

*Dark
Regency*

6



A Heart
So WICKED

CHASITY
BOWLIN

A HEART SO WICKED

DARK REGENCY, BOOK SIX

CHASITY BOWLIN

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Bennett

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Clayton

Carter

Quentin (October 2016)

For Jonathan,

I simply cannot imagine what my life would be like without you in it. Thank you for proving to me that the kind of love I always dreamed of isn't just a fairytale.

PROLOGUE

THE SOLICITOR'S office was located on a busy street in Birmingham. Dodging carts and other pedestrians, Malcolm Bryant made his way across the street. He paused just long

enough to remove as much of the mud from his boots as he possibly could before opening the door and entering the dark, gloomy set of rooms that comprised the offices of Mooney & Drake.

“Your coat, my lord?”

Malcolm looked back at the valet he’d hired during his brief stop in London. It had seemed the safest way to avoid any missteps. An ally, even a paid one, was a necessity on foreign soil. What he hadn’t counted on was that his valet would also be his social advisor and tutor on the rigid rules of etiquette for English society so that he’d avoid any social missteps. Well, he thought as he recalled his first day in London, any further social missteps.

Thus far, Lytton had been a godsend, helping him to blend as much as possible. He’d spent his youth and formative years in America, but he’d spent the better part of two decades letting his own sense of adventure be his guide. From India, Africa, and beyond, he’d seen most of what the world had to offer. In the course of his travels, he’d amassed and lost a fortune, and now, apparently, he’d also inherited a title, an estate, and a hefty sum to go along with it. If there was one thing Malcolm had discovered in the course of his travels, money was no guarantee of happiness, but it certainly helped.

Doffing his greatcoat, he allowed the valet to take it and his hat. The new togs were also part of his new life, but he had yet to become fully accustomed to looking the part of a titled gentleman. If it had been up to him, he’d be wearing the worn, rough work shirts and pants that he’d favored while on board ship.

“What should I expect, Lytton?”

The valet brushed lint and dust from the coat as he folded it carefully over his arms. “They will discuss the particulars of the inheritance, my lord.”

“I’m not a lord yet,” Malcolm said. He wasn’t sure he wanted to be. He might yet tell them no and walk away from it all.

“With all due respect, my lord, you’ve always been one. You simply didn’t know it,” Lytton continued. “If you agree to the terms and conditions of the inheritance, they will have you sign papers. Once everything has been filed with the courts, you will take possession of the property.”

Malcolm sighed. “How is that you know these things, Lytton?”

“I’ve been with the gentry or nobility all of my working life, my lord. I’ve learned a thing or two by keeping my mouth shut and my ears open,” the little man replied with a modest smile.

There had to be more than that, Malcolm thought, but it wasn’t in his best interest to pursue the matter. Some things, it was best just to let lie. Before anything else could be said, one of the inner doors opened and a small man with a shock of white hair and spectacles emerged.

The little man stopped short, his eyes widened. “May I help you?”

“I’m Malcolm Bryant. You contacted me regarding the estate of Lord Hadley.”

“The late Lord Hadley, my lord,” the little solicitor corrected. “You are the current Lord Hadley.”

“That remains to be seen,” Malcolm replied caustically. “I am given to understand that there are some conditions that might impact my decision on whether or not to accept this inheritance.”

“You misunderstand, my lord. The title is yours regardless of whether or not you wish to use it. As is the estate itself. The funds and associated investments managed by our firm are another matter altogether. So, accepted or not, you *are* the current Lord Hadley,” the little man insisted. “If you choose not to be confirmed by the House of Lords, well, that is entirely at your discretion.”

“I am supposed to see Mr. Mooney,” Malcolm stated, not wanting to continue the debate.

“I am Mr. Mooney, my lord,” the man stated, clearly enjoying the fact that he had Malcolm at the disadvantage, at least momentarily.

Of course he was, Malcolm thought. He’d taken an instant dislike to the man and now he would be forced to continue dealing with him throughout the ordeal. His patience already strained, Malcolm snapped, “Then tell me about these conditions so I can make a decision and be done with it.”

The solicitor stepped back and gestured toward the door he’d just exited. “Step into my office, my lord, and I will be happy to relay all the particulars.”

Malcolm did so, but he couldn’t help but note the solicitor’s smile. It was quite clear to him that the man was enjoying his discomfiture. Half an hour later, Malcolm understood why.

The title was his by virtue of birth and his father’s connection to the previous Lord Hadley as a cousin. But the title without the estate was utterly worthless, and the trustees of the estate, namely Mr. Mooney and his associate, had made inheriting said estate nearly impossible.

“I have to live in a reportedly haunted house and I have to wed a woman of good birth and breeding who is local to the region who will consent to wed me in spite of my cohabitation with the spirit world,” Malcolm stated calmly.

“And she must reside in the home with you, my lord, *and* your inherited spirits. There will be no marriages in name only. We at Mooney & Drake take the sanctity of marriage quite seriously,” Mooney replied evenly. “The house is in very ill repair at this time, and I’m afraid that until the conditions set by the trustees are met, no funds will be released to bring it up to snuff.”

In other words, he’d have to woo a bride while living in filth and squalor. Easy enough, Malcolm thought bitterly. What woman wouldn’t jump at the chance to marry a man who may or may not be impoverished and quite possibly has a host of spirits in his home? “And in the meantime, you earn a

hefty commission for managing the estate, do you not, Mr. Mooney?"

Mr. Mooney remained expressionless, though there was a wicked and calculating gleam in his eyes. "We are fairly compensated for our diligence, my lord."

It infuriated him. He'd always despised people who bent the law and molded it for the sake of their own profit without any thought to what was right or whom they might hurt in the process. It was that anger that prompted him to accept Mooney's unspoken challenge. "Very well, sir. I shall remove myself to Lofton, take up residence in Rosedale Hall and set myself to finding a wife. I am to assume there is a time limit on how long I have to procure a wife?"

Mooney frowned, made a note on a bit of paper on his desk, and answered, "You have a period of one year, my lord, to wed, and to provide the necessary proof that the marriage is in fact a legitimate union."

"And how exactly does one prove that?" Malcolm demanded.

"By the presence or imminent arrival of an heir, my lord," Mooney offered with a sly smile. "As a man of the world, I can't imagine you need further explanation than that."

Malcolm was tempted to get up and walk out. He could return to America, go back to trapping furs and playing cards to earn a living. But he was bone-weary of that life, of never being settled in one place, or having a home of his own. And there was something about Mooney himself that set Malcolm's teeth on edge. The man wanted him to turn tail and run and Malcolm would just as soon eat glass as give into that. "Where do I sign?"



Eberhard Mooney watched the last of the Hadley line leave his office as a satisfied smirk played about his thin lips. When the outer door closed, a small hidden door connecting his office to that of his partner, Mr. Drake, opened. But it wasn't Drake who stepped inside. The woman was beautiful, but cold to the bone.

“You’re certain he’s the last of them?” she asked.

Mooney nodded. “The very last. There are no other possible heirs to the estate after this.”

“And if he finds a bride?”

“Pshaw!” Mooney dismissed. “The number of unmarried women in Lofton is negligible at best. The number who meet all the requirements set forth by us is nonexistent! When he has exhausted all options, and has no funds to keep that moldering estate afloat, he’ll be only too happy to follow my generously offered advice on seeking Common Recovery to break the entail and sell off the estate.”

She settled into the chair recently vacated by the new lord. Her blonde hair was pale and striking, her complexion smooth as silk. “It should have been mine. All along, it should have been mine.”

“So it should have, my lady. So it should have,” Mooney agreed enthusiastically. “And it will be.”

The woman caressed a talisman hanging about her neck, a hideous piece of silver carved with ancient and intricate symbols. “The house will not welcome him. I’ve made certain of it.”

Mooney swallowed convulsively. His greed was boundless, but he had a healthy fear of burning in hell. His benefactress dabbled in things that made his blood run cold.

As if sensing his thoughts, she offered him a wicked smile, revealing perfect if smallish teeth that, in that moment, looked rather vicious to him. “Why, Mooney, you’re as pale as a ghost... one might think you’d seen one!”

She laughed at her own jest, a maniacal and wicked sound.

“I’ll bend the law from dawn till dark, my lady, but I’ll not truck with spirits,” he said.

She slapped her palm down on the desk with enough force to make it rattle and to send several of his books crashing to the floor. “I *own* you, Mooney. Body and soul. You

will do as I say and you will not utter a peep of complaint about it. Is that understood?"

Mooney stared at her in horror. She was a beautiful woman, but for a split second, as she'd leaned over his desk and bared her teeth at him, he'd seen the truth. Her beauty was nothing but a thin veneer, and what lurked beneath it was foul and terrifying.

"Yes, my lady," he agreed with little more than a whisper.

She eased back and settled herself once again on the chair. With a flick of her wrist and a loud snap, the fan she carried opened with a flourish. "I find I'm quite parched, Mooney. I'll have some tea if you please."

He didn't hesitate, but scurried to do her bidding.

CHAPTER 1

THE WINTER SUN was sinking beyond the horizon and the air had grown more chilled. Shivering inside her worn coat, a coat that was not at all up to standard for the weather they were experiencing, Kit Wexford sighed. It wasn't the first time she'd been cold and it would hardly be the last. Still, it wasn't only herself she had to think of. Her younger brother was too fond of running wild through the fields and skipping rocks on the nearly frozen surface of the pond to care overly much for the temperature.

In another life, they'd enjoyed the parks while living in London, but Lofton was different. While it had been her family's home for generations, she and her brother were unwelcome there. That was made evident with every foray into the village. So rather than risk another row or dressing down from shopkeepers about a woman of her ilk, they'd taken to walking to the abandoned Rosedale Hall near her cousin's home. It was their refuge.

Of course, it wasn't simply the lack of villagers that drew her there. There was something about the house and the land that surrounded which compelled her. She felt inexplicably drawn to it in spite of its present state of decay. It had been almost a week since she'd been able to sneak away there, a week since she'd had the peace and quiet of being able to walk

those grounds without her cousin or her cousin's viperous servants breathing down her neck. It wasn't the house that preoccupied her thoughts that afternoon. It was her brother and how she was possibly going to see to his welfare while residing in her cousin's home.

Patrice would never pay for a tutor or to send him to school, though it was the best possible means of ensuring his future. He couldn't attend the local school because Patrice worked him like a field hand, and even if he did go, he'd only fight every boy on the premises in defense of her honor. She hated Ned Cavendish in that moment, more than she'd ever hated anyone else in her life. Selfish, self-serving men had ruined everything for her.

As she walked, her skirt caught on a briar and Kit stopped to carefully extract the fabric without further tears. It happened often while she was wandering the neglected grounds of the estate. It was wild and untamed in many ways, and even she was not unmoved by its natural beauty. Of course, beautiful or not, after hours in the cold, she was ready to be inside by a warm fire. Thinking of the little grate in their small room, she grimaced. It might warm her toes if she stuck her feet right into the hearth, otherwise she'd just shiver in front of the stingiest blaze ever known to man. But at least they'd be inside and Joseph could dry his clothes. They could not afford to have him take ill.

Living as meanly as they did, they hadn't the coin to hire a doctor or pay for medicine. Nearly everything they had of value had already been claimed by the moneylenders before they'd been tossed unceremoniously into the streets. The few items they had managed to escape with, save for a few very dear things she hoped never to part with, had been sold in the interim just to make ends meet. Her cousin's charity extended only so far, after all.

It could be worse, of course, she reminded herself. Patrice had taken them in, and given her sullied reputation and the precarious position that they held in Patrice's household, that was a great generosity in and of itself. Of course, she also worked them both like dogs, but then it was only right that

they pay their way. It wasn't so right that the paid servants actually had better lodgings and more coal to keep them warm than they did, but complaining would smack of ingratitude and she wouldn't risk being turned out for it. "Joseph! Come along," Kit called out. "It's grown too dark to see anyway!"

As they prepared to depart for their erstwhile home, Kit gave one last lingering glance at the manor house. It truly was her only refuge. It was one of the few places that they knew they'd be left alone entirely. All of the villagers avoided the house, certain that it was haunted at best, cursed at worst. Beyond question, the house had witnessed its fair share of tragedy and then some; but then, Kit reflected, so had she. Perhaps that was why she liked to come there. She felt a certain kinship with the crumbling manor. It was much a pariah as she was.

The house was falling into ruin but the grounds had been so meticulously cared for by the past gardener that, even now in their overgrown state, they retained much of their beauty. Kit couldn't help but wonder, and not for the first time, what it had looked like in its former glory. Eyeing the overgrown rose bushes that still held a few blooms even in the dead of winter, she fervently wished she could have seen it and said as much to Joseph.

"It doesn't matter if you can see it, Kit," he replied with a cheeky grin. "You can hear it." To prove his point, he sent another stone sailing over the nearly frozen surface of the pond, skipping at least three times before sinking with a plop.

"That's very good, but I have to get back and help prepare supper. And I'm sure you'll be needed in the stables. Afterward, if there is time, we'll work on your reading. We've been far too lax with it!" Of course, they only had a few books, which were old and incredibly familiar having been read cover to cover more than a dozen times each. There were books in her cousin's library but they were forbidden to seek them out. Why that was, Kit couldn't possibly say, but in her darkest and meanest moments she thought perhaps it was just another way for Patrice to lord it over them just how far they'd fallen.

“Fine,” he agreed, though his tone was morose. He did more chores than most boys, Kit reflected. He had little time to play and she’d allowed herself to grow lax about his studies. But they had no money for a tutor and asking Patrice to provide one would only result in conversations about the workhouse. Attending school in the village was impossible as whenever he did go, the kind of trouble that led to bruises and black eyes always seemed to find him. Too many people had reveled in their epic fall from grace. They had lost their home, their fortune and now existed in less than poverty, scraping by on the thin, grudging charity of a woman who was cold at best and cruel more often than not. And to add insult to injury, all of this occurred with in full view of the people her mother had once snubbed. Kit knew that it wasn’t the worst possible thing that could have happened to them, but at times it certainly felt like it.

“How did Papa die?” Joseph asked thoughtfully, batting at dried grass with a heavy stick as they strolled past the home that had once been theirs.

