority that Lord and Lady Cambourne want it that way.”

“Yes,” David agreed with a laugh. “Those two have always been social pariahs, but of a sort that has more fun than nearly everyone else I know.”

Millie had nothing to say to that, so she just stood where she was, smiling up at David. He was so devilishly handsome when he was slightly winded and alive with mischief.

“I heard back from Richardson, by the way,” he said a few moments later, his tone changing to something lighter and more practical. “He agrees with your suggestions on how to avoid future nematodes.”

“Does he?” Millie perked up with surprise.

“Yes,” David said. “In fact, he told me he would investigate the benefits and drawbacks of switching production on our farms from barley to more vegetable crops. He says there is a market for it, but advises caution before proceeding. It may not be so easy to be released from our contract with the brewer.”

“Yes,” Millie agreed. “It is always wise to investigate before—”

“Hello? Is anyone in the maze?” Lady Eleanor’s voice came from much closer to them again.

David made a shushing sound and shifted so he could cover Millie's mouth with his hand.

Millie froze, hardly daring to breathe. The intimate touch had her heart pounding so hard she thought she might swoon.

"Oh, bugger," Lady Eleanor cursed from what sounded like only a few hedges away. "This is intolerable."

It took every effort of will Millie had not to laugh. David's hand over her mouth, and the fact that he, too, looked as though he would burst into laughter at any moment, did not help the situation.

David removed his hand and drew Millie silently along the path to the maze's entrance. As soon as they were out in the open, they both glanced around, and then David broke into a very un-duke-like run, pulling Millie with him.

Millie couldn't help but laugh then, even though the two of them were breaking every rule and social convention known to man. In the moment, she couldn't bring herself to care. She was with David, they'd escaped Lady Eleanor, and they'd had infinite amounts of fun while doing so.

But as with all good things, it came to an end as they reached the rose garden. At last, they came within sight of other people, and David was forced to drop her hand and step back into pretending they barely knew each other, and that the social divide was so vast they would never know each other.

"Thank you for rescuing me," David said, still panting a little as he bowed to her. "I will be forever in your debt."

"I was only doing my duty," Millie said, grinning. "As one farmer to another."

David started to laugh, but a call of, "Foxley, there you are," from Lord Theydon stifled the moment.

"I must go," Millie said, immediately turning so that no one would catch them together or be suspicious. She needed to get back to the hedge maze anyhow and to make up some sort of excuse as to why she had not done what her mistress had ordered her to.

But as she went, she smiled and pressed her fingertips to her lips. If nothing else came of the summer, she would have memories upon which to spin fantasies for the rest of her life.

Chapter Four

ANOTHER WEEK AFTER THAT...

By the beginning of July, David was convinced that attending the house party at Nedworth Hall was the worst mistake of his life.

“Have you heard the latest speculation about Carshalton’s heir?” Bygrave asked as David and a few of the other gentlemen played billiards on a rainy afternoon.

“I’ve heard that Lady Angeline is no longer subject to such speculation,” Rothbury said, eyeing Bygrave like he might beat the man with his cue if he so much as suggested anything untoward about his fiancée. “That is all I need to hear.”

“No, no,” Bygrave said after taking his shot, then straightening so that Theydon could slip in and take his. “Lady

Angeline has most definitely been stricken from the list of potential candidates.”

“Who is it now, then?” David asked. Not that he was particularly interested in the identity of the heir. Solving that mystery had become the primary occupation of the gentlemen when they were in each other’s company, but mostly because half of the men attending the party believed the heir was a woman and that their fortune could be made if they discovered and married her.

David already knew he wouldn’t leave the house party with a duchess. Lady Eleanor had spent the last several days, since her attempt to compromise him in the hedge maze, practically beating all the other ladies away from him with a stick. Even if she hadn’t cowed the others into leaving him alone, there was only one woman at the party who had his heart, and it was so impossible for the two of them to be together that he’d spent the last week since the hedge maze avoiding Millie entirely.

God, he’d almost kissed her. The desire had been there, and if he wasn’t mistaken, so had the willingness been on her side. It didn’t matter how mousey and repressed Millie was made to be by Lady Eleanor, her inner beauty shone through. And when she laughed.... David nearly clapped a hand to his heart then and there, at the mere memory of Millie’s laughter, to stop that organ from leaping out of his chest.

He would have placed a hand to stop his other organ that leapt at the thought of Millie from rising, but that would have required a great deal of explanation to his friends.

“I say, what do you think of that?” Bygrave asked, pushing David out of his thoughts.

David blinked, alarmed to find everyone watching him. “I’m sorry?” He felt himself heating.

Bygrave and Theydon exchanged knowing looks. “For those of us who were not away with the fairies, I shall repeat. Theydon here has made the audacious claim that he knows the identity of Carshalton’s heir beyond any shadow of doubt. We asked whether you think he truly does or not.”

David took a breath, hating the way every set of eyes were on him. He despised that sort of attention, any sort of attention, really.

“I could not say,” he said with a shrug. “I have not been particularly interested in the identity of the heir.”

“Of course not,” Bygrave told Theydon with a smirk. “Our esteemed friend here is a duke of good fortune who is conscientious about maintaining his estates and his investments, and is, therefore, not in need of a wealthy heiress to shore things up.”

“I am one of the lucky few,” David said, hoping to steer the conversation away from himself. “Too many of our ranks have rested on their laurels and assumed that nothing would change in terms of farming practices or income from our estates. That is why you find so many gentlemen seeking out the hands of American dollar princesses.”

“We have our very own dollar princess here at Nedworth Hall,” Rothbury pointed out. “My betrothed is quite fond of Miss Pennypacker.”

“Frank Crymble is also fond of Miss Pennypacker,” Theydon said, returning to gossip as if they were farm hands chatting to make the harvest day go by quicker. “And from the sound of things, she’s just as fond of him.”

“I suppose an American wouldn’t see anything wrong with marrying a man that was born on the wrong side of the blanket,” Bygrave said, moving back to the table to take his shot.

“Crymble is the natural child of a gentleman,” Theydon said with a shrug. “But despite what you all say now, he’s not Carshalton’s heir.”

David stepped back and let the conversation fade into a buzz. Whether Frank Crymble was the heir or not—and most people assumed the heir was a woman—it didn’t change the difficulty of the position David found himself in. His heart wanted what it could not have, and nothing could be done

about it. In more ways than a few, there was no point to him being at the house party at all.

That seed of a feeling germinated and grew in the following days, as the dramatics with Mr. Crymble and Miss Pennypacker increased. Miss Pennypacker's father arrived on the scene, and from there, everything descended into complete, loud chaos in a style that only Americans could manage.

David was caught up in the theatrics of Mr. Crymble's staged rescue of Miss Pennypacker, which turned into the lady in question being in real peril. David watched along with everyone else as Crymble climbed up the side of the house to rescue Miss Pennypacker as she nearly fell from the roof. The whole thing was ridiculous and did nothing to improve David's feelings about the house party. Quite the opposite.

After the furor died down and Mr. Pennypacker stomped around for a while, giving his grudging consent for his daughter to marry Crymble, David made up his mind that he would return home to Fox Glen. Beyond just the feeling that he wasn't going to find a wife at the party, he would have given anything to have five minutes to himself again. He hadn't dared to be by himself entirely for days, since Lady Eleanor's gambit.

That was how David found himself walking into the library late in the afternoon, the day after the theatrical rescue, to find Lady Cambourne and make his apologies.

"My lady," he made his presence known as he approached Lady Cambourne while she read on a settee in a beam of sunlight.

She glanced up at him, and David found himself thinking that their hostess must have been quite the alluring beauty in her youth. She was still an astoundingly handsome woman, and her posture on the settee still stirred a natural, male instinct within David.

He considered that the woman would have loved to know she could still inspire a man with no romantic inclinations toward her to ardor, but since the true object of his ardor was

part of the reason he'd sought Lady Cambourne out, he shoved those feelings aside to address her with dignity.

"Foxley," Lady Cambourne said, as if delighted to be interrupted. She marked her book, set it aside, then sat up straight and patted the settee beside her. "What brings you into the library when everyone else is out shooting archery?"

David cleared his throat, suddenly feeling self-conscious about everything he was about to say. "My lady, I have come to tell you that I will be leaving Nedworth Hall tomorrow."

Lady Cambourne's pleasant look changed to alarm. "Leaving, Your Grace?"

David cleared his throat again and took another step closer. "I am sorry to say that, despite your excellent hospitality and warm welcome, I am not comfortable here. There is too much noise, too much company, and I...I do not think I will find a bride here."

A knowing look spread across Lady Cambourne's face. "It is you who must forgive me for not making allowances for those among us who desire as much solitude as company," she said, then patted the settee again. "Sit with me, please."

David shifted awkwardly, but since Lady Cambourne reminded him a great deal of his mother, he shuffled his way to the settee and sat gingerly on the far end. "I've no wish to disappoint you, or anyone else, by making an early departure," he said, "but I fear I cannot stay longer."

Lady Cambourne tilted her head to the side and studied him. "I take it your desire to flee is because of more things than a lack of quiet time?"

David's face heated. "It is nothing to do with the quality of your hospitality, I can assure you."

Lady Cambourne continued to smile and study him in a way that made David feel she could see into his soul.

After too long a silence, she said something unexpected. "Do you wish to know who Lord Carshalton's heir is?"

David blinked at her. “Not really, no,” he said slowly. “I find the mystery of the heir to be exciting, and I understand that everyone else is caught up in attempting to uncover who the heir is, but I haven’t found myself interested in their identity.”

“Miss Millicent Silverstone is Carshalton’s heir,” Lady Cambourne said.

David started, his jaw dropping. It felt very much like someone had hooked his insides and yanked hard. “I beg your pardon?” he asked, his voice coming out hoarse.

Lady Cambourne pivoted to sit facing him more fully. “What do you know of the Countess of Gillingham?” she asked.

David was completely flummoxed by the turn of the conversation. “I know nothing,” he said with a shrug.

Lady Cambourne smiled mischievously. “Barbara, that is, Lady Gillingham, was a dear friend of mine when we were children. She was lively and clever, and she was a beauty, too. She had the most luxurious, blonde hair and blue-green eyes that were the envy of all.”

Millie had blonde hair and blue-green eyes. David could tell at once where the story was going.

“Barbara met Lord Carshalton at a ball in London during our first season,” Lady Cambourne went on. “We were both quite popular that year, but Barbara only had eyes for Carshalton. They sought each other out at every opportunity, danced more than was appropriate at balls, and were even rumored to have been seen exiting the theater together before performances were completed.”

David already had an idea of how the story ended.

Except the math of years did not add up. Lady Cambourne must have been drawing close to sixty, and if she and Lady Gillingham had shared a season, for the story to progress the way David thought it might, Millie would have been approaching forty when, in fact, she looked to be in her middle twenties at best.

“Barbara’s parents did not approve of the match,” Lady Cambourne went on. “Lord Carshalton had not made his fortune yet. He was young and rash, and he offended Barbara’s father in public. The two of them were forcibly separated, and at the end of the season, Barbara was forced to marry Lord Gillingham.”

“How very sad,” David said.

Lady Cambourne shrugged. “It could have been sadder. Lord Gillingham is not overly fond of women. As Barbara has confided in me, he did not touch her at all for the first several years of their marriage. In fact, he was away on the continent for much of it.”

“I see,” David said, his face heating at being told such intimate details. Although he’d known about Lord Gillingham.

“Several years later,” Lady Cambourne continued. “Roughly twenty-five years ago, Barbara was fortunate enough to be reunited with her love. Lord Carshalton never married. He’d thrown his disappointed energy into making himself into the sort of man who Barbara’s father would approve of. He became one of the wealthiest men in England in the process.

“Then came a summer where a mutual friend of ours, Lady Sutton, invited Barbara to spend time with her and Lord Sutton at their house in Brighton. Lady Sutton had secretly alerted Lord Carshalton that Barbara would be there. Strangely enough, Lord Carshalton occupied the house next door to the Suttons’ for the entire summer.

“As it would happen, the following spring, Lady Gillingham gave birth to a darling baby girl,” Lady Cambourne continued. “Lord Carshalton was staying in the nearby village at the time of the birth. But several things conspired at once that caused the unlucky hand of fate to separate the two lovers again before the baby was six months old.”

“I can only guess,” David said, eyes wide in astonishment at the story he was hearing.

“Lord Gillingham returned home unexpectedly to find another man in his marriage bed and his wife, whom he hadn’t seen in over three years, nursing a towheaded infant,” Lady Cambourne confirmed. “I am not entirely clear on the details, since I believe Barbara left a few things out, but there was a row, Lord Carshalton was sent packing, never to see Barbara or the baby again, and the baby was given to a dear, childless couple on one of Gillingham Manor’s tenant farms.”

“Millie.” David whispered her name, staring at a spot on the floor off to the side as everything suddenly fit into place in his mind—Millie’s patrician looks, the way Lady Gillingham had taken such a shine to her, and the education that had been provided for her. Even the way Millie had been sent to Nedworth Hall with Lady Eleanor made perfect sense. “You’ve intended from the start to announce Millie’s true heritage at this party, haven’t you.”

“Indeed, we have,” Lady Cambourne said. “With Lady Gillingham’s full knowledge and approval, I might add.”