“He fell and struck his head,” Kit answered. There was no need to tell him the truth. She didn’t doubt that Joseph was perfectly aware of the circumstances that had left them orphaned. There was simply no way that the people of Lofton on Wick would have allowed that juicy morsel to pass them by. Their father had committed suicide after he lost his fortune and left his children to fend for themselves.

“Did we live in a house like this then?” he asked, pointing toward the empty manor house.

“Not quite. We had a townhouse in London, so it was taller and narrower... but large and spacious inside. It was very fine,” Kit replied evenly, trying not to let her own misery seep into her voice. The Wexford townhouse and the genteel life they’d led there seemed to be a million miles away. Her life, before scandal and poverty, had been a blissful dream she could only appreciate now that it was gone. Reading whatever she chose from the library, bemoaning music and dancing lessons, protesting because she didn’t want to paint another watercolor or embroider another pillow, debating endlessly

which party or ball to attend. Now she spent her days cooking, drawing baths for her cousin, scrubbing floors and mending clothes finer than she could ever hope to wear again. She hadn't time to be bored and if she did complain about her lot, there was no one to hear her who wasn't in the very same pickle she was.

"I hate living in that house!" he said, "And I hate Cousin Patrice! And I hate that dark little room she's put us in! It's too small. It's always cold. The roof leaks and the chimney smokes and you can't even take a piss without everyone knowing it!"

"Joseph Selby Wexford, you will not speak that way!" Kit knew she was all but shouting, but no matter how far they'd fallen, she would not allow him to forget that he'd been born a gentleman. "We may live in a more common way now, but that does not make us common people. You will not speak that way ever again. Is that understood?"

"Then I hate this house!" he shouted back. "I hate it because it sits there empty while we're miserable – hungry and cold all the time! We're no more than slaves!"

Kit had no idea where the anger was coming from, only that Joseph seemed to have suddenly been overtaken by the misery of their lives. He didn't really understand or remember their life before and she'd thought that might spare him some of the pain. It was a struggle for her every day not to let the bitterness and regret seep out of her in just the way it was now bubbling out of him. Before she could stop him, he stooped and picked up a large stone. With a strength and accuracy that surprised her, he sent it sailing toward the house. It landed against the plate glass window that should have been boarded up.

As the glass shattered, Kit wondered at that. All of the windows had been boarded, but now a good portion of them were uncovered. She had grown so used to the house in its abandoned state that she hadn't truly looked at it until that moment to note the change.

As if in response to her vague musings, a light suddenly flared inside. The house was not uninhabited after all. That thought brought a dozen horrifying emotions whirling to life inside her. Had the Hadley family returned to take up residence there after all these years? Immediately, she dismissed that thought. The last Lord Hadley had died without issue and the trustees of the estate had been searching for an heir for decades, since long before she was born. It was highly unlikely that they'd finally found one. It was probably a much more simple explanation that the trustees had let the house. And that meant that they were trespassing and that Joseph had just destroyed their property, whomever it was.

"Joseph," she said, "Run! Run back to the house now and let me deal with this!"

He squared his thin shoulders and lifted his chin. "I'm a man, aren't I? I'll not be a coward and leave you to whatever fate I've courted!"

She didn't roll her eyes though the urge was strong. He was a boy with a man's pride and wounding it would do neither of them any good. Instead, she cupped his cheek and pressed a kiss to his forehead. "You're not a man. Not yet, though you're far closer than I like to admit. Please, Joseph, just go! You head toward the village and I'll lead him the other direction!"

"Kit—."

"Joseph, I can handle this! I'll be along shortly. I'll simply tell whoever it is that it was a terrible accident."

His face crumpled. "But it wasn't. I did it!"

The door to Rosedale Hall was opening and Kit knew they'd run out of time. "Go! Go now!" she ordered.

CHAPTER 2

KIT WATCHED Joseph as he made his escape. He ran to the edge of the woods and then turned to look back at her. She waved him off and then he vanished, just as a dark, cloaked figure strode through the front door and moved toward her with a menace she'd only seen once before. Years earlier, she'd been

invited to see Lord Bamford's menagerie while in London. She could easily recall the pacing of the panther in its cage. The man who now moved toward her reminded her a great deal of that beast. So much so that she took an involuntary step backward.

Another memory crept forward in her mind. Two of the other young women present had squealed and drawn back from the caged animal, prompting it to charge at them, to reach its large, wickedly clawed paw through the bars to swipe at them. The rough spoken man who'd handled the animals for Bamford had warned them not to show fear, that it only heightened the animal's predatory instincts. With that in mind, Kit squared her shoulders and forced herself to stand her ground on knees that trembled.

When he neared the gate, her courage failed her. He was large, intimidating, and she was alone. It was as if she'd woken up from a dream. Remembering that she was supposed to run, to lead him away from Joseph, Kit found the strength to force her limbs to move. She took off, heading toward the woods in a different direction than the one Joseph had taken. She didn't think for a moment that she'd outrun him. If he chose to pursue her, he would catch her. She could only hope that she'd buy enough time for Joseph to be well away.

As she entered the woods, she could hear his footsteps behind her and they were far closer than she would have liked. Ducking between the trees and beneath low hanging branches, she hoped that would at least slow him down.

“Stop!”

His voice boomed out, the limbs near her rattling with the force of it, or so it seemed. Kit ignored the directive and kept moving. The distance between them was actually growing she realized. Her strategy, ill thought out as it was, of using his height against him in the narrow confines of the woods was actually working.

No sooner had the thought occurred to her than the unthinkable happened. Her toe caught on a root. She tripped, nearly righted herself, but then slipped in a patch of melting,

mud speckled snow and tumbled forward. It seemed as if the ground was rushing toward her rather than she toward it. Putting her hands out to break her fall, she braced for the impact. It never came.

Instead, a pair of strong arms snagged about her waist and tugged her up and back. The momentum was too much for her rescuer, however, and rather than upright, he wound up on the ground and she, much to her mortification, wound up atop him. It might not have been so humiliating had he not let out a great ‘oomph’ at the force of the impact.

One would think that as miserly as her cousin often was with food that Kit’s figure might have trimmed significantly while living in her household. Her would-be captor and now rescuer would clearly be able to differ on that score.

Kit scrambled away from him quickly, squirming to get off his lap and to be free of him before he regained his faculties. If nothing else, perhaps her excess weight might have finally served some purpose in her life and knocked him senseless. But alas, it was not to be. Before she’d even made it fully to her feet, he’d snagged her wrist, one of his large hands closing over it with a bruising grip that she had no hope of escaping. As his hand tightened further, she let out a soft cry of pain. Instantly, his hold gentled, but remained firm and unbreakable.

“If you struggle,” he warned, his voice a deep growl, and his accent was distinctly American, “You will only injure yourself.”

“And I’m to trust then that meekly accepting the yoke of your captivity will spare me?” she snapped back at him.

The hood of his cloak had fallen back, revealing a shock of dark hair and heavy whiskers that concealed a good portion of his face. But they did not conceal his eyes which narrowed and glittered with anger. “You’ve a sharp tongue. I daresay you can do as much damage with it as you can with the stones you put through my window!”

“Stone!” Kit corrected. “There was only the one.”

He smiled then, the dark and heavy beard parting to reveal gleaming white teeth. “So there was... Thank you for the confession.”

He'd tricked her, Kit realized, and she'd fallen for it completely. “Yes, I broke your window! It was an accident. I will happily pay for the damages.” Of course, she had no notion of how she'd pay for them. She hadn't two pence pieces to rub together and even if she managed to scrape together enough to pay for the window, she'd have to explain to her cousin why she needed to go into Birmingham to sell everything they had left to a pawnbroker. Anything but that, she prayed, anything but that woman's cold, disapproving gaze sweeping her from head to toe and reminding her of all the ways she'd failed.

Kit felt his gaze roam over her, taking in her worn clothes and the patched hem of her dress. Her boots were so old that they couldn't even be resoled anymore. The leather itself was beginning to wear through.

His snort of derision enraged her. “It wasn't an offer intended to amuse, sir! Unhand me!”

He laughed outright then. “Oh, it's quite amusing from my vantage point. You haven't got a penny to your name! How the devil will you pay for the damages to a double paned window in a house such as Rosedale Hall?”

Kit was about to tell him, but then she saw something flicker in his gaze. Then his eyes traveled from her face, down to her bosom which tested the already strained seams of her pelisse. The garment had been made for her when she was still little more than a girl, and try as she might, there was only so much that could be done to make it accommodate a woman's figure. But the heated look from him, the carnality of it, might have been lost on some women. Fortunately for her, being utterly ruined meant she wasn't in complete ignorance of what had crossed his mind. Awareness did not equal amenability, however.

“Unhand me!” she demanded.

“You'll run,” he protested.

Of course, she would. “Unhand me or I’ll scream!” she threatened.

“Go ahead... You’ve run to an isolated section of woods where there isn’t a cottage for miles and no one to hear it,” he said with a smile. “Scream all you like, but I’ll be damned if I mean to chase you down again.”

It wasn’t the fact that they were at an impasse that prompted Kit’s actions. It was the slight frisson of fear that had crept over her when he reminded her that they were alone and she was completely vulnerable. Lifting her foot, she brought it down hard on his shin. Abruptly, he let her go as he cursed mightily. Had she not been so intent on escape she might actually have been impressed with his unique vocabulary.

While he cupped his injured leg, Kit turned and ran as her life depended on it. It might very well, she reasoned. She knew nothing of him. While it was true that he hadn’t tried to harm her physically, Kit knew only too well that many men hid their poisonous natures beneath a charming smile or a guise of gentlemanly behavior. She wasn’t about to be fooled again

CHAPTER 3

LYING ON THE COLD GROUND, cursing his own high handed ways and his idiocy in spooking the girl, Malcolm closed his eyes. By god, he thought, she kicked like a mule. He grinned in spite of the agony of his bruised shin and his bruised pride. She’d put him flat on his ass twice. Getting to his feet, he was proud of himself for not limping though it stung like the devil.

Carefully, he made his way back to Rosedale Hall. It wasn’t the window, and having chased her down, he knew full well she wasn’t the culprit. If she’d been capable of throwing a rock far enough to break a window, she’d have thrown one and bashed his head in right there in the woods. No, she’d clearly been covering for someone else and he meant to find out who. But first he’d need to find out who she was and why a woman who had clearly been raised as a lady was dressed in little better than rags. There was a story there, and if there was one thing he dearly loved, it was unraveling a mystery.

When he reached Rosedale Hall, he entered through the front door which he'd left ajar, but that was now firmly closed. Lytton had gone into Birmingham to hire servants and obtain supplies. He would not be back until the following morning. It could have been the wind, he thought, but he knew it hadn't been. In the few days they'd been in residence at Rosedale Hall, there'd been any number of strange incidents. Mooney had been quite upfront about the presence of spirits.

The woman was temporarily forgotten. There were mysteries enough inside the walls of his new home to keep him occupied for some time. He wouldn't say that he *didn't* believe in ghosts. There'd been too many things in his life that defied explanation for him to ever completely dismiss the possibility, but he was a reasonable man, and if there was something other than spirits to be blamed for the strange goings on at Rosedale, he'd damned well find out. And if not, well, then he'd figure out what to do about the other.

"If you're here," he called out, "Show yourself! Don't be a damned coward!"

In the upper floor of the house, he heard a door slam. It wasn't the first time. He also knew that by the time he reached the second and third floor every door would be standing wide open, daring him to enter. That didn't stop him though. He climbed the stairs two at a time until he reached the upper floor. The faint scent of roses hit him then. He'd smelled it before in the house, and in those times when he hadn't been able to convince himself that the presence he felt wasn't real, it had seemed feminine to him.

To hell with it, Malcolm decided. Between the wild hellcat in the woods and the banshees or ghosts inhabiting his house, the fairer sex could all go straight to hell, especially the already dead ones. He needed a drink and he needed to put his damn leg up before he went lame from being kicked by a hellion of a girl who dressed like a pauper and spoke like a queen.

Servants, he reminded himself as he made his way down the stairs. He needed servants. He could only pray that Lytton would be successful in obtaining them beyond the confines of

the village as their inquiries at the local inn had been met with laughter and immediate dismissal. Perhaps, he thought, with a houseful of people, slamming doors and strange noises wouldn't seem quite so menacing.

In the meantime, he'd turn his attention to unraveling the other mystery that had presented itself to him. He needed to know who she was, and gossip flowed freely when ale did. He'd purchase a few rounds at the local tavern and find out what he needed to about his mystery woman. Going into town and socializing with the locals did not appeal to him, but if it afforded him some opportunities to inquire about a genteelly impoverished young woman with a wealth of dark hair and a pair of breasts that could make him forget his own name, so be it.

Once in his study, the room still shrouded with Holland cloths and a heavy layer of dust, Malcolm seated himself at his desk. It and the bed in the master suite were the only pieces of furniture he'd bothered to uncover since his arrival. Lytton had worked in a few other rooms, but Malcolm had yet to inspect them. He'd focused instead on touring the tenant farms and discovering what tasks on the estate needed to be attended to first.

Looking around at the once grand room, he vowed that it would be restored. For most of his life, he'd been too poor to afford anything more than a pallet on a floor with a thin blanket for warmth. Now he sat there in his once fine country estate, literally a lord of the manor. Through some strange circumstance of birth and a series of unfortunate tragedies befalling distant and unknown relatives, he found himself in possession of a title. *Malcolm Bryant, Lord Hadley of Rosedale Hall*. He chuckled as he retrieved a bottle of brandy from the desk drawer. What a mouthful that was! And with his *quaint colonial manners*, as one fine lady in London had put it, he'd be bound to set any local society that entertained him on its ear.

After a health swig of the brandy, his grin broadened. Maybe that was the way to find his rag-clad queen. He'd

become the toast of the local gentry and she'd have to turn up sooner or later.



Kit slipped through the kitchen door of her aunt's home and ignored the suspicious whispers of the maids and the glare of the stone faced housekeeper.

“Where have you been?” Mrs. Farrelly demanded, eyeing Kit's muddy skirt with disapproval.

She might be a poor relation, Kit thought, but she wasn't about to be taken to task by the housekeeper like an errant scullery maid. “I went for a walk, Mrs. Farrelly.”