David frowned. “Why did the woman not simply send Millie along as a guest? Why has she forced Millie to suffer under the yoke of Lady Eleanor? And who is Lady Eleanor at any rate? Is she Gillingham’s natural child?”

“She is not,” Lady Cambourne said, lowering her eyes. “Gillingham, to this day, has still never touched her. Lady Eleanor is a foundling child that was left on the doorstep of Gillingham Manor a few months after Millie was given to the Silverstones. Apparently, a rumor had traveled around the village that Lady Gillingham found good homes for unwanted babies. And in a manner of speaking, she did. Although again, I am unclear on whether Barbara wished to keep the child or Gillingham did in order to make it appear as though he’d sired Eleanor. I believe there were some uncomfortable questions from authorities around that time that Gillingham wished to avoid.”

“So Millie is the true nobleman’s daughter and Lady Eleanor is the child of who knows who?” David asked.

“You are correct.” Lady Cambourne nodded. “Barbara did her very best to raise Eleanor with love, but she fears that she could not love her the way she loved Millie, and that her lack of care has caused Eleanor to turn sour. That is why she sent Eleanor here for the summer. It is Barbara’s dearest hope that Eleanor will find a man who can love her the way she deserves to be loved.”

As lovely a sentiment as that was and as much as it raised his estimation of Lady Gillingham, David knew he could never be that man. “It cannot be me,” he spoke his thoughts aloud.

“No, of course not,” Lady Cambourne laughed. “You are in love with Millicent.”

“But I—how did—I have been discreet, since I cannot—”

David stopped, but his mouth continued to hang open. Actually, if Millie truly was Carshalton’s heir and the daughter of a countess and one of the wealthiest men in England, even if she was illegitimate, he very well could marry her. It would still cause a scandal, but money had a way of smoothing over even the roughest circumstances. There were more than a few women of dubious birth but incredible fortune who had married a titled gentleman in the last few years.

“Do you see now why I have revealed this information to you?” Lady Cambourne asked, peering at him as if trying to see how well he understood.

Mouth still open, David looked to her. “Not entirely,” he admitted. “Not yet.”

Lady Cambourne nodded. “The truth will come out,” she said. “That is the entire point of making the issue of Carshalton’s heir central to the house party. Millie will be exposed as the wealthy heiress she is.”

“And every unattached man left at the party will swoop in on her like vultures on a mouse,” David said, suddenly understanding all.

Lady Cambourne smiled. “Do you still wish to leave the house party, Your Grace?” she asked.

“God, no!” David said, far too loudly. He lowered his voice and said, “Millie needs me.”

“She does, Your Grace,” Lady Cambourne said with a nod and an impish grin.

David frowned as he considered things. Everything had changed in the course of one story. Millie was no longer completely out of his reach. He knew without a doubt that he wanted to marry her. Knowing that felt rather like the floor had just opened up under him, though.

“Does Millie know?” he asked, bringing his focus back to Lady Cambourne again.

“She does not,” Lady Cambourne said, shaking her head.

“I should tell her, then.”

Lady Cambourne’s face twitched slightly. “I will leave that decision up to you, but I ask you to think about how and when you will reveal the information. I do think it would be best to let her know before any sort of public announcement will be made, which is inevitable. Just keep in mind that Millicent believes herself to be the beloved daughter of Bill and Myra Silverstone. She loves her papa and mama dearly and sees Lady Gillingham as a distant patroness. She has never known Lord Carshalton at all. Simply blurting out the truth could hurt her more than it would help.”

David blew out a breath and pushed a hand through his hair. “You’re right, of course,” he said. “However Millie is told, it will have to be delicate.” Another problem came to his mind. “We’ve struck up a cordial friendship, one with a great deal of potential for more, but both of us are well aware of the difference in class and have kept our distance as much as possible because of it.”

“But you wish to woo Millicent now and are worried that she would continue to keep her distance if you make advances toward her without immediately revealing the truth,” Lady Cambourne finished his thought for him.

David nodded. “How do I woo her without making her believe I am a blackguard who simply wants to steal her virtue

without any hope of an honest future?”

Lady Cambourne shrugged. “I do not know. That is why I will understand if you wish to let Millicent know the truth long before the rest of us. If you would like to write to Lady Gillingham to ask for her advice, or perhaps her blessing, I can have a letter delivered.”

David nodded, but he still wasn’t certain. “Thank you, Lady Cambourne,” he said, pushing himself to stand. “You’ve given me a great deal to think about. I don’t know how I wish to proceed as of yet, but I want you to know that my intentions toward Millie are honorable. I will not put her at any sort of risk or importune her until I am certain about what I need to do.”

Lady Cambourne smiled as she rose. “How lucky Millicent is to have found such a champion in you, Your Grace. You are the very best of men.”

David smiled in thanks, but he wasn’t sure how good a man he actually was. Telling Millie the truth would make things easier for him, but it could hurt Millie. Not telling the truth could hurt her as well.

The only thing David knew was that he was unendingly grateful that he had weeks more time to decide what to do.

Chapter Five

After the dramatics of Miss Pennypacker and Mr. Frank Crymble becoming engaged, and after the difficulty they had in getting Mr. Pennypacker to agree to the marriage, the intensity of emotion at Nedworth Hall seemed to increase somehow. Even after the loud and boisterous Mr. Pennypacker departed for London, leaving his daughter and Mr. Crymble to enjoy the company of their friends for the rest of the party, the sense that there was still a buzz in the air remained.

If she could have left Nedworth Hall then to return to the peace and quiet of Kent, Millie would have. With every day that passed, her time there grew more and more fraught. Lady Eleanor became increasingly demanding with each new engagement that was announced, and she seemed hell-bent on making her lack of any suitors—or at least any suitors she wished to acknowledge—somehow Millie's fault.

“It’s your wretched incompetence,” Lady Eleanor hissed at Millie after Lord Podmore left the conversation he and Lady Eleanor had been having on the lawn, while watching some of the rest of their group play badminton. “He barely commented on the weather or the match to be because you failed to heed my request to fetch lemonade for the two of us.”

Millie bit her lip and lowered her head, her hands clasped in front of her. The cowed gesture was not one of contriteness for failing her mistress, it was from a sense of utter hopelessness. Lord Podmore had departed the conversation with Lady Eleanor because Lady Eleanor had done nothing but talk about David in a manner that suggested their engagement was a foregone conclusion. She’d managed to bash and batter Lady Yvette’s reputation into smithereens as she did.

No gentleman would want to stay and pass the time with a lady who not only clearly had her heart set on someone else, but who had taken to assassinating the characters of the other ladies of the house party on top of that.

Only, it wasn’t all the other ladies of the house party, it was just Lady Yvette.

“Something is most decidedly wrong with that woman,” Lady Eleanor grouched a few days later, on a particularly rainy Wednesday, when there seemed to be far less to do at Nedworth Hall than usual.

Most of the ladies had gathered in the conservatory to practice singing. Lady Yvette had taken it upon herself to organize an impromptu choir, based on the vast experience she claimed to have in leading groups of singers. The idea was that they would sing choral works that evening instead of solo piano pieces after supper.

“She always needs to be the center of attention,” Lady Eleanor continued to complain as she paced the length of the library, which was down the hall, but within earshot of the rehearsal in the conservatory. “She keeps inventing stories of her adventures and her prowess that I know full well are false.”

“Yes, my lady,” Millie said, no idea what else she could say.

“They’re all lies,” Lady Eleanor went on. “They must be.” She stopped her pacing and turned toward Millie without looking directly at her. “I’ve written to some of the people she’s mentioned to uncover the truth. I will untangle her web of lies if it’s the last thing I ever do.”

“Yes, my lady,” Millie said, the words coming out slower. “However, did your mother not write to you just yesterday to urge you to let the matter drop in favor of endearing yourself to some of the gentlemen of the party?”

Lady Eleanor’s gaze snapped to focus on Millie. “How dare you use my mother’s words against me?” she barked. “She’s *my* mother, not yours.”

“Yes, my lady,” Millie said, wilting, but trying not to make it so obvious that her mistress was very near to breaking her spirit entirely.

“Besides,” Lady Eleanor said, continuing her pacing, “I’ve already chosen the mate of my future life.”

Millie’s heart sank even further. David. He was the other problem she longed to run away from. It was agony remaining at Nedworth Hall with him, especially since the last few days had seen a change in the way he was with her.

Something had happened, Millie was certain of it. At the height of the goings on with Miss Pennypacker and Mr. Crymble, David had suddenly begun to pay greater attention to her. It was subtle, but Millie felt it acutely. For the first half of the house party, they had more or less kept their distance, smiling at each other from afar, but turning away before the intensity of their gazes became too intense.

Now, however, David always seemed to be there, particularly when Lady Eleanor was at her cruelest or some task needed to be done that she could not accomplish on her own. When Millie was dragged along into the turmoil of the house party and became part of group scenes of scandal, David

always seemed to be standing right behind her, close enough to catch her if she should trip.

The way he looked at her had changed as well. No longer were his glances fleeting and guilty. He now looked directly at her with a warmth that never failed to leave Millie tingling. He didn't even try to conceal the way he studied her, like he had before.

Something had definitely happened, and Millie had a horrible idea she knew what it was. The loosening of morals as the house party wore on must have convinced David it would not be as wrong as all that to indulge in a summer assignation with someone utterly unsuitable. That was the only explanation.

The trouble was, Millie wanted that, too. She was desperately close to throwing her good upbringing and her modest values out the window so that she could experience what it felt like to be in a duke's arms. If her mother could see her—

“Are you even paying attention?” Lady Eleanor snapped, suddenly only a few feet in front of Millie and scowling.

“Yes, my lady,” Millie lied. “Lady Yvette is indeed wicked.”

“She is the very devil,” Lady Eleanor agreed, pacing away from her.

Millie let out a sigh of relief that she'd guessed correctly what her mistress had been nattering on about.

“It is Lady Yvette's fault that I've made no progress with Foxley,” Lady Eleanor went on.

“My lady?” Millie asked, hoping her voice hadn't faltered too much and betrayed the feelings of her heart.

“Foxley has been inattentive of late,” Lady Eleanor huffed, moving to the window and looking out at the incessant rain. “He barely notices me anymore. He didn't dance with me once at the ball the other night. And the reason is clear. Someone else has caught his eye, and it has to be Lady Yvette.”

Millie's face heated so much that she feared what might happen if Lady Eleanor turned away from the window and noticed her. "Lord Theydon seems quite taken with Lady Yvette," she said quietly, not certain it was a good idea to suggest David wasn't interested in Lady Yvette. Lady Eleanor might search for someone else who had bewitched the duke, and that could not end well.

Lady Eleanor *humphed* and tapped the window to make some of the raindrops that were caught there run down.

A flicker of movement out of the corner of Millie's eyes caught her attention. When she turned her head to see what it was, she nearly gasped aloud. David stood in one of the smaller doorways that led to the adjoining parlor at the far end of the library. As soon as their eyes met, he pressed a finger to his lips, urging Millie to be quiet. He then gestured for her to come to him.

Millie's heart raced, and she found it difficult to catch her breath. Was this how illicit assignations began?

"I have to think of something to expose Lady Yvette as the lying snake that she is," Lady Eleanor said, turning away from the window.

Millie caught David jumping back into the other room in the periphery of her vision.

"If I could just catch her at her wicked behavior and expose her to all, I would be vindicated," Lady Eleanor went on. "And then Foxley would see that I am of strong and stalwart character, and far better than any of the whores who make up this house party, and he would choose me as his duchess."

"Yes, my lady," Millie said, hands clasped behind her as a way to will herself not to look suspicious. "Perhaps joining the others at choral practice would give you the perfect opportunity to catch Lady Yvette in her lies."

"Do not be ridiculous," Lady Eleanor snapped even before Millie was finished her suggestion. "I want nothing to do with the woman, or that crowd of sycophantic ninnies that

surrounds her.” She walked away from the window with a thoughtful look. “Although there is that adage about keeping your friends close but your enemies closer. I could infiltrate their lot and observe, and with any luck, that cow, Lady Yvette, will slip, and I will catch her in her lies.”

“Yes, my lady,” Millie said, seeing no point in mentioning that was precisely what she’d told her to do.

“I’ll go at once,” Lady Eleanor said walking swiftly across the room. “Do not be idle,” she called over her shoulder to Millie. “My skirt from yesterday needs repairing, and several pairs of my shoes need to be cleaned. I expect you to earn your keep while I’m busy elsewhere.”

“Yes, my lady,” Millie said.

She waited until Lady Eleanor was fully out of the room before turning and racing to the other end of the library where the doorway David had appeared in stood.

Before she reached it, the door opened, and David reached for her. “Is she truly gone?” he asked.

Millie checked over her shoulder, then said, “I believe so.”

“Good,” David said with a smile. He caught Millie’s hand and drew her through, into a tiny reading room that she hadn’t been in before. “Because I have something to tell you. Something important.”

“Oh,” Millie gasped, pressing her free hand to her heart as David whirled her around and pulled them both to sit on a small couch under one of the room’s two windows.

He did not let go of her hand, and because of the size of the couch, they were seated so that their knees touched. This was it. This was the moment her virtue would be put to the test. She would have to choose between remaining true to the morals her parents had raised her with or letting her heart and her fantasies indulge in what was likely the only chance she would ever have to be loved by someone like David.

“What do you know of your family?” David asked, leaning toward her a bit, his eyes alight with excitement.

His expression and the question were so much at odds that it threw Millie off entirely.

“I...er...my father is William Silverstone and my mother is Myra Dalton Silverstone,” she said, blinking in confusion. “They occupy the largest farm on the estate of Gillingham Manor.”

“What else do you know about them?” David asked. “Why did they never have another child, for example?”

Millie frowned. She was certain he had a point, but the question seemed impertinent.

“My mother always longed for another child,” she said, lowering her eyes. “She used to sigh and say it was not part of God’s plan.”

She paused for a moment as a sudden wave of homesickness overcame her.

“My mother is the very best of women,” she went on, a bit teary. “She is so good and so humble. She always helps the poorer farmers whenever she can. She would gladly go without her own supper if it meant feeding a hungry beggar in the road. She is always the first to tend to someone’s sickbed or to do their housework for them if they cannot get out. She is selfless, and it is my greatest wish to emulate her in every way.”

Millie didn’t realize she was so close to tears until one slipped from her eye. She pulled her hand away from David’s to wipe it.

“My father is just as wonderful,” she went on, vaguely noticing that much of the excitement had gone out of David’s look, to be replaced with something sweet and sentimental. “He is a man of few words, but he’s the cleverest man I’ve ever known. When called on, he could converse with anyone, high or low. I once listened to him and Lord Gillingham, on one of the rare occasions when his lordship was home, discuss the beauty and benefit of family. I was so proud of the way he urged Lord Gillingham to embrace his daughter, even though

he barely knew Lady Eleanor and had been absent for most of her life.”

“That’s...that’s lovely,” David said, his face pinching with an odd sort of confusion.

“I adore my papa, and my papa adores me,” Millie went on. Another tear fell, and she wiped that away as well. “I’m so sorry that I’ve turned into a watering pot when you brought me here to tell me something. It’s just that I miss them so.”

“I miss my father more than I can say,” David said, reaching out to wipe Millie’s tears for her. The warmth of his hand combined with the tenderness of the gesture had her heart beating fast. “He’s been gone nearly two years now,” David continued. “Not a day has passed when I don’t miss him, or when I don’t wish he’d never attempted that trip to France.”

“He was killed in a ferry accident, was he not?” Millie asked, taking David’s hand when he shifted it from her face.

David nodded sadly and lowered his head a bit. Millie was struck by the way the gesture made him seem like a much younger man. It was almost as if she could see the boy he used to be.

“The truth is,” he went on, studying their hands and twining their fingers together, “I was not ready to become the Duke of Foxley. I still don’t feel as though I’m ready. Most of the time, one does not suddenly find themselves a duke. We are given years to learn and train at our father’s feet. These days, it’s a rare thing when a man passes away before he’s old and grey.” He paused, sighed, shook his head, then said, “There is so much I still have to learn.”

“I am certain you will rise to the occasion, David,” Millie said, returning the comfort he’d given her. She even went so far as to rest her free hand on the side of his face. “You are a good man, a noble man. You’ve kept yourself above the fray of everything that has happened at this house party. And I know you care very deeply for your tenants. I’m certain Richardson knows it as well.”

David smiled at her, as if Richardson were their special joke.

And then he sucked in a breath, his expression softening and something warm and needy appearing in his eyes. He raised a hand to cover hers on his face, and then, before Millie could see it coming and decide what to do about it, he shifted toward her and slanted his mouth over hers.

The kiss was light and chaste at first, but that didn't last long. With a small, deep sound of longing, David pulled her close, stroking one hand over her cheek as he intensified their kiss.

It was everything Millie had wanted and dared not dream of. Her heart was as much involved as her body, though both reacted with eagerness. Before she could think twice about it, she opened her mouth to him, and when he delved into her with his tongue, she made a sweet sound of surrender and kissed him back.

She could let everything go. She could be as wicked as she wanted to be and submit to David. For however long the house party continued, she could be his, and damn the consequences. The two of them could never be together, but at least she would have this wonderful memory to take with her for the rest of her days. And if she ended up with child because of it, she was confident her mother would welcome the babe with open arms.

That decision made, she threw herself fully into their kiss, grasping at David and leaning into him so that she could feel the heat of his body. She vocalized her acceptance of him and her love and desire for everything he might want from her.

His hand had just slipped to her bodice and their lips and tongues were exploring each other ardently when Lady Eleanor's call of, "Miss Silverstone!" from the library shocked them apart. "Miss Silverstone! Where are you, you wretched girl?"

"Oh, no," Millie gasped, pulling away from David.

“She won’t find us,” David promised her, standing and taking Millie with him. “You can go out that way.” He pointed to a different door at the other end of the room. “I’ll watch her, and if she comes this way, I’ll distract her.”

“Thank you,” Millie said, smoothing her skirts and patting her hair, as if they’d done more than just kiss. She took a step toward the far door, then turned back to David. “There was something you wanted to tell me?” she asked.

David pinched his face in frustration. “Yes,” he said as Lady Eleanor called out again from the other room. “But it will have to wait.”

Millie nodded. She started to go, then hesitated again, once her hand was on the doorhandle, and turned back to him. “I...I would have liked it very much if things here had continued,” she said, startled by her own boldness.

David’s expression moved slowly into a smile that fired her blood and made parts of her that she rarely thought about feel alive. “I would have liked that as well,” he whispered. “You’d best go now.”

Millie nodded, then pulled open the door and dashed into the other room and on to make her escape.

By the time she reached the hall, however, her giddiness of the encounter had been replaced by wariness and fear. What was she doing? She could not tempt a duke the way she had. She should flee as fast as possible and return to Kent, leaving the affairs of the nobility to the nobles. Heaven only knew what would happen if she stayed where she did not belong.

Chapter Six

Despite Millie's fears that everyone who saw her for the next few days would know just by looking at her that David had kissed her—and that she had most definitely kissed him back—nothing of any great import actually happened. Aside from Lord Bygrave's astonishingly identical twin brother, Mr. Damien Dixon, arriving at Nedworth Hall. And Lady Eleanor increasing her efforts to undermine and destroy Lady Yvette.

Millie felt as though she were drifting through a dream as she trudged around after her mistress, listening to every vile thing imaginable said about Lady Yvette, but registering very little of it. That Lady Eleanor felt her place at Nedworth Hall was in danger from a rival noblewoman was nothing new. Neither were the lengths Lady Eleanor would go to if she thought she could defeat Lady Yvette in the imaginary war she was waging.

None of it was of any importance at all to Millie. The way her lips continued to tingle, even days after the kiss, and the way she could conjure the feel of David's body close to hers and the warmth as he embraced her was important. So was the guilt of knowing what she would have done had Lady Eleanor not interrupted her.

The turmoil of discovering herself to be someone with different morals and standards than she'd thought she had genuinely troubled Millie. So much so that, early in the morning a few days after the kiss, she took to the desk in the tiny closet of a room adjacent to Lady Eleanor's guestroom to write to her mother, asking for advice.

"I find myself in the strange new position of wanting something that I know to be wrong with my entire heart," she penned to her mother, trying not to weep with the force of her emotions as she scratched out her heart on the paper. *"I have always tried my utmost to be good, as I know you would have me be. I have guarded myself so carefully. But David has spun me around completely, and I find that I have fallen in love with him despite my best efforts."*

"You would love him dearly, Mama," her letter continued. *"He is so strong and intelligent. He has been nothing but kindness to all who have approached him, from the loftiest of the house guests to the lowest of the servants. Even those gentlemen who are at the party for less than savory reasons have been met with careful consideration from David. He does not need to be so kind and good to all around him, but he has been."*

"There is something that I have not told you about David that changes everything, Mama. I know that I've written about him and my feelings for him since arriving here at Nedworth Hall, but the one thing I have failed to mention is that—"

Millie stopped and sucked in a breath. She was bent low over her paper so that she could see by the light of the single candle Lady Eleanor had allowed her to write the words, but she straightened. She hadn't been entirely honest with her mother in her previous letters, because she'd known what her mother would say. Dukes should not be trifled with. David

was miles above her, and it was wrong of her to lift her eyes to him and to continue their association once she'd learned the truth.

But she could no more have stopped herself from falling in love with David than she could have stopped the sun from rising that morning. Even though she knew that committing the words to paper would spell the end of any hope she had, she had to be honest with her mother.

“—David is the Duke of Foxley,” she continued writing. “I’ve fallen in love with a duke. A duke who has paid special attention to me. A duke who kissed me in the reading room off the library the other day.

“Oh, Mama, I don’t know what to do,” Millie concluded her letter. “I have fallen in love where I shouldn’t, and I know that if I stay here at Nedworth Hall, I will succumb to the desire I feel for him. Please speak to Lady Gillingham and ask her to call me home. I hate the very idea of leaving David, but I know it is for the best.”

She sighed and read over the last few paragraphs of her letter, feeling sick at heart. The confession had to be made, though. Her mother would know what to do. She always had.

Millie wrote a few quick words of love to end the missive, but as soon as she signed her name, a scream was heard in the hallway.

“She’s gone! She’s vanished! Help! Miss Benning has been kidnapped!”

Frowning, Millie stood from the writing desk, tightened her shawl around her shoulders, and took up her candle. There was no telling what was behind the cry that Miss Benning was missing, but if she'd learned anything in her weeks at Nedworth Hall, Millie had learned that things were seldom as they seemed.

As it turned out, she was entirely correct to assume that something other than what lay on the surface was going on in the halls of Nedworth Hall. By the time she joined the others that filled the hallway near the grand staircase in increasing

numbers, the drama of Miss Benning's life was playing out dramatically as it was discovered Mrs. Seymour, Nedworth's cook, was her natural mother.

As if that single drama was not enough, the company assembled to witness the scene was then astounded by Lady Yvette's declaration that she was Lord Carshalton's heir.

From the moment Millie heard the announcement, dread filled her stomach. She looked straight to Lady Eleanor, who was standing just a pace or so in front of her, watching the scene.

"This is preposterous," Lady Eleanor huffed. Millie instinctively stepped forward to warn her mistress not to cause a scene, but Lady Eleanor elbowed her and surged forward. "You are not Lord Carshalton's heir, you lying shrew!"

Millie didn't hear the rest of the confrontation. Lady Eleanor's shove came just as she reached the edge of the stairs, and with a sudden twist of her ankle, Millie felt herself falling.

And just as quickly, she was caught securely in David's arms.

David held her tightly, regardless of the packed hall around them. Millie trembled with alarm at the near disaster, and at the allure of the warmth of David's embrace.

"I've got you," David whispered to her as Lady Eleanor got into a row with Lord Theydon. "You're safe with me."

"I'm not certain I am," Millie said before she could stop herself as she stood straight.

David smiled at her, which made her feel even less secure. She could give up everything for the man so easily.

"Don't worry," he said, brushing her side—which, considering she only wore a thin, summertime nightgown, turned into an extraordinarily intimate touch. "I will never let any harm come to you. And Lady Yvette isn't Lord Carshalton's heir, you—"

"Perhaps we should postpone this scene until we are all dressed and have had breakfast." Lady Cambourne's

pronouncement cut short whatever David had been about to say. “We will all have clearer heads after a cup of tea.”

“I agree,” David said, as if suddenly aware of everyone’s eyes on him, and Millie by extension. “It would be better to hear the final chapter of this story and learn more about Lady Yvette’s revelation once we are all presentable.”

Millie started to smile, feeling certain David wanted to take her aside to finish his thoughts, but Lady Eleanor put an end to that.

“I cannot believe you are even entertaining this,” Lady Eleanor said, bumping some of the other guests as she came to face David. “Surely, you must know how false and wicked Lady Yvette is. Every word that has come out of that woman’s mouth since she’s arrived here has been a lie.”

“Lady Eleanor, I urge you to calm and forbearance in this matter,” David said, stepping up to calm her.

Millie wasn’t entirely certain what happened next, but Lady Yvette turned to say something to Lord Theydon, looking rather sick as she did, the two of them turned to go, and everyone else, sensing the scene was over, drifted away as well.

“She’ll rue the day she thought to cross me,” Lady Eleanor growled, looking like she might march back and continue the confrontation with Lady Yvette for a moment.

Millie stepped farther away from David before Lady Eleanor could comprehend the affection between the two of them. It felt as though a rock of doom plummeted into her stomach as thoughts of how Lady Eleanor would react if she knew there was something between her and David had her ignoring David entirely and rushing to her mistress.

“Are you well, my lady?” she asked. “This must be such a blow for you.”

Turning things back around to Lady Eleanor was precisely the trick Millie needed to divert her mistress’s suspicions.

“She will rue the day,” Lady Eleanor hissed. “Come, Miss Silverstone. We have much work to do.”

Millie followed Lady Eleanor down the hall and back to their rooms. She spared David a glance over her shoulder just before they turned the corner. David looked deeply concerned, but he dropped his shoulders and smiled at her, as if telling her everything would be well in the end.

“She thinks she can lie and have everyone falling at her feet by claiming to be Lord Carshalton’s heir,” Lady Eleanor continued to grumble once they were back in her guestroom. Millie jumped to prepare an outfit for Lady Eleanor for the day as her mistress washed. “Well, she has another trick coming. I’ll prove to the world that Lady Yvette Mortimer is nothing but a lying whore. She will not steal the duke from me, and she will not upstage me when I am by far the superior person.”