“And your chores are done?” the woman demanded.

With her shoulders back and her chin raised defiantly, Kit met the woman's disapproving stare boldly. Rather than sharp, her tone was imperious as she delivered a set down that was well beyond her authority and would undoubtedly get her called on the carpet later. “My chores are assigned by my cousin, madam, and not by you... but to answer your impertinent question, yes. I have completed the tasks that were asked of me. I may not enjoy the same stature that I once did, Mrs. Farrelly, but I am not a servant under your domain!”

“Perhaps I shall have a word with the mistress then,” Mrs. Farrelly snapped. “Too much idle time for a girl of your wild and reckless nature can only lead to trouble!”

The reminder of her fall from grace and the loss of her reputation was such a common occurrence that it should not have stung. Yet it did. Every time it was mentioned, every time that she was reminded that her name was irrevocably sullied, she felt the burn of humiliation anew. The maids tittered behind their hands as they cast sly glances in her direction.

“You overstep, Mrs. Farrelly.”

The cold statement was delivered in a low voice, but one that still rang with authority. Chalmers, the butler, had been quietly at war with the housekeeper for as long as she could remember. Kit would never go so far as to think of him as an ally, but at the very least, they did have a common enemy.

The housekeeper stiffened. “The kitchen, where Miss Wexford does most of her chores, is still my domain, Chalmers!”

“But she is a member of the family and that still places her far above you in this household,” he intoned imperiously. “You will apologize to Miss Wexford, Mrs. Farrelly, or I will be forced to speak to Mrs. Hampton about this indiscretion!”

Kit didn’t respond outwardly, but inside, she felt a rush of dread. Being forced to apologize, in full view of her underlings, would only further embitter the housekeeper toward her. Chalmers wasn’t helping her at all. She was simply a pawn in his endless battle with the woman he viewed as his nemesis.

“My apologies, miss.” The words were uttered stiffly and the bitterness in the housekeeper’s voice cut like a blade.

Kit said nothing, merely accepted the less than gracious amends with a nod and quickly left the kitchen. She climbed the stairs to the small chamber on the third floor that she shared with Joseph. Technically, it was not part of the servants’ quarters, but if she were to be honest, the servants quarters were in better repair. Wind howled through the large cracks around the window casement, the chimney smoked horribly when they even had enough coal for a fire. He was still young enough to share her bed, but soon that would change. Then one of them would be relegated to a thin, cold pallet on the floor. Her only ally in the house, one of the maids, was hiding in the room, waiting for her.

“Kit!” Vera called when she entered. “Are you well? Joseph told me he broke that horrible man’s window!”

“I’m quite all right, Vera... Mrs. Farrelly is another matter altogether. Chalmers just forced her to apologize to me in front of the maids. No doubt we’ll all be paying for that for some time to come.”

Vera clucked her tongue worriedly. “Oh, that isn’t good at all. It’s too much to hope that she choked on the words, isn’t it?”

Kit laughed in spite of their dire situation. “Yes. Yes, I’m afraid it is.”

Crossing the room, Kit picked up the basket of mending that Vera was working on. The pile seemed to be ever growing. “I see you’ve been delivered more linens to work on. What in the world does she expect you to do? There’s more here than one person could complete in a month, much less a day!”

“Earn my keep, I suspect... Mrs. Hampton has no obligation to shelter me, Kit, or even continue my employment here, given what most folks say about me.”

Vera was in much the same boat that Kit herself was in. The loss of a reputation at any social stratum was catastrophic. The maid continued, “It’s a kindness and my skill with a needle is the most valuable thing I can offer. Mending the linens is the very least I can do.”

Kit sank onto one of the two broken down chairs that had been placed in their small chamber for just this kind of work. The seat sagged beneath her weight as she took one of the items from the basket and examined the rent in the fabric. She’d take up her needle and thread to at least lighten Vera’s burden.

“What happened with the gentleman, Kit?” the other woman insisted.

“He was very angry,” Kit answered. Recalling the details of their encounter, she couldn’t help but shiver at the memory of his deep, growling voice or how firm his hand had been as he clasped her wrist. Other details emerged as she replayed the incident in her mind. He’d gentled his touch at the first hint he was causing her pain. He’d also risked injury to himself to keep her from falling. The statement he’d made about no one being able to hear her scream may or may not have been a threat. Her own history had prompted her to interpret it that way. Of course, that wasn’t something she could tell anyone else, even Vera. “He’s an American, also. I can’t imagine what he’s doing at Rosedale Hall. Either the trustees have let the house to him or perhaps he’s simply squatting there.”

Squatting, she thought, would be the best option. It would eliminate any repercussions from Joseph's behavior.

"I've heard all the tales about the previous Lord Hadley," Vera uttered in a stage whisper, and then shivered dramatically. "Vile man. But he did have a younger brother, I think, who took off to for the Colonies from what I hear."

"America. They like to be called America now," Kit corrected.

"Perhaps he is the heir, after all."

How she hoped that Vera was wrong! "Time will tell, I suppose. But in the meantime, I simply need to avoid him and to avoid Rosedale Hall altogether... I may need to go to Birmingham to sell what we have left, though I doubt it would come close to covering the cost of the window."

Vera sighed. "I'll borrow my brother's cart on my half day. It'll save a bit of money, though that old nag of his is slower than Mrs. Farrelly!"

"If I ever get out of here, Vera, I'm taking you with me!"

"You most certainly are... I'd not stay here otherwise!"

CHAPTER 4

"LORD HADLEY, my lady," the butler intoned in a deep and sonorous voice.

Malcolm entered the drawing room of a woman he'd been assured was the key to Lofton's version of high society. Lady Elsingham sat upon a red brocade chair gilded in enough gold that it vied for the title of throne. In her black gown with her nearly white hair pulled back in a low chignon, she was lovely, if austere.

"Good morning, Lady Elsingham," he offered. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"It is quite presumptuous of you to simply invite yourself to my home, Lord Hadley," she replied. Her tone was dry, bordering on amused, but not entirely indulgent. "To what do I owe the dubious honor?"

Malcolm imagined that this was a woman who did not like to have her time wasted, so he was as blunt as politeness permitted. “Lady Elsingham, you are the sole hostess of note in Lofton. And I am a bachelor sorely in need of a wife. In short, my lady, I require your assistance in creating an event that will allow me to find one.”

She cocked her head to one side. “You are a bold one, Lord Hadley. I suppose it can be blamed on you’re being an American...they are a rather forward lot.”

“I would not disagree with your assessment, Lady Elsingham,” Malcolm conceded.

“What precisely are you asking for in the way of assistance? I only ask you see, because I’ve grown rather bored of late. It is too difficult to travel to London this late in the winter and Lofton society does leave much to be desired... In fact, I must ask, why are you not seeking a bride in the city? It is the season, after all. You’d be much more likely to find a suitable match!” she admonished.

“There are conditions upon my inheritance, my lady, that require I marry a girl from this region.”

She laughed. “Well, you’ll be sorely pressed to find one that will be to your liking. We’ve very few young women in the village of marriageable age and suitable station. I can only think of two, in fact, and one simply would not do at all. She’s a scandalous creature!”

And that was precisely what Malcolm had hoped she would say. “I love a good story, my lady. Be kind enough to enlighten me, if you please.”

“Wicked Wexford,” she said in a mock whisper infused with glee. “But you heard none of this from me, my lord! I am not one for gossip!”

Malcolm settled back in his chair and offered her his most charming smile. “Naturally, Lady Elsingham. Naturally!”

For the next hour and a half, Malcolm listened to every juicy and salacious tidbit that Lady Elsingham knew about

every single resident of Lofton, including Miss Katherine Wexford. Ruined. Destitute. And ripe for the picking.

“Oh!” Lady Elsingham exclaimed, clapping her hands like an excited child. “I’ll host an assembly! Not here of course, since some of the people would be too common to invite into one’s home... but at the local Assembly Rooms. It’ll be divine. And I can introduce you to Miss Croft! She’s not much to look at, my lord, but she does meet all your requirements.”

“And Miss Wexford? Will you invite her?”

Lady Elsingham drew back. “Absolutely not! I’ll not have her corrupting my party. Why would you even suggest such a thing?”

Recalling Lytton’s suggestion that comparing anything to a London party was bound to strike her competitive spirit, Malcolm smiled. “While I was in London, I was able to attend a few parties. One of the hostesses commented to me that she makes it a point to invite at least one scandalous person to every party so that her other guests will have a ready topic of conversation.”

Lady Elsingham’s eyes widened in surprise, but then her mouth curved in wicked glee. “Oh what a deliciously naughty idea! You are a scoundrel, Lord Hadley, in the best possible way!”

“I do try, my lady.”

“We’ll see you wed and your inheritance secured! Oh, I haven’t had such fun in a very long time! Wicked Wexford will set Lofton on its ears!”



It was exhausting to live on tenterhooks, and for nearly a week, that was precisely what Kit had done. She’d been waiting every day for the magistrate to come knocking on the door and demand her arrest for a broken window.

Pausing in her task of dusting the various knickknacks that dotted every surface of her cousin’s sitting room, Kit brushed back the strands of hair that had escaped the simple

chignon she had come to favor out of necessity. Her cousin's house was not grand, but it housed grand things that often looked out of place or were simply too large for their surroundings. Patrice loved things far more than she loved people and the room made it clearly evident. As she placed another spotless Staffordshire shepherdess back onto the small table, she felt an overwhelming sense of doom. It had been nearly a week since the incident at Rosedale Hall and while nothing untoward had happened, the local gossips had begun to talk about *Him*.

Malcolm Bryant, Lord Hadley. He was, in fact, a descendent and was planning to remain at Rosedale Hall and restore it to its former glory. Of course, gossip about him had stirred gossip about the former Lord Hadley and his young wife whom he'd reportedly murdered. It had taken him nearly a decade to have her declared dead after she went missing. But before he could remarry and beget an heir, he'd suffered a fatal heart seizure. Servants had fled, leaving the dowager to live there alone until she died, abandoned in that house to decay with it. It was a gruesome tale, and she shuddered in spite of herself.

As a general rule, Kit despised gossip, mostly because she was normally the topic of it. But under the circumstances she was grateful for it. It had allowed her to learn that he was the great-nephew of the late Lord Hadley and that he'd come from Boston, of all places, to claim his inheritance.

The door flew open and Patrice entered, leaning heavily on her cane. Though only forty, the woman's hair was a dull gray and always scraped back into a tight knot that did not flatter her at all. Thin as a rail and with an eternally sour disposition, the black and gray gowns that she favored did nothing to alleviate her stern appearance.

"Enough of that! We've been invited to an assembly and you'll need to bathe and dress accordingly!"

"Certainly, cousin," Kit replied evenly. Mentally, she had to wonder what on earth she'd wear as she didn't own a single gown that wasn't years out of date or inches too small.

“And I suppose we’ll need to find you something to wear,” Patrice commented, eyeing her with disdain.

The dress Kit had donned that morning was only a few washes away from the rag bin, but she hadn’t the option to be choosy. “I have no wish to attend, cousin. If it’s all the same to you, I’ll simply remain behind while you socialize.”

Patrice stopped then, an icy glare and cruel frown further hardening her features. “Your wishes do not signify, Kit. I’ll not leave you here in this house without a proper chaperone just so that you can bring the same kind of scandal and ruin to my door that you brought to your father’s! I utter a grateful prayer every day that your mother passed before witnessing what has become of you!”

The heat of anger and embarrassment flooded her, but Kit said nothing. She wanted to rail at her, to scream and smash her cousin’s treasured figurines. There were moments, such as that one, when even the threat of the workhouse seemed small in comparison to the misery of continuing her life at her cousin’s home. But for Joseph, she could not and would not risk it. Instead, she forced a blank expression and inclined her head meekly. “Of course, cousin. I understand.”

Patrice walked to her wardrobe and reached to the back for one of her older gowns. It wasn’t gray, but an unlikely shade of blue. She thrust it at her. “This one was made up in the wrong fabric but that shrew of a dressmaker refused to take it back! It’ll do, though you’ll have to let it out in the bosom. Go and be quick about it. I’ll not arrive late and have the whole village whispering about us and wondering what wickedness of yours was the cause!”

Kit accepted the gown and managed to stay her overwhelming desire to toss the dress to the ground and stomp on it. “Yes, Cousin. I will work as quickly as I can.”

“You don’t fool me, Katherine. I know you despise me,” Patrice said, a cool and superior note in her voice. “But it was your own recklessness and inability to adhere to the rules of polite society that has denied you a life of comfort and ease. I house you, offering you food and shelter. I am all that stands

between you and the streets... or worse, the workhouse. You'd do well to remember that, cousin."

"I am unable to forget it," Kit replied. As not a day went by when it wasn't uttered by someone in the house, there had been no opportunity to put it from her mind.

"Don't be cheeky with me!"

Kit took a deep breath. "I did not mean to be, cousin. I am aware of your charity to both myself and Joseph and I am humbled by it. Thank you."

That seemed to mollify the woman. She waved a dismissive hand in Kit's direction, indicating that she was ready for Kit to be out of her sight. As she was eager to be far away from her cousin, Kit did not hesitate to make her escape. She's swallowed so much of her pride that she feared choking on it.

Kit retreated to their small room and began working on the gown. It fit, but only barely. It was so tight she could scarcely breathe. The night would be a misery and that was undoubtedly all part of Patrice's plan. There was no other reason the woman would have given her anything. The door opened and Vera entered. She carried her small sewing box with her.

"I thought I'd try to help," the maid offered.

"Mrs. Farrelly will eat you alive," Kit responded.

"No, she will not. I've taken ill and gone to bed... the last thing she wants is me casting up my breakfast in her kitchen!" Vera offered with a conspiratorial grin. "I was quite convincing when I began to retch and heave. You should have seen her face!"

Kit shuddered. "I've heard you before when I knew you were faking it and still wasn't certain! You should be on the stage, Vera!"

"Maybe one day I will," the maid said with a shrug. "But for now, I'll be backstage... working as costumer and dresser. We need to get you ready for this assembly tonight. Maybe you'll snag a rich husband and save us both from this place!"