“Yes, my lady,” Millie said, feeling brittle and on edge. She got everything ready for Lady Eleanor once she was finished with her morning ablutions, and as she helped her mistress to dry off, she asked, “Do you not think Lady Yvette is Lord Carshalton’s heir?”

“No, indeed,” Lady Eleanor snapped. “And if you think so, you’re as stupid as I’ve always known you are.”

Millie was so confused by everything that had happened and by David’s words to her avowing that Lady Yvette wasn’t the heir that she barely registered the insult. She helped Lady Eleanor into her day dress, then set to work tidying up the room as her mistress sat at the small table in the room and took out her writing paper.

“I will write to every solicitor and family member I can think of to obtain proof that Lady Yvette is a liar and a cheat,” she said as she started scribbling. “I’ll inquire of her father, her late husband’s children, the haberdasher who makes her hats. That woman will not have a single secret left by the time I’m through with her.”

Millie’s gut twisted with dread. She wanted to stop Lady Eleanor and tell her to give up her increasingly mad grudge against Lady Yvette and to let the poor woman settle her own affairs for once. But Lady Eleanor had tipped over the edge of reasonable behavior and now seemed to be half mad with

anger. Millie felt rather like the woman was a rabid dog who needed subduing, but if she got too close, then she herself might end up bitten and destroyed.

The only small, saving grace in the turmoil was that Lady Eleanor gave her the pile of letters for London to take to the post. When she'd returned to her small room to bathe and dress, Millie had folded up and addressed her letter to her mother as well. So by the time she hurried down to the front hallway to hand the stack of letters over to Stanhope, she was grateful she had at least been able to send her letter home.

She had just turned back from passing the letters to Stanhope when she was seen by Lady Cambourne as the woman walked through the grand front door.

"Miss Silverstone," Lady Cambourne said with a bright smile. That smile immediately dropped. "Whatever has you looking so distressed this morning, my love?"

Millie bit her lip and glanced up the stairs, as if Lady Eleanor—or David—would come down at any moment.

"My dear, clearly you are in a state," Lady Cambourne said, stepping closer to her and resting a hand on Millie's arm. She glanced up the stairs as well, then seemed to come to a decision. "Come outside with me for a moment and tell me what's worrying you."

Millie wasn't certain she wanted to, but Lady Cambourne was so maternal, she missed her own mother so terribly, and in that moment, Millie was so desperate for some sort of counsel and advice—not to mention in awe of the lady's station and the interest she was showing in a mere maid—that she went with her.

"Now," Lady Cambourne said when they had moved to the terrace on the other side of the front door and the balmy, July morning. "Won't you tell me what's wrong?"

"I need to go home," Millie blurted before she could stop herself. She even clutched Lady Cambourne's arm as though it were a lifeline. "I should not be here, my lady. You have been so kind, everyone has been so kind, but I...I have reached

further than I should have and lifted my eyes too high. I must go before worse things befall than have happened already.”

“There, there, dear,” Lady Cambourne said, drawing Millie into an embrace.

Millie was so surprised by the gesture that she didn’t stop the lofty woman from hugging her. She needed that sort of comfort. With primarily only Lady Eleanor as company to an increasing degree in recent days, she needed human touch and sympathy more than ever.

And then Lady Cambourne shocked her until her blood ran to ice by saying, “Have you not spoken with Foxley yet?”

Millie gulped and forced herself away from Lady Cambourne. “How...how did you know?”

“My dear, I have eyes,” Lady Cambourne smiled.

That only made a swooping feeling of shame sweep through Millie’s insides. “I never meant for it to happen,” she said in a rush. “That is why I need to go. I let things go too far. I was too familiar when I shouldn’t have been. I need to go home now or...or I’m afraid I’ll succumb to the way I feel about him and...and....” Panic made her lose her breath, and she couldn’t finish the sentence.

“Shh, shh,” Lady Cambourne soothed her. “I am not angry with you or upset in any way. You’ve done nothing wrong.”

“But I have,” Millie squeaked.

Lady Cambourne shook her head and took one of Millie’s hands. “Listen to me,” she said, staring directly at Millie. Millie couldn’t help but stare back. “You must speak with Foxley as soon as you can. You will not leave Nedworth Hall, because you’ve done nothing wrong. You are wanted here, very much. And do not let Lady Eleanor’s antics undo you. I can assure you, you have more allies here than you have enemies, and they will rise up to help you when you least expect it.”

Millie could only nod, praying that Lady Cambourne was right. The very fact that the woman had taken time to console her was proof that at least someone cared.

“What should I do?” she asked as soon as she felt she’d calmed herself enough.

Lady Cambourne shrugged. “Sit back and enjoy the spectacle that is about to unfold,” she said. “Go about your business as you ordinarily would. For I believe we are drawing very near to the end of the house party and all the reasons that brought us here.”

Millie didn’t quite know what to say to that. She was becoming increasingly aware that she should not be conversing with a woman of Lady Cambourne’s station in the way she was. And if she didn’t return to Lady Eleanor soon, there would likely be hell to pay.

“Yes, my lady,” she said, forcing herself to take a clearing breath. “Thank you for listening to me and for giving me such wise counsel.”

“Foxley is the one you should speak with,” Lady Cambourne said. “Believe me, he has the power to make everything come to rights.”

Millie frowned slightly, wondering what that meant, but she’d already taken up too much of Lady Cambourne’s time.

With a quick curtsy and another round of thanks, she turned and headed back into the house. Whatever was to come, Lady Eleanor would be more unbearable than ever. That was the first and only thing that Millie had to concern herself with for the time being.

Chapter Seven

David was not satisfied with the way he'd let a golden opportunity to reveal the truth to Millie and potentially to take her away from Lady Eleanor's rancor slide. He should have stepped in and challenged Lady Yvette—who was clearly lying about a great many things, not just that she was Carshalton's heir—and put a stop to Lady Eleanor's belligerence before it went too far.

Any duke worth his salt would have at least attempted to quiet the scene before it spun as far out of control as it had. But David had hesitated, uncertain of his own authority and loath to embarrass either Lady Yvette or Millie in company. Attempting to be a gentleman did not always lead one to make the right decisions. And afterwards, instead of pursuing Millie and Lady Eleanor to nip whatever might happen between the two of them in the bud, he'd allowed himself to be drawn into excited and not entirely kind conversation with the other gentlemen of the party.

“Who would have imagined that the heir was Lady Yvette all along?” Mr. Sands commented as a group of gentlemen wandered back to their rooms to wash and dress for the day. “It’s a bloody shame that Theydon’s already snatched her up.” He laughed unkindly.

“I’m not convinced she really is the heir,” Lord Podmore said with a sly look. “I rather think Lady Eleanor is correct in saying the woman has been lying to us all from the start.”

Mr. Sands snorted. “You’re just saying that because Lady Yvette refused your suit.”

“She refused your suit as well,” Podmore pointed out.

Sands shrugged. “Things have changed. She might not turn her back on me now.”

David doubted that was true. He found the conversation to be tedious and uncomfortable, but there was still a ways to go before he reached the door to his guestroom.

“What do you think of the matter, Your Grace?” Podmore asked him before David could get away. “Do you think Lady Yvette is being true?”

David’s gut twisted. He knew the truth, but admitting as much would cause more trouble than it would resolve. He continued on until he was at his guestroom door, gripping the handle, before turning back and saying, “I really could not say.”

Before the two gentlemen could engage him further, he dashed into his room and shut the door behind him.

He found himself in similar situations throughout the rest of the day, forcing him to have to wiggle out of giving a definitive answer about what he thought. Lady Yvette was all anyone could talk about, even as they went about other business. David had no choice but to stand at the periphery of those conversations, working as hard as he ever had to express no opinion. He looked for Millie constantly, desperate to create a situation where he could safely tell her everything, but she was either absent or ensconced with Lady Eleanor until

after supper. By that point, it was quite literally too late to do anything.

David was determined to find and educate Millie the next day, but before he could do more than sip his morning coffee, the conversation and activity of the house was more of the same.

“I expect there will be a great furor in the press,” Mr. Dixon said, managing to look both excited and sympathetic as he attempted to draw David into conversation at the breakfast table. “I’ve been in London these last few months, and your house party isn’t the only group of people who have been working to discover the identity of Carshalton’s heir.”

“Didn’t *The Times* do a piece about it a fortnight ago?” Lord Rothbury asked, reading said newspaper at the table. “I am certain I remember reading about heaps of speculation.”

“There’s no need to speculate now,” Miss Pennypacker said with a smile, glancing down the table to where Lady Yvette was engaged in conversation with Lady Angeline and Lady Patience. Fortunately for them all, Lady Eleanor was not present. “Lady Yvette will be feted around London for months, once the truth is made public. She won’t be able to go anywhere without a crowd of admirers, most of them likely to be attempting to wheedle money from her.”

That consideration was so harsh that David immediately lost his appetite and put his serviette down. “If you will excuse me,” he said, pushing his chair up and standing. “I...I’ve just remembered a letter I need to write in time to go out with the morning post.”

No one seemed to question that, and David was able to flee the room without further comment. He rushed down the hall, intent on finding Millie as soon as he could.

What he would do once he found her, however, he didn’t know. She deserved the truth. She deserved a champion to help her manage the truth. But once everything was out in the open, it would decimate Millie’s world. David was deeply wary about hurting Millie in his attempts to help her.

She was not an unhappy woman. Lady Eleanor might have made her life a misery at Nedworth Hall, but David remembered the way Millie had spoken about her parents when they discussed the matter before. She was so happy and settled with the life she already had. The father who had raised her sounded like the very best of men, one who loved his daughter, whether she was flesh of his flesh or not. Millie's mother seemed like an angel as well, and she had raised Millie to be strong, good, and beautiful.

Could David really, in good conscience, yank Millie away from her happy life and throw her to the wolves of public opinion? Heiress or not, London society would savage her. Could he truly do that to her?

Then again, it would happen anyhow. She would be discovered, and once she was, all of England would know her identity. Miss Pennypacker was horrifically correct when she said that people would climb out of the woodwork to throw themselves at Millie. The only way she stood a chance of being shielded from potential harm was if he managed to marry her and protect her with the mantle of his title as quickly as possible.

He spent a solid twenty minutes searching for Millie throughout the house. It was early enough that she was likely still inside, but no matter where he went in the vastness of Nedworth Hall, he couldn't find her.

That didn't mean he didn't find anyone, however.

"Oh! Your Grace! I did not expect you to catch me here," Lady Eleanor greeted him with false surprise and fluttering eyelashes when he stepped into the library for a moment to see if Millie had, perhaps, gone there for a book.

Alarm spiked in David, and he searched anxiously for anyone else that might be in the room to stem the tide of disaster he felt was about to befall. Millie had warned him about finding himself alone with Lady Eleanor, after all.

"My lady," he said, rocking on his spot, like he would turn and flee. He wanted to ask if Lady Eleanor knew where Millie

was, but he couldn't very well explain his reasons for wanting to know.

"What a treat to have you to myself at last," Lady Eleanor said, her voice high and breathless, pink splashing her cheeks, as she practically skipped across the room to him. "I have wanted to find myself in a situation precisely like this for many weeks now."

She came to a stop far too close to him. David stepped back, but Lady Eleanor moved with him.

"I...I have business that I need to be about, Lady Eleanor," he said, looking toward the doorway.

"Don't go," Lady Eleanor practically pleaded with him, shifting even closer to him. "I have wanted to tell you how deeply and ardently I admire you for quite some time."

David cleared his throat. "Thank you, my lady, but I would not want there to be a misunderstanding between us." He tried to step away once more.

"No!" Lady Eleanor shouted, then grabbed hold of him like a crab snatching her prey. "No." She modulated her tone to something attempting to be seductive. "You cannot go. For...for the time has come for me to declare myself."

"Lady Eleanor," David began, trying to extract himself from her grip. That only caused her to paw at him even more.

"You must know that of all the ladies present at this house party, I am most suited to becoming your beloved duchess," Lady Eleanor went on, trying her best to press her body against his.

"Please, my lady, this is unseemly," David said, his heart pounding with panic.

"Is it unseemly to declare love?" Lady Eleanor asked. "Is it unseemly for two hearts that beat passionately for each other to declare themselves?"

"It is," David said. The more he tried to push her away without forcing or hurting her, the tighter Lady Eleanor clung to him. "You must know that I do not—"

“I have dreamed of you my whole life,” Lady Eleanor went on, her eyes taking on a glassy, wild look. “I know that there is no other who would be a better wife for you than me. I will adore you and worship you. I will give you children and everything else that you might want. I will order and rule your household with precision and efficiency. Everything will be perfect between the two of us.”

“My lady, if I have ever given you any indication of feelings—”

“Yes!” Lady Eleanor’s eyes lit with something David found terrifying. “Yes, you have given me so many indications of feeling.”

“I have not,” David said desperately.

He had just reached the point where he could no longer be gentle with Lady Eleanor and where he would, regrettably, have to shove her away, when Lady Cambourne stepped into the library, saying, “Is something the matter here?”

Lady Eleanor gasped and turned to face Lady Cambourne, still clinging tightly to David, looking as though she had won the greatest victory of her generation.