Men didn't marry women like her, Kit thought bitterly. Ruined, her reputation soiled beyond repair and not a penny to her name, there would be offers aplenty, but none of them would be for marriage. If she thought it would help her to help Joseph, she might consider it. But there was little point in ruining Vera's fantasy. It was all either of them had, after all. "One never knows," Kit finally uttered.

"That new Lord Hadley will be there," Vera offered in a conspiratorial whisper as she helped Kit into the gown that her cousin had thrust at her.

It was finer fabric than she'd worn in some time, but the gown was hopelessly ill-fitting. Too big in some places and entirely too small in others, there was no chance of making it flattering. Given a week, Vera might have been able to work her magic, but with only hours before the assembly, it would be a disaster. Of course, that had undoubtedly been Patrice's desire all along.

"Don't lose hope just yet," Vera said with forced cheer. "I could make something of this yet!"

"A cake... that's what I'll make," Kit said. "I'll look like a fool and that is precisely what Patrice intended all along. This is impossible, Vera, and we both know it!"

Vera clucked her tongue. "Difficult, but not impossible. I can make this work, and I will, but you must keep you cloak on until you reach the assembly. If the mistress sees you in it before you leave here, she won't let you go!"

"I can't wear something scandalous! People already talk about me like I'm a harlot!" Kit protested.

"Not because you'll look like a harlot, but because you won't look like you're wearing something plucked from the rag bin! If she sees her plan is a failure, she'll abandon it—and you—to rot here!"

Of course, Vera was right. Patrice was nothing if not small, petty and vindictive. "Fine. But if it's indecent—"

"You'll look every inch the lady, as you ought," Vera answered. "I'm going to trim down the skirt and the fabric I

take from there, I'll use to create gussets for the bodice. It'll be fine. I promise! Now, get your bath done so your hair will dry in time."

Uneasy and with a growing disquiet about the whole affair, Kit still followed Vera's edicts. After all, it wasn't as if she'd been given a choice. Her cousin had essentially demanded that she attend. Nothing good would come of it. Nothing good could come of it, she thought bitterly. The people of Lofton would never forgive her for her perceived transgressions and any protestations of innocence would only be met with derision. It was a fact she'd learned the hard way.

CHAPTER 5

THE ASSEMBLY ROOMS in Lofton left a great deal to be desired. Of course, he wasn't particularly well acquainted with Assembly Rooms in general. In his previous life, he would hardly have been invited to such events. In his current life, he could only imagine that he would tire of them quickly. Taking in his surroundings, he imagined he would tire of them before the night was through.

The space was short on luxury but offered more than enough room for the occupants to freeze long before any heat from the stingy fire laid in the hearth could ever reach them. Weak lemonade and stale biscuits comprised the only refreshments, but that had not dissuaded every respectable resident of Lofton from trotting out in their finest clothes.

It was a bore and a deuced uncomfortable one at that. Still, Malcolm thought as he clenched his jaw to keep his teeth from chattering, this was the most likely way for him to make the formal acquaintance of his vandal. In a controlled, social environment where she could feel relatively safe and where they would both have to moderate their behavior accordingly. It was his only option, he thought.

Convincing the local hostess extraordinaire, Lady Elsingham to include Mrs. Patrice Hampton had been difficult. Convincing her to include Mrs. Hampton's cousin, the Wicked Wexford, had not been nearly impossible. Thanks to Lytton, a well placed hint with the woman's maid that most London hostesses had taken to inviting at least one scandalous person

to every ball just so that guests would have something to talk about reinforced Malcom's original suggestion, and she'd come around.

From across the room, Lady Elsingham caught his gaze and offered a brilliant smile. She was thoroughly enjoying her foray into scandal mongering. It caused him a moment of guilt that he was in essence throwing Miss Katherine Wexford to the ravening and gossip-hungry wolves, but it was his only option. There was no other way, aside from a public assembly, that would allow him to speak to her without raising alarm or having people question how they'd come to be acquainted with one another. Also, it was very likely that she would spook and run. Recalling his statement to her in the woods, it was easy enough to discern how she might have misinterpreted his words and perceived them as a threat.

Every call he'd paid, each gossip session he'd endured with every nattering old bat in the entire village had resulted in him being regaled with stories of Katherine Wexford's wickedness and her attempts to seduce a good man in spite of his betrothed status. Malcolm had not pointed out the truth—most men were quite willing and even eager to be seduced, betrothed or not. The other truth that he'd wisely kept to himself was that any woman with a pair of breasts as fine as Miss Wexford's would not have to work nearly as hard as most. She was undeniably appealing, and she was also an enigma to him. Was she a victim of vicious gossip, or was she indeed the femme fatale that everyone reported her to be?

The object of his musings entered the room then, on the heels of the most miserable looking, dour creature he'd ever beheld. It must be the cousin, he thought, Patrice Hampton. The bitter turn of her mouth and the permanent furrow of her brow despite the painfully tight coiffure that tormented every salt and pepper strand on her head told him all he needed to know of her. She was a mean-hearted and vicious creature. The steel in her gaze told the truth of it. And behind her, Miss Katherine Wexford stood in a borrowed gown, for surely if she'd been dressed in rags when he met her, she would not own anything so fine. The blue silk complimented her fair skin and dark hair, but the bodice, quickly altered to fit her, no

doubt, did little to conceal her generous figure. Even as he thought it, she lifted her fan to her rather daring decollate to preserve her modesty. A faint blush crept up her neck and stole into her cheeks. It was hardly the behavior of a practiced seductress.

“Can’t believe she’d have the nerve to show her face here!”

The hushed whisper came from the gaggle of women to his right. A second woman in the group tittered nervously while the third let out a loud harrumph before adding, “Being bold as brass has never been a problem for that one!”

“He’ll be here... he and his wife are coming!” the first woman hissed. “That poor dear. To be confronted with the sight of that hussy!”

“That poor man!” the third woman replied. “Being confronted with his mistakes right here in front of everyone! Imagine how humiliated he’ll be when people see them in the same room together... especially when one considers just how far she’s fallen! I hear Lady Hampton works her like a dog in the kitchens just so she’ll be too exhausted to go cavorting with the footmen!”

He’d heard enough. Glancing over his shoulder at them, he gave them a look that told them in no uncertain terms what he thought of their gossip. “*Vicious harpies,*” he spat out, and they scattered like crows.

Turning his attention once again to the entryway, he watched her as her gaze finally came to rest upon him. The expressions on her face shifted rapidly—shock, recognition, fear, anger, and finally resolve. He knew that she’d accepted her fate then, that at one point during the night, one way or another, they would have a confrontation. But he doubted that she had any inkling of just how it would go. With the small cup of weak lemonade that had somehow made its way into his hand, he lifted his glass to her and smiled. Her answering glare made the gesture completely worth it.



Walking into the Assembly Rooms was tantamount to walking willingly into a nest of vipers. But vipers were content to bite and let the poison do its work. The people of Lofton were not so merciful. They wanted to flay the flesh from her bones while she screamed. Or perhaps that was her cousin, she thought bitterly.

Patrice had not been happy with the adjustments made to the gown, but then again, Kit hadn't expected her to be. No matter what she'd done, the dress would have been either too unflattering or too revealing. As it was, Patrice had scolded her for taking a perfectly decent evening gown and turning it into something that a doxy would wear. The short ride, trapped in her cousin's carriage, being taken to task incessantly, had seemed to go on forever.

And now, as she surveyed the small group that had already gathered, noting how so many of them watched her with eager and vicious smirks on their lips, she knew that the evening was going to go poorly. That thought was punctuated by a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach as her gaze suddenly latched onto one of the very last person she wished to see. It was him. The new Lord Hadley was there, in the flesh. As he raised his cup in a mock toast, it became quite clear that there was no hope that he had not recognized her. He knew precisely who she was. That thought was followed by an even more painful one. There would be no getting out of it. At some point during the night, she would have to speak to him and then everything would come crashing down around her ears.

"Stand up straight!" her cousin hissed.

"If I stand up straight, I'm drawing too much attention to my bosom... or so you said only a moment ago," Kit muttered under her breath.

Patrice turned her head sharply. "What did you say?"

"Only that it must be a terrible burden for you to have to remind me again as you just did a moment ago," Kit answered, pasting a false smile on her face. Still, she opened her fan wider and pressed it against a décolletage that on any other

woman would have been perfectly acceptable. On her, because of her physical attributes, but primarily because of how people perceived her, the garment would be judged harshly, but not nearly as harshly as the wearer. Every sharp eyed and sharper tongued old bat in the room was watching her to see if she made even the tiniest misstep.

Patrice walked in with her head held high, as if daring anyone to say a disparaging word against her. It was a trait that Kit envied. Walking behind her cousin, Kit had a moment of wistfulness. At one time, she'd have been the belle of any ball in Lofton or in London. With a fine dress that had been made just for her, her hair done up and everyone in the room vying for her attention, she'd have laughed and danced the night away.

Patrice came to a halt. "That's him, isn't it? The new Lord Hadley?"

"I would think so," Kit replied vaguely. "He's the only unfamiliar face in the crowd."

Patrice lifted a quizzing glass that was more appropriate to a woman of twice her age. No one had ever embraced the crotchety nature and uncomfortable frankness that came with old age with such premature enthusiasm as Patrice.

"I don't like the looks of him," she said. "He looks a bit wild to me... like a pirate."

Kit did not roll her eyes. Patrice had never left Lofton in all of her life to even have an inkling of what a pirate looked like. "I'm sure he's a perfect gentleman, cousin. One mustn't judge a book by its cover!"

"Does that mean that we shouldn't call you a harlot even though you clearly dress like one?"

Kit's spine stiffened visibly. She knew that voice as well as she knew her own. At one time, that voice had whispered secrets to her and she'd held them dearly as friends do. They'd giggled together, learned to flirt with boys together, but while the voice was familiar, the vitriol in it would never be, regardless of how many times she heard it. Georgiana would

spend the entire evening making certain that no one would ever forget or forgive Kit's many sins. She couldn't pinpoint exactly when it was that Georgiana had grown so vicious. It had predated their falling out, she knew that.

The urge to defend herself, to whirl on the woman who'd once been her dearest friend and let loose with a string of truths that would upend the entire village burned inside her. Of course, it would no good. Kit knew that. Defending herself had never done anything but spur the gossips on. But Kit didn't have to face her attacker or utter a word in her defense. For once, her kinship to Patrice was simply a blessing and not a mixed one. The older woman whirled, pinning the other woman with an icy glare.

"Remember yourself, Georgiana. We are in public and anything you do here will reflect poorly upon your husband and your children," Patrice reminded her coolly.

"She has no right to be here!" Georgiana protested. "Look at her, standing there like the Whore of Babylon. Everyone in this room knows what you are and what you've done. All of London knew it too. It's why your father ate a pistol ball for dinner and waited for you and your brother to come find him."

The words themselves didn't shock her. They were nothing that hadn't been said to her or about her many times before. Even the things said about her father were only too familiar. It was the glee that she displayed, the way that her one-time friend gloried in her cruelty that shocked Kit to the point of speechlessness. Thankfully, her cousin was not.

Patrice raised her chin and squared her shoulders. The cold, clear gaze that she leveled on the other woman would have grown men quaking in their boots. Patrice had always been a force to be reckoned with. Courting her displeasure was not for the faint of heart. "Then neither does your husband. Is he not guilty, as well? How easily swayed from your side he was, Georgiana! Do you really wish to remind everyone in this room that your own charms were so lacking that you couldn't maintain his interest?"

Georgiana's jaw clenched, her perfectly formed lips drawing into a sharp, hard line. "Very well. Parade yourself about in here as if you have the right. I'll not stop you! But don't think for a single moment that anyone will forget what you are, Katherine Wexford! Blood tells and the Wexford blood is strong in you!"

Kit watched as Georgiana turned away in a whirl of heavily flounced skirts and walked away. "That was unpleasant."

Patrice harrumphed. "A megrim is unpleasant."

"Why couldn't she and Ned just stay in Birmingham?"

Patrice shrugged. "They come and go from Lofton to there. She avoids London now, oddly enough. At one time, I'd have thought she'd make for the capitol and stay there... Our Georgiana is not the social butterfly she once was. She socializes with very few now. I'd bet she's only here tonight because Lady Elsingham let it drop that you'd been invited. You were led like a lamb to slaughter." The last was accompanied by a laugh, as if the whole thing was a great amusement to her. But then Patrice grew serious again and said, "That exchange, my girl, was a bloodletting... it'll be the first of many tonight. Be prepared."

The warning washed through her leaving a chill in its wake. Patrice hadn't brought her there to reintroduce her to society at all. She'd brought her there to remind her of her place, to cement firmly in her mind and everyone else's that she was the architect of her own ruin.



Malcolm watched the exchange. He didn't need to be close enough to hear their words to know they'd been cross ones. It was apparent in their body language. The stiff set of her shoulders, the jut of her chin, and the tight line of her lips as she smiled in spite of everything told him more about her than she might have imagined. Just as the lovely Miss Wexford was easy to read, the bitterness of the woman she'd accompanied was abundantly clear, as was the jealousy and defensiveness of

the woman who'd confronted her. The wife, he surmised, of the man she'd allegedly tried to seduce.

It would work in his favor. She'd be desperate to change her life, desperate to escape the drudgery and disapproval of being a servant in a judgmental relative's household. Desperate enough that she would agree to marry a stranger, or so he hoped. In truth, she was his only option. He'd discovered during his week of paying calls that there were very few eligible women of good family and breeding in the small village of Lofton. It was either Miss Wexford or some horse faced chit with a crossed eye. If a man had to choose between a woman with a poor reputation and one with a poor face, he'd prefer the one he could stand to look at across the breakfast table.

Decision made, Malcolm still faced the difficult task of finding a way to get her alone and discuss it with her. He would not humiliate himself by asking her to dance, firstly because he had no idea how and secondly, he was fairly certain she'd give him a resounding rejection. It was that lowering realization that left him lurking by the refreshment table waiting for an opportunity to snatch her away.

It didn't take long. Within a quarter hour of their arrival, she was there, filling small cups with vaguely lemon flavored water and glaring at him as she did so.

"You're staring," she accused.

"You're very easy to stare at," he replied. "Funny that you don't look like a window breaker in that gown."

She blushed. "It was an accident!"

"So it was," he capitulated. "But recompense must be made. If you'd care to meet me on the balcony, we can discuss it."

"No, I do not care to meet you on the balcony," she hissed in a low whisper. "Everyone in this room has their eagles' eyes trained on me, just waiting for any hint of mischief!"

“Then you will come to Rosedale Hall tomorrow,” he said. He didn’t phrase it as a question. Refusal wasn’t an option for either of them.

She turned toward him with a hard expression. “You know I haven’t a shilling to my name. You’ve listened to enough gossip here tonight to already to know that I’m poor as a church mouse!”

“And if money is of no interest to me?” he asked.

If her gaze had been hard before, it became glacial then. “Contrary to what you may have heard, Lord Hadley, I am not for sale, nor can I be had.”

“You’ve a dirty a mind, Miss Wexford,” he pointed out. “I merely said I had no interest in money. The impropriety was borne in your own imagination.”

“I find that difficult to believe, my lord. You intentionally made an inflammatory statement and now you’re attempting to lay the blame for taking the bait solely at my door!”

Malcolm ducked his head to hide a smile. He had and he was, and it tickled him that she’d taken him to task for it in spite of their current situation. “Come to Rosedale Hall, Miss Wexford. I will be the soul of propriety, I assure you.”

“Promises from men mean little to me,” she snapped.

“It’s a promise from me, Miss Wexford, and that is worth more than gold because I do not give them easily. You will leave with whatever virtue you enter with,” he assured her. He meant it. She did not know him, but he’d never made a promise that he didn’t keep. His intentions toward her were as honorable as a man’s could be when he meant to use her to gain control of the estate before the solicitors bled it dry. But he wouldn’t hide that from her, nor would he lie to her about his reasons for marrying her. There would be no false protestations of love. Just a healthy dose of lust and a mutually beneficial arrangement. In her current situation, what more could Miss Wexford ask for?

“Very well, Lord Hadley. I shall see you tomorrow.”

“When can I expect you?” he pressed.

“When I arrive,” she replied sharply. “I am not at your beck and call, my lord.”

No, he thought, not yet.

CHAPTER 6

EXHAUSTION SLOWED Kit’s progress as she made her way toward Rosedale Hall. It wasn’t simply that which bogged down her steps and had her trudging along the path. Dread and fear also contributed to her lack of enthusiasm in making the short journey. It was not aided by the very small amount of sleep she’d gotten the night before. While the good people of Lofton did keep country hours, they were still out well past ten at night, which was hours after she would normally have been in bed. Of course, she’d still been expected to be up before the crack of dawn to see to her cousin’s breakfast. The cook prepared it, but she wouldn’t allow the maids to serve it. No, Patrice demanded that Kit serve her breakfast in bed every morning. She treated Kit as her own personal servant, never letting an opportunity pass to remind Kit of just how far she’d fallen.

Of course, there were other things pressing on her, as well. Joseph had been horribly upset when she’d refused to let him accompany her. But the last thing she needed was for Lord High and Mighty Hadley to get a look at her brother and realize that it was he who had actually thrown a stone through the window. If he suspected it—well, he could threaten her all he liked, and she’d simply brazen it out. But Joseph was her Achilles’ heel, and until she understood precisely what the newly named peer was about, she’d keep that vulnerability well concealed.

Stepping from the shelter of the trees that grew heavily along the path she and Joseph had worn through the woods during their many sojourns to Rosedale Hall, Kit paused to collect herself. She didn’t know what he wanted though she certainly had her suspicions. And whatever people might say of her, she had no intention of letting him take advantage of her. To that end, she’d borrowed a knife from the kitchen before making her escape from her cousin’s home. Stabbing a man was certainly a mess she wished to avoid, but if it came to

it, she'd do it. It wouldn't be the first time since her reputation had been ripped to shreds that she would have fend off unwelcome advances.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, she pushed onward, walking toward the dark and foreboding shape of the manor house. With the windows now free of boards, it should have looked less ominous. Somehow it didn't. In fact, it felt very much as if someone was watching her. Looking up, her eyes scanned the upper floors until she paused on one particular window. A dark shape was silhouetted against the glass. She couldn't make out anything specific of the figure, but she had the sense that it was not Lord Hadley. Even as she thought it, the door opened and he stepped out. She glanced at him and then back to the window, but the dark figure was gone.

A shiver raced up her spine, a sense of dread settling in its wake. The whispers and rumors about Rosedale Hall and the dark events that had occurred within its walls. What sort of man could live there? Was he aware of what was said about the house, of what had occurred there? Did he have any sense of unease residing in such a place? She had more questions than answers and was left with the alarming realization that only he could provide answers.

"You came after all," he said. "I had begun to wonder."

"I keep my word, Lord Hadley," she replied stiffly. "I told you I'd be here and here I am."

He dipped his head in acknowledgement, but the gesture did not succeed in hiding his grin. "So you did, Miss Wexford. Come inside and we will discuss your restitution."



Malcolm stepped aside and allowed her to enter the house before him. He didn't miss the shiver that racked her gently curved shoulders as she crossed the threshold. Was it fear of him or fear of Rosedale Hall? It didn't matter. Whether it was him or the house, she'd have to become accustomed to both.

Following her inside, he watched as she scanned the interior of the house. Peeling paint and wallpaper, dust and cobwebs covering every surface, even the Holland covers that

had draped every piece of furniture in the house had not fully protected them from the dust. Lytton had attempted to hire local servants and failed. They'd sent to an agency in London but no one had arrived yet.

"It needs a bit of work," he said.

"A bit," she agreed. "Is this my restitution, then? To dust every infernal inch of this mausoleum?"

"No, that is not your restitution, Miss Wexford. But if you desire to spend your afternoon sweeping down cobwebs, I will see what I can do about procuring a broom for you." The reply was offered slyly, with humor, but she was not amused.

"I'm a servant in one house already, my lord. I've no wish to take on work in another," she answered. "I have very little money. Certainly not enough to pay for the window, but that is all I mean to give you, Lord Hadley. If you had anything else in mind, you will be sorely disappointed."

Malcolm crossed his arms over his chest as they stood there in the dust shrouded foyer of his home. She was dressed in her worn pelisse again and the same drab, frayed dress she'd worn the day he'd chased her through the woods. Her hair was disheveled and a glance at her hands, unprotected from the cold by any gloves, offered proof of just how hard she worked. They were not the soft hands of a lady anymore. They were callused and worn from scrubbing floors and whatever else her hag of a cousin made her do.

"You think very poorly of me, Miss Wexford. Or is that you think very poorly of all men?"

"I have little enough reason to think well of them," came her bitter reply.

While he didn't know the particulars of her situation and the reports of her past were colored to cast her in a dark light, he had little doubt that she'd been sorely used and borne the brunt of someone else's misdeeds. As much as he enjoyed needling her, the flash of fire in her eyes and the bite of her words providing more entertainment than he'd had in sometime, it was time to get to the heart of the matter. "My

intentions toward you, Miss Wexford, are completely honorable, if somewhat unorthodox.”

She arched one ebony brow in an imperious fashion. “Unorthodox... I have no time for games, Lord Hadley. State your business and leave off with the dramatics, if you please.”

“You need to escape your harridan of a cousin, but due to your current financial straits, you cannot. And because of your reputation and the wild rumors that circulate about you, the avenues of escape typically open to women, or at the very least the honorable ones, are no longer available to you.”

She whirled away from him and walked toward a marquetry console that rested beneath a broken mirror. With her finger, she traced a delicate pattern in the dust gathered there. “You seem to have a remarkable skill for the stating the obvious, my lord.”

Malcolm moved toward her, stopping only when he could place his hand over hers on the table, stilling her movements. He heard her indrawn breath, felt her body stiffen with wariness at his closeness. When he spoke, his voice was pitched low, and there was a warning in it as well as a promise. “I am not like these men you know, Miss Wexford. I come from a wilder place, a place where one has to work to survive. Reputations and gossip mean little to me... what does mean something to me is keeping this house from falling down about my ears. For that I need money, and to get money, I must obtain a wife. That is your restitution.”

“To find you a bride?” she demanded, her voice quivering slightly. “Surely you would do better to find a matchmaker with whom reputable ladies will actually speak, my lord.”

“Not as a matchmaker, Miss Wexford. You will be my bride.” He said it gently, but there was steel in his voice. She would not deny him, of that he was determined. But her response was one he could not have anticipated. A bitter laugh escaped her, fading into peals of giggles.

“You’re insane,” she finally managed to say, albeit breathlessly. “Living in this drafty old house has addled your wits!”

“On the contrary,” he said. “My wits are perfectly clear. The will and trustees specified that I must wed a woman of good family with connections to the area. Your father was a baronet. Your mother was the daughter of a baron. Her family goes back generations here; your cousin, Mrs. Hampton, who is above reproach, still resides in the area and you with her. You meet all of the requirements.”

“But one... I am of good family, but not of good name. Surely the trustees would protest?”

He shrugged. “They did not specify good name. There are two women in this village who meet their requirements. Of the two, you are certainly the most pleasing to look upon.”

Kit shook her head while favoring him with a baleful stare. “But I am also a horrible person... a vile seducer, a betrayer of friends, a woman of loose morals.”

Malcolm grinned wolfishly. “Some of my best evenings have been spent in the company of such women. That is hardly an obstacle.”

CHAPTER 7

KIT COULDN'T BREATHE. She couldn't even think. He was a stranger to her and she had no inkling of just what kind of man he was. But he offered her something that no one else would dare—a single chance to regain her social standing, to repair her tattered reputation. Of course there was more to consider than just herself.

“I have a brother,” she said.

“Should I be asking his permission, then?” Lord Hadley responded sardonically.

“A much younger brother,” she corrected. “I would not leave him behind.”

“I would not ask you to. There is adequate room for him here, or if he is of an age and you wish it, he may go to school... I understand that's an important part of the social development of gentlemen in this country.”

Could it be that easy? There had to be some sort of catch, she thought. Given her history with luck which bore no little similarity to a Greek tragedy she knew there had to be. “What would you expect of me?” she asked.

“I would expect for you to be my wife,” he answered. “And all that typically entails... Managing my home, entertaining our guests should any ever dare to darken this door, and welcoming me into your bed.”

Naturally. He would expect that, she thought. “Would you consider a marriage in name only?”

“To that horse faced chit in the village? Most assuredly. To you? Not in a million years.”

Kit moved away from him again. He stood too close, close enough that she could feel the weight of his presence, feel the heat that emanated from him. It was unsettling. She didn't fear him, she realized. But neither did she trust him completely. Still, she needed the room, the space, to gather her thoughts.

“I can't think with you hovering,” she stated.

His lips once again curved upwards in a grin as he cocked one eyebrow in amusement at her. “That's a good sign... I'd hoped I'd be able to addle your wits. I thought it would take an actual kiss, but apparently I simply need to stand within a reasonable vicinity. How promising!”

“This is not a jest, Lord Hadley. This is my life we're discussing. I know nothing of you. You are a stranger here and yet if I marry you, as you've suggested, I become your property... It's hardly a matter to be taken lightly.”

He'd leaned nonchalantly against the peeling paper that curled away from the wall. But at her words, he rose and walked toward her. No. Not walked. He stalked, like a predator. It was not the first time she'd compared him to one, and it would undoubtedly not be the last. There was a quicksilver quality to him, that he could be jesting and jovial one moment and seem so utterly overwhelming and powerful in the next.

He stopped, only an arm's length from her. A long shadow fell, obscuring his face, but even in the depths of it, she could see his glittering gaze. It pinned her to the spot.

“It most assuredly is not a jest, Miss Wexford. I mean every word that I have said to you here today... and the next thing I say to you will be my solemn vow. I mean you no harm. I will not hurt you, nor will I allow anyone else to do so. If you become my wife, you will have all the protection that I can provide and a kind of comfort that you have not known in a very long time.”

It was tempting. Incredibly tempting given just how miserable her cousin was trying to make her. For herself, she could tolerate it. But the simple fact remained that her lowered social status was impacting her brother. Every fight he got into with other children in the village was the direct result of his attempts to defend her. Patrice was no kinder to him than to her. His education was suffering, his language was becoming rougher and more like the servants he spent so much time with rather than like the gentleman he was supposed to be raised to be. But there remained one very significant obstacle even if she did agree. Patrice would not necessarily have to give her consent, but if she opposed the match, life could get very difficult.

“You’ll need to speak to my cousin,” Kit offered in a rush. “You’ll have to obtain her consent.”

“I take that to mean I have yours, then?” he queried.

“It is foolish beyond measure, but I—,” she broke off, questioning the wisdom of admitting her current situation to him.

“But?”

“I can’t stay there anymore,” she admitted. “It isn’t the work, you understand. I could survive scrubbing floors and cleaning hearths from dawn to dusk. It’s the insults, the snide remarks and the constant reminders that I am not now who I once was in the eyes of the world.”

He cocked his head to one side as if he was considering his answer carefully. When he spoke again, his tone was gentler than she would have expected. “Others do not dictate who you are, Miss Wexford, only how they choose to see you. If they elect to be small and mean then it is surely no reflection on you.”

Kit shook her head. “I do not understand you at all, Lord Hadley.”

He shrugged. “You will have ample time to make sense of me in the future, Miss Wexford. You should return home. I will come tomorrow morning and speak with your cousin.”

Kit started to reply but a door slammed loudly upstairs, so forcefully that the windows rattled in their frames. “What was that?”

“A ghost, Miss Wexford—apparently Rosedale Hall is full of them.”

Her eyes widened. “You can’t possibly be serious!”

A loud creaking noise from above the stairs preceded his answer. “I assure you that there are some things I would not jest about... and the presence of spirits in this house is one of them. It’s a matter I take very seriously.”

“And you just tolerate this?” she demanded.

“What else would I do? The dead cannot harm us, Miss Wexford. It’s the living we must be on guard against... I will see you tomorrow.”



Malcolm watched her from the windows as she left Rosedale Hall and headed for the path through the woods. It would have been the gentlemanly thing to do to offer to accompany her or even to see her home in the small curricule that he’d obtained since arriving in Lofton. But until he’d secured her cousin’s consent and the banns were posted, they could not be seen together. It would only create difficulty for her.

Another door slammed above stairs.