“Oh, dear!” she said, filled with false alarm. “You have discovered me and the Duke of Foxley in a compromising position.”

David tensed, feeling like a trapped animal. “I can assure you, Lady Cambourne, this is not what it appears.”

“Yes, it is!” Lady Eleanor shouted triumphantly. “You have caught the two of us, an unmarried man and an unmarried woman, alone in an intimate embrace. There will be a tremendous scandal unless the two of us are married as soon as possible.”

Lady Cambourne’s expression was so flat that David nearly laughed. She glanced from Lady Eleanor to David with a look that teasingly scolded him for being fool enough to fall into Lady Eleanor’s web.

“This is not as it seems,” David said, his voice not much more than a put-upon sigh.

“No, I would imagine it is not,” Lady Cambourne said, her mouth twitching as if she were fighting not to smile.

“It most certainly is,” Lady Eleanor insisted. David was surprised she didn’t stomp her foot. “The Duke of Foxley and I have been found alone and embracing. I demand you preserve my honor and reputation at once by declaring us engaged.”

Lady Cambourne nearly did burst into laughter then. She pressed her fingers to her lips for a moment, eyes dancing with mischief, then said, “But you are not alone, my dear.”

Lady Eleanor frowned and loosened her grip enough for David to take a large step away from her. “But we are,” she said. “We are very much alone.”

“Am I a ghost, then?” Lady Cambourne asked. She turned to David and said, “Good lord. I am a ghost in my own house already. Lord Cambourne will be so disappointed.”

David let out the smallest, tightest of laughs before saying, “You make a lovely ghost, my lady.”

“No!” Lady Eleanor shrieked. She huffed, as though David and Lady Cambourne were the ridiculous ones. “That is, yes, you are here now, but you were not here earlier. His Grace and I were alone in the library for quite some time.”

“No, you were not,” Lady Cambourne said, her mirth turning into something sharper. “You were never alone.”

“We were!” Lady Eleanor snapped. She glanced to David, who moved farther and farther away from her with every passing second, and said, “You know we were.”

“I was here the entire time, my dear,” Lady Cambourne said, sending David a pointed look. “Was I not, Your Grace?”

David cleared his throat to stop himself from falling into hysterics. The moment was utterly mad, and there was nothing he could do about it. “You were, my lady.”

“That is not true,” Lady Eleanor growled. “We were alone. I swear it. We were alone and declaring our love for each other. I was importuned, and therefore we must be married.”

“The three of us were discussing the weather,” Lady Cambourne insisted. “Were we not, Foxley?”

“We were,” David said with exaggerated solemnity. “It is quite lovely this morning.”

“It is,” Lady Cambourne said. “Very warm and sunny. Not a spot of rain in sight.”

“Not a one,” David agreed.

“No!” Lady Eleanor moaned, suddenly close to tears. “You cannot do this to me. I nearly had him. I could have been a duchess. I *will* be a duchess.”

Lady Cambourne sent David an apologetic look, as if it were her fault for inviting Lady Eleanor to the party to begin with. Although now that David knew the truth, he knew why.

But then things took an unexpected turn.

“Your Grace, I do believe that the weather is so fine you should take a solitary walk to enjoy it,” Lady Cambourne said, staring intensely at him. “The woods close to the river are particularly nice on days like this. You may even find things waiting for you in the woods for which you have been searching for quite some time.”

David tried not to suck in a breath too obviously. He was nearly certain Lady Cambourne was referring to Millie.

“Do you know,” he said, edging toward the doorway, “a walk sounds perfect just about now.”

“I’ll walk with you,” Lady Eleanor said, evidently thinking she needed to make one last effort to nab him.

“You will not,” Lady Cambourne said. “You and I need to have a talk about your behavior of late.”

“My behavior?” Lady Eleanor said, reeling back, as if her behavior had been above reproach.

“Sit down,” Lady Cambourne ordered her.

As amusing as it might have been to linger and hear what Lady Cambourne had to say to Lady Eleanor, David fled the room and searched for the closest exit in the house. He wanted

to get away from the maelstrom of gossip and activity that the house party had descended into. He wanted to be somewhere quiet and solitary.

No, that wasn't completely correct. He wanted to be with Millie. He would have given anything if he could have packed her into his carriage and taken her straight home to Derbyshire right then and there. He was certain that Millie wouldn't mind living a country life with him for the rest of their days.

But first, he had to find her. He knew where the woods were, and it didn't take him long to get there. Finding her once he was among the leafy, shady trees was another thing. The woods were quiet and a breeze blew through the treetops, masking much of the sounds humans might make.

But at last, he found her. He had to take a narrow path that wound away from the main path and ended in a small, lovely clearing, where someone had created a rustic terrace with a chaise lounge and a few wicker chairs. But there she was, looking confused and lost and nearly at her wits' end.

"Millie," David breathed her name, gladder to see her than he'd ever been to see anyone. He strode across the space to her, determined never to let her out of his sight or his arms again.

Chapter Eight

The morning after Lady Yvette's announcement that she was Lord Carshalton's heir was troublesome from the moment Millie awoke in the morning. She'd hoped Lady Eleanor would reconsider the rampage she'd started off on after a good night's sleep, but that was not to be. As Millie helped her to dress for the day, her mistress muttered about last resorts and the need to delve into the lies swirling around the house.

Lady Eleanor didn't notice that Millie was anxious and out of sorts. She never stopped to make a single inquiry about what might be the matter. The truth was that Millie felt as though everything was the matter. Her feelings toward David had only grown since he'd stopped her from falling down the stairs, and since he'd done his best to quiet Lady Eleanor's rage. Each new action that David took, despite the madhouse Nedworth Hall had descended into, only showed how kind and considerate he was.

And then there was the letter Millie had received from her mother in reply to the one she'd sent the other day, in which she'd poured out her heart.

"I understand your concerns, my dear child," her mother had written—and remarkably swiftly as well for the letter to reach her so hastily. *"You have always been so sweet and so good, always concerned about what is right and what is moral. But on this occasion, I must counsel you to remain as close to the Duke of Foxley as possible. I should not be surprised that he has singled you out for particular affection. You are worthy of the man in every way. You must trust me when I say this. All will become clear, but until it does, you must put your trust in the duke and follow his lead in all things."*

Millie had read her mother's words dozens of times since she'd received the letter the previous afternoon. She couldn't make heads or tails of them. On the one hand, her mother was always such a strong, upright person. Millie was inclined to believe and follow every bit of advice she gave.

On the other, it very much appeared as though her mother was telling her that she should throw herself at David and succumb to whatever desires he had. Since there was no way for them to be together legitimately, despite every scruple she knew her mother had, it was clear her mother was telling her to become David's mistress.

Millie had no idea what to think of it, or indeed, of the grander situation she found herself in. What had started out as a delightful house party had turned into a test of her resolve and of her heart.

"Oh, Millie, my dear," Lady Cambourne's call as Millie returned the tray that Lady Eleanor had taken her breakfast on to the kitchens stopped her and pulled her from her troubled thoughts.

"Yes, Lady Cambourne?" Millie asked, attempting a distracted curtsy after the fact.

Lady Cambourne marched straight up to her and plucked the tray right out of Millie's hands, as if she'd spent a lifetime

in service instead of being served.

“I have a task for you to perform, my dear, and it must be done quickly and silently, without delay,” Lady Cambourne said.

Millie blinked once, feeling the importance of the task down to her toes. “Of course, my lady.”

One of the maids happened to be passing, so Lady Cambourne handed her the tray. She then turned to Millie and said, “Do not ask why, but I need you to proceed at once down to the woods on the south end of the property, near the river.”

Millie frowned in confusion. “The woods?”

“Yes,” Lady Cambourne said, taking Millie’s arm and escorting her toward the nearest door leading to the gardens. “Do you know the woods at all?”

“I...I have walked there in search of solitude once or twice, yes.”

“Good.” Lady Cambourne nodded. “Do you know the delightful spot secluded in the depths of the woods? Where my darling husband has arranged a few bits of furniture for when the two of us wish to be alone?”

Millie’s face heated. She knew the spot, and it only just dawned on her what the oasis had been created for. “Yes, I know it, my lady,” she said.

“Then you must go there at once,” Lady Cambourne said, stepping ahead of Millie to open one of the French doors in the ballroom. “At once,” she repeated. “Do not stop for anything.”

“Yes, my lady,” Millie said with a confused frown.

She did what Lady Cambourne asked, even though anxiety gripped her.

No, not anxiety. It was something more along the lines of expectation. For she had a good idea what it was that Lady Cambourne was up to. She suspected that she would not be alone in the clearing in the woods. The few times she’d gone there to simply breathe without Lady Eleanor knowing where

she was, she'd thought to herself that the spot would be perfect for clandestine meetings.

With that in mind, she was a bit disappointed when she reached the clearing only to find it empty. Empty, but not untouched. There was a small, covered tray with some light refreshments that had been left on one of the small tables. Likewise, there were comfortable cushions on the chairs and the chaise lounge. Considering it had sprinkled a bit in the night, the dry condition of the cushions hinted that someone had put them there recently, and perhaps with something intentional in mind.

Millie's heart continued to beat as though she were walking vigorously as she moved around the clearing, investigating the furniture and the surroundings, as if whatever Lady Cambourne wanted her to have was hidden. It was not, though, and about fifteen minutes after she arrived, she heard swishing on the path that had led into the clearing before glancing up and finding David stepping into the light.

"Millie," David greeted her with such relief that Millie was immediately on edge for his sake.

"David," she greeted him in kind and flew across the clearing to him.

She stopped just short of actually leaping into his arms, but that apparently wasn't enough for David. He reached for her, scooping her into his embrace, holding her against his body so tightly that she could feel his pounding heart, then burying his face in the side of her hair.

"You've no idea how glad I am to see you," he said, sounding glad indeed.

"Is something wrong?" Millie asked, feeling the tightness of his body.

David loosened his hold on her, and they both leaned back so they could better see each other. "I just had the most terrifying near miss of my life," he said, humor joining with alarm in his expression to confuse Millie entirely.

“What happened?” she asked. She pivoted slightly to look back at the furniture, then led David over to the chaise lounge and sat with him.

“I failed to heed your advice,” he said, more humor and affection seeping into his tone. “I allowed Lady Eleanor to catch me alone in the library.”

“Oh, no!” Millie gasped, grasping David’s hands.

“As expected, she hurled herself at me and attempted every manner of impropriety,” David went on. The amusement growing in him was at odds with what he was saying.

“But...you’re laughing?” she asked.

David did laugh then, as if she’d commanded it. “Never fear. Lady Eleanor failed miserably in her attempts to corner me into marriage. To be honest, in this day and age, I’m not sure being alone with a man is really enough of a reason to trap him into matrimony. Either way, she did not succeed. Lady Cambourne happened by and stated that she had been there the entire time and that Lady Eleanor and I had never been alone.”

Millie was astounded by the story. “I can’t imagine Lady Eleanor was happy with that.”

“She most definitely wasn’t,” David said. “I believe she’s receiving a dressing down from Lady Cambourne right now.” He paused, glanced down at their joined hands, then rubbed his thumb over Millie’s knuckles before looking up into her eyes again. “Lady Cambourne sent me here, and I guessed her reasons the moment I saw you.”

Millie’s heart pounded harder than ever. She didn’t know what to say. She’d suspected what Lady Cambourne was up to as well, but now that she was there with David, alone in a beautiful setting, she didn’t know what to do.

David evidently knew what he wanted, though. He raised a hand to brush Millie’s cheek lightly, gazing into her eyes with so much love and admiration as he did that when he leaned into her, Millie couldn’t help but move with him. When his

lips slanted over hers in a kiss, she breathed out a small sound of wonder and longing that surprised her.

What surprised her even more was the ease with which she molded herself against him, clinging to his shoulders and letting him kiss her with all the depth of passion he wanted. More than just let him, she joined in with the action, kissing him back eagerly. He was so good at kissing her, at making her feel as though she were the most precious and wonderful thing in the world.

“Yes,” she whispered when they paused for breath.

“Yes?” David asked.

Millie opened her eyes, not realizing she’d closed them to begin with, then gazed seriously at him. “I’ve had a letter from my mother,” she explained. “I...I wrote to her with the dilemma of my heart, and she replied.”

“The dilemma of your heart?” David asked, his eyes full of concern as he stroked her face gently.

Millie took in a breath, then let out everything within her. “I love you, David,” she said, barely above a whisper, as if it were wrong to tempt fate by expressing such impossible sentiments aloud. “I have liked you very much from the moment we met, and instead of squashing those feelings or letting them fade away, I’ve nurtured them. You have been so good and so kind to me these past many weeks, and...and I have fallen in love with you more and more.”

“I love you, too,” he said before she was able to get another word in. That startled Millie enough that she could only blink at him as he held her face in his hands and gazed ardently at her. “I found you to be sweet and beautiful and precious from that first meeting as well, and my opinion of you has only risen as I’ve come to know you more. You are so strong and courageous to put up with everything that you already have, and I fear there is even more to come for you.”

Millie swallowed and lowered her eyes, though David still held her head. She had no doubt that she had more misery in store, if Lady Eleanor continued in her ways.

“I intend to protect you from all of it,” David said, causing her to suck in a breath and look at him again. “Come what may, I will stand by you and shelter you from whatever stormy blast comes your way when the truth is known.”

The truth. The truth that Millie had allowed herself to be led off the straight and narrow path. She knew what they were talking about now. She knew what their entire acquaintance had led up to.

“Yes,” she repeated, smiling at him. “With my mother’s blessing, I...I will consent to be yours. I never thought I would find myself in the bed of a duke, but surprisingly, I find I don’t care. I just want you. I want to spend my life with you in whatever small way I can. I don’t think I even care what the others say, as long as you’ll let me love you.”

“Oh, my darling, yes,” David said.

For a moment, Millie thought there was something else he wanted to say. There always seemed to be something else that David wanted to say, but for whatever reason, he held back.

But, of course, that was because he was a duke and she was the daughter of a farmer, and he had no obligation to share anything with her.

“We have so much to discuss,” he said, slightly more serious. “There are things you don’t know.”

“I know that I love you,” Millie said, uncertain she wanted to hear the more mundane details of what it meant to be a duke’s mistress. “That is all I need to know.”

It was a risk, one she never thought she would be bold enough for, but instead of allowing David to speak, she slipped toward him, undoing the buttons of his coat so she could slide her arms around him, and captured his mouth in a kiss the way he had taken hers before.

David breathed in, surprised, and then everything just seemed to resolve itself and fall into place. He kissed her back powerfully, taking her in his arms with more intention than he ever had. His hands roved her body for a moment before reaching into her hair.

Millie might have laughed at the way he was so easily able to send her hairpins flying as he loosened her hair and let it flow around her. It felt so freeing to no longer hiding her true feelings behind a tight smile. Everything about her felt free with that single, laughably simple gesture.

There was more freedom to be had as well. Without questioning herself too closely, she set to work on the buttons of David's waistcoat, and then his shirt under that. Mad though it was—and truly, everything at Nedworth Hall was mad now, so why should she not be, too—she wanted to feel the bare skin and heat of David's body against her palms. She wanted to feel it against more than just her palms.

“Millie,” David growled, tipping her back until she lay reclined on the swooping end of the lounge. He surprised her further by lifting her legs onto the cushion and leaning over her.

Wicked though it made her, Millie let her legs fall apart, one on one side of the cushion and the other on the other. That allowed for David to position his body flush with hers, and through that motion, she was able to feel the stiffness of his member pressing into her.

She'd always thought she'd be frightened by such a blatant display of masculinity, but instead of fear, she was consumed with desire. David continued to kiss her, both pleasing and punishing her lips and tongue with his. Millie never could have imagined that impassioned kissing could feel so blissful.

There was more bliss to be had as well. David moved his hands to unbutton her simple bodice. He encountered her corset when he did, but a few deft pushes at the hooks clasping it together loosened the whole thing enough for him to part the garment so he could rain kisses across the tops of her breasts. He even managed to take one of her nipples into his mouth through the thin fabric of her chemise.

It was wicked as could be, but Millie sighed and moaned and threaded her fingers through David's hair to encourage him. His attention to her breasts seemed to go straight to her sex, which ached for him. She'd only ever dreamed of that

kind of pleasure, but now that her dreams were a reality, she found herself panting for more.

Again, David gave her the more she craved. He shifted in one long movement to sit between her legs, then gathered up her skirts, stroking her thighs as he did. His hands traveled up her thighs and over the thin stockings she wore to seek out the split in her drawers. Moments after he found it, Millie let out a truly wicked sound as he explored her in the most intimate way possible.

“My love,” David whispered, moving again so that he could kiss her while teasing and stroking between her legs.

It was the most amazing thing Millie had ever experienced. She understood completely why some women would ruin themselves for the pleasure their lover could give them. The way David’s fingers plunged into her, teasing something within her that felt heavenly while his thumb stroked the outer part of her, had her close to coming apart. The sensations coiled tighter and tighter within her as her breathing became shallow, until it all seemed to well into a moment of perfection before her body and heart came completely undone.

David moaned as well as her body shuddered, squeezing around his fingers. Everything about the moment made Millie so happy that when David inched back, she nearly shouted in protest. A moment later, he shifted her and moved himself closer between her legs. She felt a momentary touch of something blunt, and then he surged into her.

All thoughts flew completely out of Millie’s head at the strange, beautiful, invasive, pleasurable feeling of David joining with her. She knew exactly what was happening. It was hard not to when one was raised on a farm. And even though she suspected she should be alarmed, all she could think about was that David was hers and she was his, and the two of them would be together, no matter who said they shouldn’t.

“Yes, yes, yes!” she gasped in time to his thrusts.

She tilted her hips to take him more deeply and held him tightly as he spun out of control and began making glorious sounds of completion. She felt powerful to be able to cause

such a reaction and so deeply loved that he would want her that way. When his energy waned and he sagged against her, remaining lodged inside her, she wrapped her arms and legs around him and held him where he was, wanting to stay that way as long as possible.

It went against everything she had been told a good woman should want, but in that moment, what was good and what was wicked had been turned on its head, and she didn't care about anything but David.

She wasn't entirely certain how long the two of them lay there. The moment was too lovely, and Millie thought they both might have drifted off for a moment. As she opened her eyes, she finally had the wherewithal to say, "That was wonderful."

David lifted himself to look at her. "Do you truly think so? I was not too harsh, too...eager?"

"You were just eager enough," she told him. She reached for him and pulled him down for a long, sensual kiss.

"Millie, there truly are things we need to discuss," he said when the kissing had left them both breathless. "There are things you most definitely need to know before—"

"Hello? Is anybody there?"

Millie gasped and jolted so hard that David slipped away from her. "We've been found," she whispered, her mind already spinning tales of what would happen to them if they were discovered.

"All will be well," David said, moving back to straighten himself in a hurry.

Millie caught a fleeting glimpse of his manly parts as he tucked himself away. She wished there was time for her to explore them a bit more.

"I say, hello?" the voice came again.

"It's Lady Yvette," Millie hissed, struggling to sit up straight and right herself. As she did, she formulated a plan.

“I’ll go and speak to her so that you can escape back to the house without being seen.”

“Yes, but we need to—”

“Go, now!” Millie whispered, rolling off the lounge and stumbling in the direction of the voice. “There isn’t time.”

There truly wasn’t time, but David whispered, “I love you,” then took off in the opposite direction, still fastening his clothing as he went.

Millie wanted to laugh, but she would have to save that until after she’d dealt with Lady Yvette. Because David was right, they had much to discuss.

Chapter Nine

Time and the extraordinary nature of the house party itself quickly became David's worst enemy. In his mind, everything was decided after the moment of abandon he and Millie had shared in the woods. It was inconceivable that he would do anything other than share the truth of Millie's parentage with her and marry her as soon as the banns could be read. If he could have stopped time and whisked Millie away from the drama she seemed to have become embroiled with so that he could explain all and make everything right, he would have.

But David had no power to stop time, or to stop the merciless machinations of Lady Eleanor. At first, he simply could not pull Millie aside to explain all in a way that would not bring unwanted attention to the both of them. And then everything was turned on its head once again when Lady Eleanor deviously invited Lord Sutton and a certain, odious Lord Philmont to join the party.

Perhaps he was weak or remiss in some sort of dukely duty not to hold his arms out and to shout for everyone to stop for a moment so that he could reveal that Millie was Carshalton's heir and that she would be marrying him and no other. Dukes were not gods, though, and the moment David saw how terrified Lady Yvette was of her father, and that Millie had leapt to Lady Yvette's side in support the moment a position was offered to her, he knew he could not put his own desires ahead of Lady Yvette's comfort and safety.

He couldn't hold the tide back forever, though, and he did not want to. As soon as Lady Cambourne announced the masquerade ball, where she would announce the identity of Carshalton's heir, David heard the sound of a proverbial clock ticking in his head louder than ever.

But again, one thing or another held him back from approaching Millie, all the way until the afternoon before the ball. By late in the afternoon, as the house party guests were dressing for the event, and as Nedworth's staff was rushing about, taking trays with supper up to various rooms, David decided he had to act, come what may.

The trouble was, he wasn't entirely certain where Millie had gone off to. She was no longer with Lady Eleanor, that much was certain. If she knew what was good for her, Lady Eleanor would keep to her rooms and not show her face to anyone after the danger she had caused for Lady Yvette. Millie was most likely with Lady Yvette, but when David went to check in the room where the ladies had been making masks for the event earlier, he found Lady Yvette and Theydon in a sweet scene of understanding and devotion, but no Millie.

The only place David imagined his beloved could have gone was somewhere belowstairs, where she thought she belonged. There was nothing for it but to seek her out there, though he regretted interrupting Nedworth's staff when they were in the final stages of preparation for the largest event the house party had seen so far.

As it turned out, he never made it to the doorway leading down to the servants' hall.

“Your Grace,” a tight voice whispered at him from one of the private parlors near the back of the house as he passed on his way to the doorway.

David frowned, recognizing Lady Eleanor’s voice at once. He hesitated. Even if Lady Eleanor’s plans were to catch him alone again, surely she must know it would never work. He owed the woman nothing. Quite the opposite. But he would not be any sort of gentleman at all if he didn’t at least hear the woman out.

With a sigh, he turned back and found Lady Eleanor watching him as she clutched the door frame leading into the parlor.

“Oh, I knew you would help me,” Lady Eleanor said with a tearful sigh.

David frowned as he met Lady Eleanor at the doorway, keeping well clear of her arm’s reach, just in case. “Whether I deign to help you or not, Lady Eleanor, depends entirely upon what you want from me and what sort of remorse you are willing to show for your actions in the last few days and weeks.”

Lady Eleanor squeaked a little and gazed up at him with round, worried eyes. “I...I am very sorry for what I have done,” she said woodenly. David didn’t believe her at all. “I would make amends for all of it at once,” she hurried on, her expression taking on a sort of manic gleam, “but to do so, I need someone of power and influence to help me.”

David remained unmoved. “You brought two vipers into Lord and Lady Cambourne’s house who have and would treat Lady Yvette abominably. I have it on good authority that Lady Yvette went to great lengths to escape from those men and their abuse of her, that she managed to hide and keep herself safe for years, and you blasted all that away by revealing her whereabouts.”

Lady Eleanor huffed impatiently. “Lord Sutton is her father. He has every right to keep his daughter in line, especially now that she is a widow. Someone needs to stop that woman’s rampage of lies.”

David glowered at Lady Eleanor, then turned to go.

“No! Wait!” Lady Eleanor leapt after him, catching his arm and holding him back. “I...I mean, it was all very unfortunate, yes, and poor Lady Yvette should be pitied.”

Not a single syllable that came out of the woman’s mouth was anywhere close to genuine.

“I would thank you to remove your hands from my person at once,” David seethed. “I may be a man and a duke, but that does not give you any more right to accost me than a man has to accost a woman.”

Lady Eleanor snapped her mouth shut and pulled her hand back as though David had burnt her. “Yes, you are right, of course,” she said, still not particularly genuine. “But I need your help, Your Grace.”

“How?” David said, not even trying to keep the scorn from his voice.

Lady Eleanor became even more anxious. She twisted her hands in front of her and said, “If...if I were a duchess, all my sins would be forgiven. This entire, unfortunate episode of the house party would be forgotten. I would have the power to keep Lady Yvette safe by keeping her out of society as well.”

David gaped at Lady Eleanor. “I am astounded that you would even entertain the thought that I would stoop so low as to marry you after all you’ve done.”

“But you must,” Lady Eleanor said, near tears, rushing at him and reaching for his arm again. “Without you, I—”

“Enough of this,” David said, nearly shouting. “You have played a game and you have lost, Lady Eleanor. If you wish to save face in even a small way, I suggest you look elsewhere for a husband who might be willing and able to protect you, though finding one may be difficult indeed after your behavior. The best you could do at this point is to take a very long holiday, perhaps to visit Lord Gillingham abroad.”

Lady Eleanor pinched her face in distaste. She then surprised David, and not in a good way, by bursting into

feigned tears and saying, “Oh, Your Grace, you are so cruel as to turn your back on a woman in—”

“Is something the matter here?”

David was filled with relief as he pivoted to see Lady Cambourne marching toward them. It was the second time their hostess had come to his rescue where Lady Eleanor was concerned.

Lady Eleanor gasped and straightened up, as if her headmistress had caught her misbehaving, the color draining from her face.

Indeed, the way Lady Cambourne narrowed her eyes at Lady Eleanor and said, “What did I tell you about harassing any of my guests, Lady Eleanor?” completed that image.

“I...I was just...Foxley was about to propose to me,” Lady Eleanor said, her eyes bright with her last-ditch effort to get her own way.

“I was not,” David said, confident Lady Cambourne knew the truth.

“Lady Eleanor, you will return to your room at once or I will have one of the footmen escort you to the inn in Stevenage until the formal end of the house party,” Lady Cambourne said, and without room for argument, continued with, “Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Lady Cambourne,” Lady Eleanor said in a hurry. “But—”

“Go!” Lady Cambourne said, pointing back the way she came. “Or do I have to get out my crop?”

David’s mouth twitched at the wickedness Lady Cambourne’s words implied, admiring the woman more than ever. Particularly as Lady Eleanor grabbed her skirts and rushed off, crying in earnest.