“Jealous bitch,” he muttered. He didn’t know why he assumed the spirit, if in fact it was a spirit, haunting Rosedale Hall was female, only that it plagued him incessantly. That was reason enough to assign such a gender. The activity in the house was growing in both frequency and intensity. Dark shadows that seemed to shift and move of their own volition, that had a depth and presence that could not be explained were among the most disturbing events to occur. Objects would move of their own accord, and strange whispers would emanate from uninhabited rooms. But there was naught to do for it at that moment. He had more pressing matters to attend to.

He had much to do the following day. He’d need to ride into Birmingham and confer with Mr. Mooney about his choice of bride. Then he’d have to return to Lofton and call upon Mrs. Patrice Hampton to secure her permission for his betrothal to Katherine. And afterward, he’d pay a visit to the vicar and find out what he could about the unfortunate events that had unfolded within the walls of Rosedale Hall. He’d never put much stock in tales of ghosts and hauntings before, but he could only imagine that if the spirit lingered after death, there would have to be a reason. What would motivate the dead?



Kit slipped in through the kitchen entrance. She managed to avoid being seen by any of the servants and tiptoed quietly up the stairs to her room. He’d given her no reason not to trust him, not to believe that everything he’d spoken to her was truth. But she’d learned the hard way that men often said things they did not mean. If he was truly a man of honor and if his offer was legitimate, it would solve every problem she currently faced. Of course, she wasn’t foolish enough to think it wouldn’t create a tangled mess of new ones.

Once in the safety of her room, she found Joseph asleep on his small cot in the corner. His clothes were dirty and it was clear he’d worked harder than a boy should have to. She could see angry red blisters on his hands from where he’d been forced to muck out stalls in the stables. Whether she could

safely trust her newly betrothed or not, he was the only hope she had for herself and her brother.

The door opened and Vera slipped inside. Kit pointed toward the sleeping boy and motioned for quiet.

“What did he want?” Vera asked in a low and clearly worried whisper.

There was no other way to say it than to simply blurt it out. “He wants to marry me.”

A high pitched squeal began to emit from the other woman, but Kit slapped her hand over Vera’s mouth quickly. “Hush!”

“I’m sorry!” Vera offered in a muffled hiss before pushing Kit’s hand away. “But you can’t be serious! He asked you to marry him?”

Kit shrugged. She was still baffled by it all herself. “It has something to do with the terms of his inheritance. He has to marry a woman with connections to Lofton and of a genteel background. Apparently, even with my tattered reputation, I still meet the basic requirements!”

Vera moved toward the bed and sat down. It was probably the first time the poor woman had been off her feet all day, Kit thought. She spent plenty of days just like that herself.

“Will you go to London, then?” Vera asked. “I would. I’d leave this place as far behind as possible.”

It hadn’t occurred to her to ask, Kit realized. But recalling how adamant he had been about restoring Rosedale Hall, she couldn’t imagine that he would wish to live elsewhere. “I don’t think so. I believe he means to reside permanently at Rosedale.”

Vera’s face paled. “Surely not! You know what they say about that place!”

Kit waved her hand dismissively. The slamming door and the dark figure in the upper window surely had rational explanations even if she couldn’t identify them. “It’s

nonsense! Hauntings and ghosts are just an extension of the silly superstitions of every one in this village!”

Vera glared at her. “I’m not one of them, Kit! I’m not some backward, judgmental busybody with nothing better to do than carry tales! But I’ve heard and seen things walking past that house... and it just feels wrong to me. I don’t want you to do it.”

Joseph stirred on his cot, turning over onto his side. It gave her an even better view of the bloody mess of his hands. A heavy sigh escaped Kit as she sank down onto her bed beside Vera. “I have to... Not just for me, Vera, but for Joseph. I need to see to his future and this is the only way that I can! Please, help me... Come with me.”

“No! Absolutely not!”

Kit grasped her hand. “Please? I need an ally, Vera. And surely there is no ghost that could be more difficult or frightening than dealing on a daily basis with Mrs. Farrelly?”

Vera shuddered. “That woman is the devil... But if it gets too bad, I’ll leave, Kit. There are some things that simply shouldn’t be toyed with. That house is a dark place.”

“So is this one,” Kit answered softly.

When Vera had gone, Kit lay down upon her narrow bed. She was tired. Weary to her very bones, in fact, and it wasn’t simply the exhaustion of the never ending stream of difficult tasks that were laid out for her by her cousin and her minion of a housekeeper. She was tired of fighting with everyone around her, of watching them whisper and smirk. Aside from her young brother whom she could only confide certain things to, Vera was her only ally. It had worn her on after more than three years.

Closing her eyes, she drifted off to sleep. But it wasn’t restful. Dreams came quickly, dark and vicious, bringing fear with them. She was in her girlhood home, the townhouse in London where she’d had so many happy memories. But it was a crumbling ruin, the decay of it perfectly reflecting the decay of her current life. As she stared down the exaggerated

expanse of the corridor, she could see the light from her mother's chamber. Try as she might to reach it, every step she took failed to bring her any closer to it.

A darkness seemed to creep in, filling the corridor with long and menacing shadows. She moved faster, her bare feet slapping against the wooden floor littered with debris that dug into her flesh. Without warning, the door slammed shut, the entire corridor went dark and she was alone there. Stopping short, her breath ragged and echoing in the stillness, she was overcome with the knowledge that she was not alone there. A presence surrounded her, an evil the likes of which she had never known. It filled the space, thick and foul, making it hard to draw breath

“He'll betray you... they always do” The whisper wasn't in the corridor, but inside her own mind, low and insidious.

Kit awoke gasping for air, her heart racing and a fine sheen of sweat on her skin. It was a dream, she told herself, only a dream. But it had the feeling of an omen of dark things to come.

CHAPTER 8

MOONEY SIZED up the man sitting across his desk from him and mentally recalculated what he would have to do in order to keep his promise to his benefactress. He hadn't anticipated that Lord Hadley would already have located a prospective bride, much less secured her consent.

“It would appear you have been quite busy, my lord,” Mooney offered. “And Miss Wexford has consented to your proposal?”

“She has,” Malcolm replied. “Miss Wexford meets all the requirements you laid out. Her family is originally from the area, or rather her mother's family was. Both of her parents are deceased and she resides in Lofton with her cousin, Patrice Hampton, who is a pillar of the community. Her father was a baronet, and while that is hardly an exalted title, it should qualify as being of good family and being gently bred.”

Mooney swallowed convulsively. She would be livid with him and he couldn't imagine what she might do. “It does

indeed, my lord.”

“Miss Wexford’s reputation is hardly pristine, but then you did not indicate that it had to be... I presume that there is nothing in writing about that?”

There was not, Mooney thought, and that oversight could very well be the death of him. “No, my lord. There is no reason that you have presented that would violate the dictates expressed by the trustees.”

“What are the options in regards to marriage licenses, Mooney? I’m unfamiliar with how that works in England,” the younger man asked.

“You would need a license, of course, and for that the banns would have to be posted and read by the local vicar.”

“And is that the only way?”

Mooney deeply resented that the new Lord Hadley was so thorough in his questioning. Objections called during the reading of the banns might delay the marriage long enough to spare him the brunt of her wrath. “No, my lord. There is a common license also obtained by the clergy, for a small fee. You would not have to wait the mandatory two weeks as with a regular license. There is also a special license, but you would need to obtain that from the archbishop and sadly he is away at this time... in London.”

Lord Hadley rose. “Thank you, Mr. Mooney. You’ve been far more helpful than I anticipated.”

“You’re most welcome, my lord.”

When Lord Hadley had left his office, Mooney reached for his quill and began the missive that would bring hell raining down upon him.



Kit had woken up late. Breakfast had long been over by the time she’d made her way to the kitchen after washing with the freezing cold water in the basin in a room where she could see her breath. Her cousin was incredibly stingy with the coal supply and the few lumps they were given to burn had to be

saved for nights when the temperature was beyond simple discomfort and into the realm of truly dangerous.

On her hands and knees scrubbing floors that one of the other maids was to have washed the day before, Kit paused to push back a lock of hair that had fallen onto her forehead and unknowingly leaving a streak of dirt in her wake. *If these floors have been scrubbed in a month you can call me the Queen of Sheba*, Kit thought bitterly. It was often the way of it. Unwanted tasks were done poorly or in such a way that they would have to be repeated at greater frequency and somehow those tasks always fell to her.

A long shadow fell over her and Kit glanced up to see Mrs. Farrelly glowering at her. Prepared to have the woman tell her that she was scrubbing the floors incorrectly and that her strokes were too broad, not rhythmic enough and in the wrong direction, or some other petty criticism, Kit sat back on her heels and waited.

“There’s a gentleman here to see you,” the older woman offered with a disapproving sneer.

The word gentleman was emphasized in a way that left little question as to his identity. It appeared that Lord Hadley had kept his word and come to call. Part of her had hoped that he would not, that it was all some elaborate ruse. Another part of her was so desperate to get away from her cousin’s home that she would have married the devil himself. *You may well be*, her inner voice warned.

Kit struggled to her feet, and only once she was standing did she realize just how long she’d knelt on the hard floor. She had to rest against the wall until the numbness retreated from her lower limbs. Her whole body ached from the backbreaking work. It was Mrs. Farrelly’s satisfied smirk more than anything else that prompted her to stand up straight and walk toward the drawing room in spite of whatever pain it caused. That woman, with her smug expressions and cutting remarks, made every day a misery.

Outside the door to the drawing room, Kit paused and took a deep breath before knocking softly. Her cousin’s barked

reply came sharply. “Enter!”

Opening the door, Kit stepped inside and found herself face to face not with Lord Hadley but with the man she’d never wanted to set eyes on again—the Honorable Edward “Ned” Cavendish, the man who’d ruined her and left her to face the consequences of it entirely alone. She couldn’t imagine why he’d come to call. There were certainly no remaining tender feelings on her part and she’d made that more than abundantly clear during every unfortunate encounter since.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded.

He sighed. “Katherine, there’s no need for such hostility. I understand your disappointment that you were unable to end my betrothal to Georgiana in spite of everything, but you must forgive and let bygones be bygones!”

That was not what he needed forgiveness for, but she’d not admit that in front of her cousin. It would do no good. “Why are you here, Edward?” She used the name he despised on purpose, a small way to needle and unsettle him just as his presence unsettled her.

“It’s about the assembly the other night, Mrs. Hampton,” he said, addressing his reply to Patrice. “You must understand that Georgiana finds it very upsetting to see Katherine socially... But I am not without sympathy for her and neither is Georgiana.”

Patrice snorted in response, sparing Kit from having to do so, before she continued in a scathing tone, “If your wife has any sympathy for anyone other than herself I’d be quite surprised, Mr. Cavendish. State your business. Katherine has work to do and I have a finite amount of patience.”

Ned’s smile never faltered, but there was confusion in his gaze. He was not used to having his charming smile leave a woman unswayed. “I’ve inquired with my cousin in Shrewsbury. She’s an elderly lady, widowed, and in need of a companion... Surely you must see that such a position would be a step in the right direction for Katherine? Regardless of her misdeeds, she was raised a lady and has never been intended

for such hard labors as being a servant in your home. My cousin could offer her comfort and then, when she passes, bless her, Katherine would have a glowing reference with which to seek other employment!”

“She’s not a servant,” Patrice snapped. “As if I’d ever pay wages to a relative! To live here without working for it would be charity and our dear Katherine’s pride demands that she never accept charity, Cavendish! Doesn’t it, my dear?”

“Of a certain. My pride must be preserved at all costs,” Kit answered back, just managing to keep the sarcasm from her tone. She’d trade her pride for being able to bend her knees without crying at the moment. Not that she’d take Ned’s offer. Shrewsbury was a short ride from Lofton and if he knew where she was at all times and could access her in a house where he could come and go freely—well, she wouldn’t let that happen. Whatever it took, she would never let that happen.

“Nonetheless, my cousin’s position would provide a generous wage for her. It would allow her to provide for herself and for Joseph in some small way,” he urged, the slick smile still gracing his handsome face.

“What say you, Katherine?” Patrice demanded. She was no one’s fool, and while she understood the truth about Kit’s situation better than anyone else, it didn’t precisely make her sympathetic. “Do you wish to be employed by his cousin?”

Kit was saved from answering by a knock at the door. The butler entered. “Madame, another gentleman is here to see you. Lord Hadley, ma’am.”

Patrice let out a rather loud sigh of disapproval. “Show him in, then! Unless you feel this is such private business no one else should be witness to it?” she directed the last to Ned with a knowing look. She was well aware of what he was about. He was a fox guarding the hen house and looking to procure a new hen for it.

Kit stared at the door as Lord Hadley entered. He was dressed well, his hair neatly styled and his face freshly shaven. Handsome as he was, and there was no denying that, much as

she might like to, nothing would ever make him look like a gentleman. It was in the powerful way that he moved, as if he was prepared at any moment to start raining blows on an enemy. Of course, it was also evident in the breadth of his shoulders and the powerful expanse of his chest. He was not a man used to being idle.

There was something about him—raw, primal, even animalistic. It was so far removed from the slick, smooth and sophisticated facade that Ned projected. Yet of the two of them, Lord Hadley was undoubtedly the more trustworthy of the two. Regardless, her already difficult day had progressed to strange and now beyond.



Malcolm took in the curious stare of Mrs. Hampton, the poleaxed expression on Katherine's face and the snake-oil smile on the face of the 'gentleman' present. He knew the type and he wouldn't trust the bastard as far as he could throw him.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Hampton, Miss Wexford," he acknowledged. Since the gentleman present was unexpected, he had no idea how to address him. Lytton had gone through the particulars of paying a formal call at least half a dozen times with him the previous evening. They'd rehearsed it until Malcolm thought he'd be repeating the addresses in his sleep.

"Lord Hadley, this is a pleasant if unexpected surprise," Patrice replied coolly. "Please do join us. May I introduce you to the Honorable Edward Cavendish?"

"Lord Hadley," Mr. Cavendish said, inclining his head.

"Mr. Cavendish," Malcolm acknowledged. He really wanted to smash his fist into the man's face though he hadn't a clue why. "I apologize for interrupting your visit, but there was a rather important matter that I needed to speak to Mrs. Hampton about."