“Your crop?” David asked once the horrible woman was gone.

“You know that I have and continue to live the most interesting of lives, Your Grace,” Lady Cambourne said with a

devilish grin. That grin dropped as she went on with. “There will be time for naughty tales later. For now, I’ve come to fetch you so that I might bring you to Miss Silverstone.”

“Thank God,” David said, following Lady Cambourne as she set off. “I’ve been looking for her everywhere.”

As it turned out, Millie was exactly where he thought she would be, belowstairs. When he and Lady Cambourne descended into the servants’ world, they found the entire downstairs area buzzing with activity, and Millie in the middle of it, helping out in any way she could.

“Miss Silverstone, I’ve brought someone to speak with you,” Lady Cambourne called out over the chaos as whichever of her staff noticed her attempted to drop what they were doing to bow and curtsy to her. “The rest of you, pretend we’re not here.”

The servants looked wary of that order, but they had so much to do that they obeyed.

Millie had been helping one of the kitchen maids arrange small treats on trays that would be offered to the ball’s guests. When she glanced up and saw Lady Cambourne and David, her face flushed even darker than it already was from her efforts, and at one, tiny gesture from Lady Cambourne, she dropped what she was doing to cross the hall to them.

“There is no time for preludes and overtures in this matter,” Lady Cambourne said, drawing both Millie and David farther down the hall to the quiet of what appeared to be the housekeeper’s office. “There have been enough unnecessary prevarications already, so I will set this machine in motion. Miss Silverstone, the time has come to reveal that you are Lord Carshalton’s heir.”

Millie stumbled over nothing as they settled in the office. David had to catch her to stop her from falling into the writing desk in the corner. “I beg your pardon, my lady?” she gasped.

“Foxley knows all the details,” Lady Cambourne went on. “I told him weeks ago, and I’ve been urging him to reveal all since then, but the impossible man has dragged his feet until

now. But we've reached the end of any possible patience any of us could have. The revelation will be made in just a few hours, at the ball, and you both need to be ready."

"I...how...I cannot...*what?*" Millie was clearly bowled over and utterly off-balance.

David stepped in, pulling her into a loose embrace so that she would know she was supported in every way.

"I am so very sorry that I didn't tell you earlier," he said, resting a hand on the side of her hot face. "I intended to from the start, but the more you spoke about your parents and the love you have for them and they for you, the more I hesitated. I did not want to crush something so beautiful with the blunt weapon of the truth."

Millie's bafflement coalesced into a tight look of misery. "My...my father and mother are not my parents?" she asked, her eyes going glassy with tears.

"They are," Lady Cambourne stepped in, giving David a quick look as if he were aggravating. "Bill and Myra Silverstone are your mother and father in every way that matters. They have loved you and nurtured you from the beginning, and that is what makes a parent, not the details of how you came into the world."

With those words, Millie gasped again, and her eyes went as wide as David had ever seen them. "It's Lady Gillingham, isn't it," she said, gripping David's jacket tightly as her clever mind puzzled things out. "That's why she has taken such an interest in me from an early age and why I have always been the beneficiary of her kindness. I...people have always said I resemble her."

"Yes, my dear," Lady Cambourne said, resting a hand on Millie's arm for a moment. "You've guessed correctly. Lady Gillingham and I have been friends since we were girls, and I witnessed her entire, tragic love affair with Lord Carshalton from its beginning. They were in love for many, many years, but forbidden to marry by her parents. You are the result of that love, which is why Lord Carshalton has bequeathed

everything he had that was not entailed away or designated for someone else by law to you.”

“I...I don’t know what to say,” Millie said, panting slightly. “I never suspected any of this.” She blinked suddenly and glanced up at David. “Good lord. Does this mean Lady Eleanor is my...sister?” She turned her gaze to Lady Cambourne.

“As it happens, no,” Lady Cambourne said, looking delighted to share the information. “Lady Eleanor was deposited on the doorstep of Gillingham Manor shortly after you were given to the Silverstones for fostering. Lord Gillingham was home at the time and insisted his wife keep the foundling.”

Millie let out a slightly mad laugh, then clapped a hand over her mouth. “Oh, dear,” she said. “Lady Eleanor will not be happy to hear that.”

“Whether she ever hears it or not is entirely up to you, my dear,” Lady Cambourne said. “I will not reveal anything of that truth tonight, only your truth.”

All of the color drained from Millie’s face, and she glanced back to David. “Everyone will know,” she gulped. “Everyone that has seen me as a wretch and a servant will suddenly know I’m...not who I said I was.”

“But you are exactly who you have been from the start,” David said, holding her a bit tighter. “You are a beautiful, sweet, good woman who has been kind to all, even under trying circumstances, and who has given so freely to everyone else without asking for much in return. And if you will let me, when you are presented to the assembly as Carshalton’s heir, I will also introduce you as my betrothed.”

Millie’s mouth slipped open, and she let out a sound of astonishment tinged with love.

A moment later, she snapped her mouth shut and shook her head, pulling out of David’s embrace. “But I cannot marry you,” she said, moving agitatedly, her gaze failing to focus on anything. “I’m a simple farm girl. I have nothing to

recommend me. And you're a duke who could have any woman in England."

"You are the only woman I want," David said, clasping her face in his hands and looking deeply into her eyes. "You are the only woman I will ever want again."

"And you are not merely a farm girl," Lady Cambourne pointed out. "You are the daughter of a lord and a lady, and now you are in possession of a vast fortune that has already been the talk of society. Money erases nearly everything untoward, and if it is not enough, the love of a duke will certainly erase the rest of it."

David felt the truth of Lady Cambourne's words more than ever. He only hoped Millie saw it that way, too.

Millie turned her gaze up to David again. "Do you truly wish to marry me, David?" she asked, breathing carefully, like she was trying to calm herself.

"I most certainly do," David said, then proved it by kissing her lips lightly. "I wanted you to be mine even before Lady Cambourne told me the truth. In fact, the only reason she told me was because I'd confided in her that I wished to leave the house party, because I didn't think I could contain my affection and desire for you, and I didn't want to put your virtue in danger."

Millie blinked back her tears and smiled up at him.

"And I, of course, informed him that there was nothing at all, except for a few minor concerns, keeping the two of you apart," Lady Cambourne said. "You are perfectly suited for each other, and I believe that time will heal every other trouble that the truth may create."

"So, will you say yes?" David asked, stroking his thumbs across Millie's flushed cheeks. "Will you make me the happiest man in England by marrying me? After all, I am in desperate need of a duchess who will not care one whit for London society and who would rather help me in my unending battle against nematodes."

Millie snorted with laughter, then laughed even harder at the sound she made. “You would truly want me to give my opinion on your farms?” she asked.

“I trust you as much as I trust Richardson when it comes to agricultural concerns,” David said, then kissed her again.

Lady Cambourne made a laughing sound and shook her head. “I suppose romance looks and feels different for every person,” she said. She then took a step toward them. “As much as I would love to allow the two of you to enjoy this moment of love and understanding for as long as possible, the ball will begin before we know it, and I need to help the future Duchess of Foxley to dress and prepare.”

Millie shifted out of David’s arms, staring at Lady Cambourne in alarm. “I...I don’t have anything remotely resembling a ballgown,” she said. “I don’t know how to comport myself at a ball. I don’t even know how to dance. I’ll be a disaster.”

“You will not,” David reassured her. “I’ll stay by your side the entire time. We don’t have to dance. And I would be more than happy to flee the ball early with you.”

“Trust your groom, my dear,” Lady Cambourne said, beaming. “We’ve all been conspiring to ensure this moment makes you the most celebrated woman in England, and for all good reasons. Foxley will protect you from everything. And if it helps, Lady Gillingham has been my co-conspirator in this whole thing, and if and when you choose to return to Kent, she will welcome you with open arms.”

“My mother knows as well,” Millie said, pressing a hand to her heart as the realization struck her. “But, of course, she’s always known.” She turned to David. “That is why she advised me to stay as close to you as possible. She knew that it actually *is* possible for me to marry a duke.”

“And as soon as we leave here,” David said, “I shall travel to Kent to ask your father personally for your hand.”

David rather liked the idea. He had a feeling he would enjoy sitting and talking with Mr. Silverstone as well. Perhaps

he could even convince the Silverstones to give up their farm at Gillingham Manor so that they might take on one of the farms at Fox Glen and be close to Millie while they lived there.

But all of those were thoughts for another day.

“Go with Lady Cambourne now,” David said. “Let her dress you however she sees fit for the ball. And when you’re ready, when the moment comes, I will escort you in personally and stay steadfastly by your side as the revelation is made and as everything settles in the aftermath.”

Millie turned to him with an overwhelmed look and smiled. “I trust you,” she said. She then took a deep breath and faced Lady Cambourne. “Do with me what you will. I am ready to play the part it seems I was born to play in this story. I am ready to accept that I am Lord Carshalton’s heir.”

Chapter Ten

Millie's thoughts scattered in a thousand different directions as Lady Cambourne took her up to the private, family wing of Nedworth's manor house and presented her with a gown that had already been tailored to fit her.

"I've never even seen anything so grand," she whispered as she brushed her hand reverently over the soft, blue skirt of the dress laid across the dressing room's lounge. "I don't know how I'll be able to wear it."

"You'll wear it like the future duchess you are," Lady Cambourne said, clearly delighted with the final turn of the drama she'd arranged for her guests.

She motioned for her lady's maid to come forward and help Millie out of her drab, workaday clothes and to quickly bathe with a sponge and rose-scented water.

“I will confess that I never would have dreamed that the Duke of Foxley would fall in love with you,” Lady Cambourne said, busying herself with underthings for Millie as Millie bathed. “You’ve created an even bigger excitement for everyone simply by being your own, charming self.”

“I never tried,” Millie said, drying herself off as she stared at the silk stockings and fine corset Lady Cambourne appeared to be giving her. “I never would have sought any of this out myself.”

“As I am well aware,” Lady Cambourne said, handing Millie the softest cotton underthings she’d ever touched once Millie approached her. “It is your sweetness and good soul which has given this story the happiest of endings.” She sighed as Millie sat to put on the underthings. “If only Barbara and Carshalton could have had the happy ending they deserved as well.”

“Barbara?” Millie asked, but she already knew before Lady Cambourne answered.

“That is Lady Gillingham’s given name.”

Millie stood as soon as her underthings were in place and lowered her head. “I must confess, it doesn’t feel like Lady Gillingham is my mother. Should it?”

“Not at all, dear,” Lady Cambourne said, helping Millie into her petticoats, then leading her over to the lounge so she and the maid could assist her in putting on the magnificent gown. “The woman whom you have always known to be your mother in your heart will always be your mother. But I am certain Lady Gillingham would relish the chance to become better acquainted with you as a lady in your own right.”

“I...I think I would like that,” Millie said.

She remained relatively quiet through the rest of the dressing process and as Lady Cambourne’s maid arranged her hair. And to think, not much more than an hour ago, she had turned down Lady Yvette’s offer to style her hair and her invitation to the ball.

That thought gave Millie pause. She cringed to think what Lady Yvette would think of her when she was revealed as Lord Carshalton's heir. It was Millie's most desperate hope that Lady Yvette would not think she'd held anything back from her. As soon as she was able, she would have to find a way to explain to Lady Yvette that she herself hadn't known a thing about who she was until the eleventh hour.

As soon as Lady Cambourne and her maid were finished with her, Millie stood and turned to face the room's mirror. She gasped at the sight of herself, barely recognizing her own reflection.

"I don't truly look like that, do I?" she asked, turning this way and that, marveling at how thin her waist looked and how low the gown's neckline was.

"You do, my dear," Lady Cambourne said, gesturing for her to come away from the mirror and out into the hallway. "You have always been a beauty, and I suspect you have never known it."

"I wouldn't say that I am a beauty," Millie said, feeling her face heat.

Lady Cambourne led her down the hall to a small, back staircase. Millie could hear the music of the ball already underway.

"I'd wager that you could be the most beautiful woman in the world, or the homeliest, and Foxley would still fall madly in love with you," Lady Cambourne said.

As they reached the ground floor and went on to a parlor that looked as though a riot had broken out between vendors of ostrich feathers, silk flowers, and paste jewels, Lady Cambourne's words seemed to be proven true. David stood in the room as if waiting for her, and the moment their eyes met, he looked as stunned as if someone had set off a box of firecrackers beside him.

"You look utterly captivating," he said in an awed voice, setting aside the mask he'd been fiddling with and moving straight toward her. "I feel spellbound."

Millie laughed and glanced down at herself. “I think I’m the one trapped in a spell,” she said.

David swept the rest of the way up to her and pulled her powerfully into his arms. “Then let me break the spell that has held you captive for so long with love’s first kiss.”

“David, we’ve already—”

He didn’t heed her. He slanted his mouth over her smiling one and took her breath away with the heat of a kiss that said more than words ever could. It said that she was his, that he was her servant, and that they would go to the ends of the earth for each other. It was a kiss that made her feel grander than any gown could.

Behind her, Lady Cambourne cleared her throat. “This is perfectly lovely,” she said, “but the ball has begun, and as I’ve promised I will reveal all, I’m certain the assembly has grown impatient. Are you ready?”

Millie caught her breath at the question. No, she was not ready. She was not ready for anything that was about to come at her. She wanted to be as far away from Nedworth Hall and the people she had come to see as friends of a sort, and most definite enemies. She wanted to travel to Fox Glen with David and stay there with him in peace for the rest of her days.

But she answered with a breathless, “Yes.” She then glanced up at David.

“Don’t worry,” he said, letting go and moving back to the table he stood beside before. “I’ve got masks for both of us to start. We’ll be able to enter the ballroom without being recognized until Lady Cambourne calls us forward.”

He returned with the masks, then nodded to Lady Cambourne.

“I’ll leave you to it,” she said before leaving the two of them alone.

“Here,” David said, moving gently around her. “Let me tie your mask for you.”

Millie felt increasingly as though she were in a dream as she held the elaborate mask David handed her in place while he tied it behind her head. When he was done, she did the same for him. That was when she realized the two of them were dressed to match, both in blue with gold accents and golden masks.

“I meant everything I’ve said to you so far, Millie,” David said, taking her hands once they were both masked. “I want you to know this now, before the storm begins. I am deeply earnest when I say I wish to marry you. I’m asking you to be my wife, now, before the world knows, before the solicitor confirms your identity and your inheritance, and before every other single man in this house and in all of England decides to throw themselves at you. I would have asked you to be my wife weeks ago, before I knew your true parentage, if I felt I could have. I would give up everything for you if you asked me to.”

“Everything except the farms?” Millie asked breathlessly, too overcome to think of a more gracious thing to say.

David laughed. “I would hope you and I could live on one of those farms and grow beautiful things together, yes.”

“Then I accept,” Millie said, beaming with joy. “I will be your wife. But you will most definitely need to teach me to be a duchess. That part of this is what frightens me the most.”

“Never fear,” David said, taking her arm and escorting her out of the room. “Lady Cambourne has already volunteered her services in helping you to navigate the ways of society, and I am more than certain that Lady Gillingham will be eager to help you as well.”

The thought that Millie could have her natural mother with her to teach her how to be David’s duchess left her feeling breathless and emotional, even before they entered the noisy, colorful, vibrating ballroom.

The feeling of excitement, knowing that Lord Carshalton’s heir was about to be revealed, permeated the air. It made the waltz sound lighter and livelier, the crystal in the chandeliers

glitter brighter, and the masks that the other guests wore appear frightening when they were supposed to be pretty.

Millie wasn't ready for any of it, but that did not stop Lord and Lady Cambourne from calling for the attention of everyone in the room, or from Lord Cambourne saying, "Lest you think we have merely been toying with you, I've invited Mr. Augustus Prose to this evening's events. He is the executor of Lord Carshalton's will, and he will confirm the identity of the heir as mentioned in the legal documents directing the distribution of Lord Carshalton's fortune."

Millie's heart thundered in her chest. She'd never seen the solicitor in her life.

She panicked even more when Mr. Sands called out, "Come on. Who is she, then? I'm ready to propose."

Many people laughed, but Millie whimpered in fear.

"Don't worry," David said. "I've got you."

Millie squeezed his arm tightly as Lady Cambourne said, "You may have your work cut out for you, Mr. Sands. For as it happens, the heir has already given her heart away and taken a heart in return."

And then everything seemed to go silent and the crowd of party guests parted as Lady Cambourne gestured to her and David.

Millie wouldn't have been able to move without David holding her and carrying her along. The two of them walked forward to gasps and stares. A few people removed their masks so they could get a better look, as if they were trying to guess her identity. It was the most terrifying moment of Millie's life.

But as they reached the front of the room and turned slightly, David said, "Ladies and gentlemen. May I present you with the most wonderful woman in the world, Lord Carshalton's one and only heir, and the queen of my heart, Miss Millicent Silverstone."

He removed her mask, and then there was nothing dividing Millie from the truth. Everyone in the room, every house guest

whom she had spent the last six weeks with, every guest who had been invited from the village and beyond, even the servants positioned around the room stared at her, eyes wide and disbelieving.

“No! It cannot be!” Lady Eleanor shouted as she stepped out of the shadows and tore off her mask. “I refuse to believe it!”

“Believe it, my dear,” Lord Cambourne said from the dais. “For it is completely true. Miss Millicent Silverstone is Lord Carshalton’s heir.”

Complete silence filled the ballroom...and then, beginning with Lady Yvette and spreading to her friends, everyone erupted into applause.

“Bravo!” Lady Yvette called out. “Well done, Miss Silverstone!”

The applause increased, and a few of the gentlemen let out whoops of approval and congratulations.

It was all so overwhelming that Millie began to tremble. She sent a terrified look to David, who stepped in immediately, resting an arm around her back.

“It’s just this moment,” he said. “They’ll cheer you on and wish you well, and then it will all be over and we can retire in peace.”

As if to prove that, Lady Cambourne gestured for the band to strike up a tune, and they went straight into playing a lively polka that was a favorite of many. A few of the people Millie considered friends continued toward them, but the bulk of the rest of the company took the hint and found partners for the celebratory dance instead.

“How wonderful,” Lady Yvette said, drawing Millie into a hug, despite her inclination to stay glued to David’s side. “The heir couldn’t have been a nicer woman.”

“It’s astounding,” Lady Patience said. “But then again, it always is the person everyone least expects.”

“I don’t know much about being a noblewoman either,” Miss Benning said, sending Millie the kindest of smiles. “We could learn together, if you’d like.”

“I’d like that very much,” Millie said, moved to tears.

“We’ll all help you adjust to your new life, of course,” Lady Angeline said.

“Hold on,” Miss Pennypacker said, holding up a hand, in true American fashion. “Let’s be clear. Are you and the Duke of Foxley engaged?”

Millie glanced up at David, who smiled back at her as if she made everything in the world right. “We are,” Millie said, beaming at him.

“No! This is impossible!” Lady Eleanor barked, pushing her way through the others to reach Millie and David. “This is absurd and...and wrong. The two of you barely know each other. He is a duke and you are a...a...well, you’re still the daughter of a farmer, no matter what anyone says.”

“Miss Silverstone and I met on the first day of the house party,” David revealed, still smiling at Millie. “She mistook me for a valet, and I mistook her for a lady.”

Lady Eleanor snorted. “How could anyone mistake *her* for a lady?”

“How could anyone think Millie is anything but a lady?” Lady Yvette countered. “She is sweet and modest, her manner has always been pleasing, and she’s far more well-spoken than most of the lady’s maids and companions in England. I don’t see how any of us could have thought she was anything other than what she is.”

“You lying shrew!” Lady Eleanor shrieked. “There must be some sort of cruel trick being played here. I am the one who should marry Foxley. I am the one who—”

“Lady Eleanor,” David stopped her, raising his voice only slightly. “Are you familiar with the plot of the operetta *H.M.S. Pinafore*, by Gilbert and Sullivan?”

“Yes, of course I am,” Lady Eleanor snapped. “Everyone knows *Pinafore*.”

“Then I trust you remember that the plot of that most amusing entertainment revolves around the fact that the high-born Ralph Rackstraw and the low-born Captain Corcoran were switched in infancy, and that Ralph was raised by common folk and Corcoran was reared in a loftier manner. And what was the point that Gilbert and Sullivan chose to make by the mannerisms and speech of those two characters?” He answered his own question with, “It was the fact that, despite the way he was raised, Captain Corcoran was still coarse and cursed, and despite his lowly beginnings, Ralph was well-mannered and genteel. You may want to think about those implications, and perhaps ask Lady Gillingham a few, pertinent questions, before you pursue your fight any further.”

“What sort of nonsense are you on about?” Lady Eleanor snorted. “The plot of *Pinafore* has nothing to do with—” She stopped abruptly, and the color started to drain from her face. “No,” she whispered. “It cannot be. We were not...I am not... Mother would never...my God!” She clutched her hands to her chest like her heart had just stopped.

“Foxley, you aren’t saying that Lady Eleanor and Miss Silverstone were switched at birth, are you?” Lord Theydon asked, standing close to Lady Yvette’s side.

“Not precisely,” David said. “But I think more than just Millie’s parentage will come to light when the truth of Carshalton’s heir is made more widely known.”

“No!” Lady Eleanor squeaked, backing up, as if a serpent were threatening her. “It cannot be. I am a lady. I am Lord and Lady Gillingham’s child. I am!”

Her panic sent her stumbling back, and by some twist of fate, Mr. Sands caught her.

“Lady Eleanor, are you quite well?” he asked. “It’s quite a shock, isn’t it, your maid being Carshalton’s heir.” He laughed. “I guess Foxley has already snatched her up, too. Shame. I was going to offer my hand and take her to see the world, and India, too.”

“I’ll go to India with you,” Lady Eleanor blurted, grasping onto Mr. Sands like he was the only boat in a storm. “Do you want to marry a lady? My hand is yours, if you want it. As long as we can flee England...er...travel abroad and see the world.”

“What an interesting prospect,” Mr. Sands said, beaming. “Lady Eleanor, would you care to dance and discuss the matter further?”

“Yes, yes!” Lady Eleanor said.

Mr. Sands offered his arm, and Lady Eleanor dragged him away, as if Hell itself were on her heels.

“Well,” Lady Yvette said. “I suppose that settles that.”

“Quite nicely, too,” Lord Theydon said. He turned and bowed to Lady Yvette and offered his hand. “Would you like to dance, my beloved? It seems as though everything has been settled here, and the rest of the evening should be all about fun and merriment.”

“I agree,” Lady Yvette said, taking his hand. “And I do love a polka.”

That seemed to decide things for Millie’s astounding new friends. They each sought out their gentlemen and joined the rest of the party in dancing.

“Would you like to give the polka a try?” David asked Millie, leaning closer to her to be heard over the noise of the ball.

“Absolutely not,” Millie laughed, her head spinning.

David laughed with her. “Would you like to step outside to catch your breath, then?” he asked, nodding to one of the open French doors.

“I’ll say yes to that,” Millie said in relief.

David took her arm and escorted her out of the ballroom and onto the terrace overlooking the back garden, deftly dodging anyone who looked as though they might want to offer Millie their congratulations as he did.

“We won’t be able to escape society altogether,” he told her once they were at the far end of the terrace and he could draw her into the safety of his arms. “And I fear there will be more than a few people who disdain your society, even though you will be a duchess, because of your origins. But I will keep you as safe as I can and shield you from the worst of it wherever possible.”

“I think I could endure anything as long as I have you with me,” Millie said, allowing herself to lean into David’s body, despite the impropriety. She caught sight of Lady Cambourne checking on them from the ballroom doorway and smiled. “I think I’ll have enough friends in this frightening, new life to provide all the company I need. And truly, I just want to live a quiet life in the country with you.”

“I find that to be the most agreeable thing anyone has said all evening,” David said, then leaned in to kiss her.

Millie circled her arms around him and let all the tension she had been holding since the beginning of the house party go. She was certain there were challenges ahead. The burden of inheriting Lord Carshalton’s money was daunting, and the thought of London society was even worse. But as long as she had David with her, loving her and supporting her, she knew she would be alright.

“I’ll take care of you as well,” she told him when their kiss was done. “You’ll never have to worry about love or comfort as long as I am with you. We’ll be happy together.”

“Yes, we will, my love,” David said, then smiled impishly. “And who knows? Maybe someday we’ll host our own summer house party and create even more scandalous matches than Lord and Lady Cambourne have.”

Millie laughed out loud. She liked that idea. But she was certain it would be a long time before she was ready for another house party like the one she’d just had.



I hope you’ve enjoyed Millie and David’s story! And the entire *Secrets of Nedworth Hall* series! I’ll confess, I came up

with this series as a way to recycle a few old novellas that were part of a now defunct multi-author series, but I had so much fun writing these new books that it's reignited my creative brain where M/F Historical Romance is concerned!

So look for an all-new M/F Historical series this year, *Unlucky in Love*! This series will have silver fox heroes (40s and 50s), quirky heroines who definitely wouldn't make it on the marriage market, a cursed castle, and a group of brothers and cousins who absolutely do NOT want to inherit said castle! Oh, and there's an exciting twist to this series, too! <wiggles eyebrows> Look for the first book, *Aged to Perfection*, available for preorder now!

If you enjoyed this book and would like to hear more from me, please sign up for my newsletter! When you sign up, you'll get a free, full-length novella, *A Passionate Deception*. Victorian identity theft has never been so exciting in this story of hope, tricks, and starting over. Part of my West Meets East series, *A Passionate Deception* can be read as a stand-alone. Pick up your free copy today by signing up to receive my newsletter!

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About the Author

I hope you have enjoyed *The True Heir*. If you'd like to be the first to learn about when new books in the series come out and more, please sign up for my newsletter here: <http://eepurl.com/cbaVMH> And remember, Read it, Review it, Share it! For a complete list of works by Merry Farmer with links, please visit <http://wp.me/P5ttjb-14F>.

USA Today Bestselling Author Merry Farmer is an award-winning novelist who lives in suburban Philadelphia with her cats, Peter and Justine. She has been writing since she was ten years old and realized one day that she didn't have to wait for the teacher to assign a creative writing project to write something. It was the best day of her life. She then went on to earn not one but two degrees in History so that she would always have something to write about. Her books have reached the Top 100 at Amazon, iBooks, and Barnes & Noble, and have been named finalists in the prestigious RONE and Rom Com Reader's Crown awards.



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