Mr. Cavendish's smile broadened. "What a happy coincidence. I too came to speak to Mrs. Hampton about an important matter... I've come with an offer for Katherine."

“An offer?” Malcolm asked with a raised eyebrow and a glance in Katherine’s direction.

“An offer of employment, my lord,” she clarified, and appeared clearly nonplussed by it. “Mr. Cavendish has offered to see me employed as a companion in his cousin’s home in Shrewsbury.”

Malcolm looked back at the other man and knew then precisely why he didn’t like him. He’d viewed him, albeit momentarily, as competition. “I see,” he said softly, but his gaze was locked on her firmly, demanding an answer. “And is this an offer that you are interested in accepting, Miss Wexford?”

She blinked rapidly several times, as if shocked at the mere suggestion. When she replied, her tone was stiff and even offended. “Certainly not, Lord Hadley. I’ve no wish to work for Mr. Cavendish’s cousin in Shrewsbury.”

Malcolm smiled and turned to Mrs. Hampton. “What a relief then... I’ve come with an offer for Katherine myself—for marriage.”

The room went utterly still. A pin dropping on the carpet would have sounded like cannon fire. The Honorable Mr. Cavendish gaped and Mrs. Hampton simply blinked at him. Glancing again at Katherine, with a streak of dirt on her forehead and patches of grime on her skirt, she simply folded her hands in front of her and kept her head held high.

“You can’t be serious,” Mr. Cavendish finally managed, his tone filled with outrage and no little amount of pique. “You do understand that she’s ruined and a completely improper choice to be the wife of a peer?”

Mrs. Hampton whacked the man’s knuckles with the walking stick she carried for appearances only. “You will hush your mouth this instant, Ned Cavendish! You’re the one who ruined her and yet here you sit in my drawing room asking to place her in the house of your doddering old cousin where you could get to her at any time you choose! You’ll mind your manners or I’ll have the footmen toss you out by way of the pig pen!”

Ned, as Mrs. Hampton had called him, shut his mouth then, but rose to his feet. "You're making a terrible mistake. She's not fit!"

Malcolm eyed him coolly. "You're a man of the world, aren't you, Ned?"

The man tugged at his jacket, straightening it unnecessarily. "Of course, I am!"

"And yet a man of the world was so wholly naive that he could be seduced by an innocent young woman who had led a sheltered and protected life? I find that difficult to believe."

"It doesn't really matter what you believe, does it, Lord Hadley?" the man replied in a tone that could only be described as waspish. He sounded like a bitter old woman.

"On the contrary," Malcolm stated smoothly and in a voice that, at least on the surface, appeared to be perfectly calm. "As I intend to take Katherine as my wife, it matters very much. If you utter one more word, Mrs. Hampton will not have to call the footmen to toss you out of this house. I will do it myself... and I will not be gentle."

Apparently, foolish as Mr. Cavendish was, he did have a sense of self-preservation. His mouth worked for a moment, opening and closing like a landed fish, before he gave a curt nod and removed himself from the room.

"You certainly know how to make an entrance, Lord Hadley," Mrs. Hampton commented. "You might as well sit. My neck is paining me from having to stare up at you."

Malcolm surveyed her with skepticism. She was not old. He doubted she was but a few years beyond him and yet she had adopted the airs of a haughty dowager. But he knew his manners, or at least what Lytton had drilled into him thus far. "Certainly, Mrs. Hampton. But not until Katherine is seated."

"She'll dirty the upholstery!" Mrs. Hampton protested.

"Then I shall stand with her," Malcolm replied.

The woman gave a loud harrumph and muttered under her breath. "Well, if it isn't Lancelot reborn then!" After a

moment, she waved a dismissive hand. “Fine, she can sit. But you’ll pull that wooden chair over from the window. She can’t ruin it!”

Malcolm wisely elected not to fight her on the edict. Instead, he did as she bid and retrieved the appropriate chair, hauling it over to place it near the settee where she was holding court. Katherine stepped forward and settled into the chair, but when her skirts brushed Mrs. Hampton’s, Mrs. Hampton abruptly shifted away with a look of distaste. Seeing as how any dirt on Katherine’s clothes had come from within the woman’s own house, her demeanor was deliberately cruel. No wonder the girl would agree to marry a total stranger.

“Speak your peace, Lord Hadley,” Mrs. Hampton instructed. “I’ve wasted enough of my day on this nonsense already.”

CHAPTER 9

KIT WAS STILL TRYING to come to terms with the fact that he’d actually kept his word. He’d come to her cousin’s home to get her blessing. In doing so, he’d publicly proclaimed their relationship. He’d even defended her to Ned *and* to Patrice which she had not expected. How long had it been since anyone, other than Joseph, of course, had dared to defend her?

“Are you agreeable to marrying this man, Katherine?” Patrice demanded.

Kit opened her mouth to answer.

“Think carefully, girl! If you say yes then you’re bound to it! You’ll find no succor in this house should you abandon your husband,” her cousin added before Kit could speak.

If there had been any doubt, it was effectively staunch. “I am agreeable, cousin.”

Patrice let out another heavy sigh and rolled her eyes heavenward. “Then you shall speak to the vicar and have the banns read this Sunday, Lord Hadley. You’ll be married two weeks after, as is custom. There is enough about this situation that is unorthodox already without adding to it with a hasty ceremony!”

“Katherine will need a trousseau,” Lord Hadley stated. “And in the interim, she will not be worked to the point of exhaustion.”

“You make a great deal of demands,” Patrice pointed out.

“I can speak for myself,” Kit interrupted them. “I do need a trousseau and I will need at least two days to go into Birmingham and obtain appropriate clothing. Beyond that, everything in this house shall continue as it always has until we are married, my lord.”

“And young Joseph will remain here with me,” Patrice stated.

“Young Joseph,” Lord Hadley replied, each of them continuing as if she hadn’t spoken at all, “Will attend the school of his sister’s choosing, or he will reside with us at Rosedale Hall.”

Patrice stood then, banging her walking stick against the floor. “I will not have that child living in that house with the evil that permeates its walls! If you send him to school, certainly I will grant my consent for it. But he will reside here or in the dormitories. Not ever in that house! Is that understood?”

“You are not his guardian,” Kit pointed out to Patrice. “But I do intend for Joseph to go to Eton. Our father went there and it’s only right that he should attend, as well. His time at Rosedale Hall will be limited.”

Patrice’s jaw tightened, her eyes narrowed, and the fury that washed over her at having her authority questioned was intimidating to behold. “Very well. Take him. In fact, both of you will leave tonight. I’ll not have either of you under my roof for a moment longer!” With that, the woman whirled and marched toward the door. There, she stopped and turned back to them for just a moment. “You’ll need one of the other servants to supervise your packing. I’d hate to have to bring you before the magistrate for thievery!”

When she was gone, Kit let out a breath she hadn’t even been aware she was holding. “Well, that certainly ended

poorly.”

“Did you expect that it would end any other way?” Lord Hadley asked. “That is a woman who likes to control everyone and everything around her. You and I, Katherine, have one thing in common... neither of us likes to be controlled by anyone.”

“I don’t know what to do. We’ve nowhere to go.”

“We will go to Birmingham and get a Common License,” Lord Hadley replied. “I spoke to my solicitor this morning as I expected that we might encounter some difficulty from your cousin. We shall take your brother with us. No doubt his wardrobe is as deficient as yours.”

“I still don’t understand why you’re doing this... clearly you have no need of the inheritance as you seem to be quite set on your own!” Kit protested. He confounded her.

“I have funds, but they are limited. If I am to set Rosedale Hall to rights, it would take everything I currently possess and then some. But with the inheritance, I can restore the estate and still live comfortably until it is once again producing an adequate income,” he explained. “Go, pack your things and your brother’s. I will await you here.”

Kit turned and headed for the door that her cousin had so recently made her grand exit from. There, she stopped and turned back to him. “I haven’t thanked you. I am grateful, my lord. Whatever happens between us and whatever becomes of me, I trust that you will do right by Joseph and for that I am very thankful.”



The unreasonable anger that filled him at her mention of gratitude left him puzzled. Still, it was there. It angered him beyond reason that she should thank him. He didn’t want her gratitude. But that left him struggling to identify precisely what it was he did want from her. *Fire*, he thought. He wanted the fire he’d seen from her that first day in the woods, when she’d kicked him like a damned horse and then run away. He wanted her to lose any air of subservience and be as haughty and proud as she was born to be.

She was still standing in the doorway, clearly wanting to ask a question but hesitating to do so. "What is it?" he demanded.

"There's a woman employed by my cousin. Vera Webb. I'd very much like to offer her a position at Rosedale Hall... as my maid if that's possible or as a maid of all work if that's all we can manage."

Malcolm nodded. "She'll be a maid of all work until the place is livable but once we have the servants Lytton has requested from the agency in London, she'll work strictly as your maid."

She ducked her head again and he could see the intense relief that filled her at his answer. Was it because she wanted to free the woman from her cousin or because she feared being alone with him without another ally? Did it matter, he thought?

"You'd best hurry," he said. "I don't trust your cousin not to call for the magistrate anyway."

"Yes, my lord," she said and rushed from the room.

When he was alone, Malcolm rose and walked over to the large window that looked out over the fields and the woods. He could see the roofline of Rosedale Hall rising above the trees. A dozen fortunes had passed through his hands during his lifetime, one or two of them his own, and while he'd never gone entirely broke, he'd never managed to hang onto anything of significance. There had never been land or a home of his own in America that spoke to him the way that crumbling ruin of a manor did. From the moment he'd crossed the threshold he'd known it was meant to be his. It didn't matter to him that it was inhabited by something he could not fully understand or explain.

It would be his home. And Katherine Wexford would be his wife. Money was a fleeting thing, easily won and easily lost. But the kind of possessiveness he felt for Rosedale Hall and these strange proprietary feelings he had for Katherine were entirely new to him.

Mrs. Hampton had stated that Cavendish was the man who'd ruined Katherine. He'd know the truth of it and he would know it from her lips.



Kit was shaking as she entered her small room. Mrs. Farrelly was already there, waiting for her with her lips twisted into a hard, ugly line. "You'll take nothing from this house that you didn't enter with!" the housekeeper raised her fist in the air in a threatening gesture.

"There is nothing in this house that I would wish to take with me beyond what I brought," Kit snapped back. She was no longer required to bow and scrape to the termagant. "And you'll not threaten me, Mrs. Farrelly. You may be a housekeeper to my cousin who is an esteemed member of this community... but after today, I'll be Lady Hadley. You will do well to remember your place and mine!"

Mrs. Farrelly glowered at her, but said nothing more. Instead, she perched in the corner of the room like a great, black crow to watch as Kit gathers all of their meager belongings. They no longer even had a valise to pack them in. She'd sold it. Taking one of her few remaining gowns, she formed a pack of sorts to tie everything up in. It was a sad testament to just how far they'd fallen that everything she and her brother owned between them could be tied up in one of her gowns.

When it was done, she gathered the small bundle and stepped out into the hall. Vera stood there wide eyed and holding a bag of her own.

"I said I'd go, and so here I am," the other woman uttered. Her voice trembled a bit.

Kit reached out and clasped her hand. "Will you collect Joseph from the stables and meet us out front?"

"You'll not come back here a-begging, Vera Webb!" Mrs. Farrelly shouted. "You've cast your lot and you'll stay in that devil's home or make your own in the streets! 'Tis where loose women like the two of you belong anyway!"

Kit whirled on the housekeeper. “And where does a vicious, black hearted witch like you belong? Our sins may see us in hell, Mrs. Farrelly, but rest assured, you’ll burn beside us for having not a shred of charity or kindness in you!”

The woman raised a hand to her chest and stepped back, as if the words themselves had somehow propelled her. Rather than give the vile wretch another moment to recover and counterattack, Kit spun on her heel and, with Vera’s hand clutched in hers, quickly made her way down the stairs. At the bottom, they parted—Vera to collect Joseph and Kit to once again face her betrothed.

As she entered the drawing room, he turned from the window where he’d been staring out into the distance. His gaze raked over her, taking in the high color in her cheeks undoubtedly. She refused to be embarrassed when he glanced at the small bundle of her possessions. There was a flash of something in his eyes that might have been sympathy, but she refused to even acknowledge it.

“Vera is fetching Joseph from the stables. They’ll meet us out front and then we can go.”

“Where is your cloak?” he asked.

“I only have my pelisse, my lord,” she replied. Her cloak had been one of the first garments she’d sold. Wool with an ermine lining, it had bought enough coal to supplement the meager supply from her cousin to get them through their first winter there.

His frown deepened. “We will have to remedy that. It’s too cold to be without one.”

It bothered her. No, she thought, it humiliated her. She’d tolerated the gossip and the lowering, menial tasks she’d committed at her cousin’s home under the watchful eyes of petty, vicious servants who gloried in her fall from grace. But his kindness toward her, his concern for her comfort when no one else had bothered to care in a very long time, made her want to weep. She *needed* her pride. It was the only thing that had kept her going, though she’d certainly had to swallow enough of it.

“It isn’t necessary, my lord. My pelisse will do well enough,” she said firmly.

He laughed. “I’ve seen your pelisse. It will not. But if it soothes your pride, I’m outfitting you for my own sake. I’ll not have people looking at my wife dressed in rags left from her youth and think it’s because I’m too tightfisted to see her dressed properly.”

He didn’t care what anyone thought and they both knew it. Still, Kit appreciated his generously offered self-deprecation for the sake of her already tender ego. “Very well, then. I will have the new cloak. But I only need a few other gowns. I doubt we will be much in society, even by Lofton standards. Vera can help me make others.”

“We will get what you need and what your brother needs. For now, we need to go. We’ll be lucky to reach Rosedale Hall before dark at this rate.”

“I thought we were going to Birmingham?” Had he changed his mind?

“Initially I had thought so too, but it’s begun to snow heavily. It would be too dangerous to attempt the journey in such conditions. We’ll go to Rosedale Hall for the night and if the roads are clear enough head for Birmingham in the morning.”

She wanted to protest. It was not what they’d initially agreed to. Spending the night under his roof when they were not yet wed—well, her reputation was already completely ruined but that would be the proverbial nail in the coffin for it. Opening her mouth, she started to speak, but in truth there was nothing she could say.

“Where else would you go, Katherine?” he asked gently, as if he’d plucked the thoughts right from her head.

“There is no where else for us to go, my lord, as you well know.”

“I will be more of a gentleman than any of the gentleman of your acquaintance have been,” he assured her.

“Given that you’ve met Mr. Cavendish, you know that’s hardly comforting.”

“Come, Katherine,” he said, holding out his hand to her. “Let’s collect your brother and your new maid and see if we can’t make Rosedale Hall habitable for us all for the night.”

It wasn’t foreboding exactly, more a knowing. Kit felt in her bones that accepting his hand would change her life irrevocably. It was more than simply agreeing to marry him. It was placing her trust in him, a commodity missing in so many society marriages. But again, what choice did she have? Kit reached out reluctantly and placed her hand in his and allowed him to lead her from the house.

CHAPTER 10

AS THEY APPROACHED ROSEDALE HALL, all of them crammed into the small gig with Joseph sitting half upon Katherine’s lap and half upon Vera’s. Malcolm imagined they made quite a sight, packed in as they were, and all of them shivering with the cold. It wasn’t simply snow that fell, but ice. The stinging pellets buffeting them made the narrow roads treacherous. The horse slipped numerous times, only just avoiding disaster as they finally eased the vehicle to a stop just in front of the manor.

Lytton was there, opening the doors wide and ushering Joseph and the women inside. Battling the elements, Malcolm made his way to the stable to tend the horse and put the small vehicle away. He might have become a lord, but he was still seeing to his own needs just as he had when he’d been trapping furs in the wilds of America or earning his living at a card table. It seemed that his inheritance had changed little about his life thus far.

Struggling back to the house, he entered through the kitchen where he found Vera heating water for tea. She had fared better than Katherine in the cold, as her clothing was more appropriate to the weather.

“Where is she?” he asked.

“Mr. Lytton has her in the study, my lord. The fire was already laid in there,” the maid answered with a bobbed curtsy.

“Thank you, Vera,” he answered and left her staring after him in surprise. It wasn’t an uncommon thing to thank servants, according to Lytton. Apparently Mrs. Hampton had not felt the need to be so gracious to anyone in her employ.

He could hear voices in the study, but they were most assuredly not Lytton. It was Katherine and her younger brother.

“Why are we here, Kit?”

Malcolm had been prepared to simply barge in to the room, but the boy’s softly uttered question stopped him in his tracks. He wanted to hear what was said between them. It might, he hoped, give him some insight into her because she was still an enigma to him.

“Joseph, I told you last night that Lord Hadley had asked me to marry him and I accepted, but Cousin Patrice... well, she was quite upset by the whole thing. She insisted that we leave immediately.”

Malcolm wondered at her reasons for not telling the boy of the true cause of their disagreement with Mrs. Hampton—that she’d insisted upon keeping Joseph with her. Perhaps it was because of the rumors about Rosedale’s ghostly inhabitants. It would simply create an opportunity for questions that she undoubtedly did not wish to answer.

“Why would you marry him?” the boy demanded, his tone rising as he was clearly upset. “You don’t know him at all! It’s because of the window isn’t it? It’s my fault!”

“No.” she answered firmly. “The window was simply the circumstance that brought Lord Hadley and I together... he is not forcing me into this, Joseph. He made an offer and I accepted it because it’s what’s best for all of us!”

“And what does he get out of it?” the boy fired back angrily.

Katherine was silent for a moment, then he could hear a soft laugh escape her. “Really, Joseph? Me! He gets me out of it!”

“You know what I mean, Kit! We’re poor. Our father killed himself, we haven’t a penny to our names and half the town calls you a—.” He stopped abruptly, cutting short what Malcolm could only imagine would have been a very hurtful statement.

“They call me what?” she asked softly.

The boy’s voice was soft, contrite when he replied. “It’s not true. We both know that. But they think it is and they’ll never let either of us stop paying for it.”

“They will, Joseph... It’s much harder to bully someone when they have a title,” she replied briskly. “Now, run along to the kitchen and help Vera.”

“Where’s the damned kitchen?”

“Joseph! You’re not in Patrice’s stables anymore! You will watch your language, young man!”

His muttered “yes, ma’am” was almost too faint to hear. Nonetheless, Malcolm stepped back from the door to allow the boy to pass. He ignored the vicious glare the boy tossed his way as he stomped down the corridor. It would take time and patience to bring him around. It would take time and patience to bring his bride around as well.

With that thought foremost in mind, Malcolm knocked briefly and then entered the library where she sat before the fire. Her clothes were still damp from the mix of snow and rain that had pelted them on the ride home. Suggesting that she change would be pointless, as she would resist on principle. Instead, he moved toward the hearth and added another log to the fire.

“You didn’t tell him that he could have stayed with Mrs. Hampton,” he said. “Why?”

She glanced up at him through her lashes, her dark eyes suspicious. “Does it matter?”

“No. But if you’ve a reason, I’d like to know, simply so that I don’t put my foot in it later on.”

“Oh,” she said. “He takes so much on himself... and I fear that he thinks he is a burden to me. I didn’t want him to think staying with Patrice was an option that might free me from the responsibility of him. He cares too much for what others think of us and their opinions have colored his vision of our situation too much already.”

“Fair enough, then... We will not be able to travel into Birmingham tomorrow. The roads will not permit the passage of the gig, I believe. There is a sleigh in the stables, but I have my doubts as to its structural integrity. But if you’re willing to risk it, we can go into Lofton in the morning and obtain a common license from the vicar and be married in the church there, assuming he’d consent to it.”

She sighed heavily. “He might, but you’d have to pay dearly for it... he likes me not at all, and believes every ugly rumor that has ever been uttered against me.”

Malcolm smiled in what he hoped was a reassuring manner. “Then he should be relieved to see you wed, and we’ll pay whatever is necessary. It needs to be done and be done quickly. You cannot remain under this roof with the benefit of marriage.”

“About our marriage, my lord... What sort of marriage is it to be exactly?”

He’d wondered when she would ask. “It will not be a marriage of convenience, Katherine. It will be a real marriage in every way. Now it is my turn to ask a question.”

“And what question is that, my lord?” she asked, clearly rattled by his proclamation.

It was a question that had plagued him since he’d first learned of the rumors surrounding her. “Your cousin said that Mr. Cavendish was the man responsible for your ruin... Precisely... well, just how ruined are you Katherine?”

“I don’t understand,” she replied.

He decided to make it as clear as possible. “After we are wed and I come to your bed, will I find the wanton woman

that Lofton proclaims you to be, a terrified innocent, or a traumatized victim?”

Her furious blush was an answer in and of itself. She turned her face from him, gazing into the fire rather than make eye contact. “I am none of those things—not innocent, not terrified, and not wanton.”

“Cavendish bedded you?”

“He forced himself upon me, and when we were discovered, he laid the blame for it at my door... telling everyone that I had seduced him instead. Today, he offered that position as a companion to his cousin because it would once again put me within his reach.”

“But you’re not afraid of me?” A note of challenge had crept into his voice. He didn’t want her fear, but he didn’t want her to lay claim to a bravery she did not actually possess and damage their relationship before it could even begin. He didn’t believe in love, but he did believe that a married couple could achieve contentment with one another if they could reach accord. The physical aspect of marriage was the best way to do that to his mind.

“I will be your wife,” she replied softly. “Whether I fear you or not, it is simply a part of it, is it not? A wife must submit to her husband’s will. That is what all women are taught.”

He laughed at that, but it wasn’t from amusement. “I would hope for a degree of enthusiasm and not just submission in a marriage bed... And to that end, I have a proposition for you, my betrothed.”

“What is your proposition?”

Malcolm smiled and crossed his arms over his chest as he leaned against the mantle. “A kiss... we are to be married. Therefore, it would hardly be scandalous between a betrothed couple.”

“Then have your kiss, my lord, and be done with it!”

“I’ll not steal it from you, Katherine... I want a kiss freely given.”



Kit's heart was pounding in her chest as she met his challenging gaze. He smiled at her like she imagined a pirate would, or perhaps a highwayman. "One kiss?"

"It's a start... if a kiss is well given, more than one will be desired by us both."

Her experience with kissing and the phrase well given had little enough to do with one another. Recalling Ned's pawing at her and the foul stench of his breath as he shoved his overly wet tongue into her mouth, she couldn't imagine that anyone would ever find kissing to be a pleasant activity.

Kit rose to her feet, fighting back a shiver. It wasn't the cold or the dampness of her clothing that prompted it. It was *him* and what he'd goaded her into. She recognized his challenge for what it was, but she had no choice really. It was a fair thing to ask for under their rather strange circumstances and there was no good reason to refuse him unless any of the things he'd asked her before, if she were still innocent or completely terrified, were actually true. The fear was there, pressing in on her, but it was fear of the unknown, fear of tying herself irrevocably to a man she knew nothing of. Perhaps the kiss would tell her something of him, as well.

Only a few steps and she was standing just an arm's length from him. It wasn't the first time she'd stood so close, that she'd felt the heat of him and the weight of his presence. But there was intent with their proximity at the moment and it left her feeling unsteady. "I am uncertain of how to begin," she admitted.

"Come closer," he said.

"How close?"

"It's a kiss, Katherine. Close enough for our lips to meet without either one of us having to break our necks," he answered, a hint of a smile turning the corners of his mouth slightly upward.

He was ridiculously handsome and at one time in her life, that alone would have tempted her to behave in a manner both

fast and flirtatious with him. But she was no longer that girl, that innocent who had no notion of just where stolen kisses could lead. Still, they were betrothed, she was in his home, and a kiss was a small price to pay.

Another step and she was close enough to see the gold flecks in his dark eyes, to see that there were strands of gold and auburn within his dark hair, glinting in the light of the fire. He remained still, leaning nonchalantly against the mantle, his arms crossed over his chest and that half smirk-half smile on his lips.

Kit had to rise to her tiptoes to reach him, but she did so with a bravado that belied her nerves. She pressed her lips to his. It should have been chaste, no more than a brushing of her mouth against his. But she felt the slight rasp of his whiskers against her skin, she tasted the spirits he'd consumed, and she could smell the subtle hint of sandalwood from his shaving lotion.

She drew back from him, and he cocked an eyebrow at her. "That's hardly a kiss," he protested. "I'm not a child to be consoled with such."

"You asked for a kiss, my lord, and I have given you one!"

"Then perhaps you have not been well schooled in the art of kissing... If you'd permit me, I would correct it."

It was another challenge. It also left her feeling as if she were standing on the edge of a precipice and being goaded to jump. She had no idea what awaited her at the bottom of the abyss, but it would surely leave her changed forever.

"Are you afraid of me, Katherine?"

No. She wasn't, and even if she were, she would not admit it. "Of course not!"

"Then let me show you what a kiss can be," he urged.

Kit took a deep breath, but still didn't trust herself to speak. Instead she gave a curt nod. A startled gasp escaped her as his hands clasped her upper arms and tugged her closer to him, until she was pressed fully against him. She could feel the

hardness of his chest pressing against the softness of her own. She'd never known that a man could be so firm and solid. The strength of his grip told the truth of it. He could hurt her if he chose, and far more easily than she liked to admit. Yet he held her gently, his thumbs tracing delicate circles on the tender skin just inside her elbow. Those lazy movements made her breathless and she felt foolish for it. It would be stupidity to let him sway her so easily.

“Relax,” he urged in a gentle whisper.

“Easy enough for you to say,” Kit replied, her own voice trembling and low. “You’ve a bit more experience in this arena than I do!”

He chuckled at that. “If I bite, I promise it won’t hurt.”

She frowned at that, uncertain of his meaning, but she had no time to ask. His lips settled over hers, firm and demanding. This was no brushing of mouths, it was insistent and intense. He mapped every curve of her mouth with his, altering the pressure from gentle to something almost harsh. And when his teeth grazed her bottom lip, nipping it just a shade past gently, she understood his earlier statement.

Heat coiled inside her, something she'd never experienced and certainly never anticipated. The warmth spread outward from her center, suffusing her limbs until she was languid with it. She found herself leaning into him, letting the hardened strength of his body support her own. It was tempting and delicious and it terrified her. Yet, she felt powerless to pull away—powerless to break the connection between them in that moment.

It was he who finally called a halt to what should have been a simple gesture of affection or attraction. He withdrew his lips from hers, yet continued to hold her close. His arms closed about her, drawing her even nearer. It was both comforting and unnerving as she laid her head against his chest, directly over his heart.

“That was not just a kiss,” she whispered softly.

His chest huffed with a silent chuckle before he uttered softly, “But it was, Katherine. A kiss, if done well, is nothing short of magic. I’d wager we did quite well, wouldn’t you?”

Kit said nothing. She didn’t need to. Her answer was obvious from the rapid beating of her heart and the trembling of her body against him. In that moment, with her lips still burning from his kiss and her heart still pounding in her chest, she couldn’t help but wonder if she’d made a terrible mistake or if she’d stumbled into salvation for both herself and her brother. She offered up a silent prayer that she would not regret the arrangement they’d come to.



Mooney was still in his office though it was well after dark. He’d been imbibing heavily from the bottle of brandy he kept in his bottom drawer and going home foxed would see his wife inflicting just as much misery as his benefactress would.

The door to his office opened with a crash and she stood there, draped in jewels and furs. It was clear she was on her way out for the evening. The toast of the town, as it were. But the unholy light in her eyes made him shrink back.

“You said he would not be a problem,” she snapped viciously.

Mooney tried not to cower, but even he was aware of the plaintive and pathetic note in his voice as he replied, “He has proven very resourceful, my lady.”

She stepped deeper into the office, closing the door behind her. Her movements were slow, deliberate, and infinitely threatening. It was like watching an adder as it coiled in preparation of a strike. “Then clearly,” she said in a low and menacing voice, “he needs more obstacles in his path. I have sold my soul, bartered it to the darkest forces in the universe, Mooney, and I have done so to lay claim to what my own blood would deny me... I will not allow this upstart American to claim that estate and the fortune that accompanies it simply because he possesses a bit of flesh that I do not!”

Mooney didn’t point out the obvious, that it wasn’t her gender so much as the circumstances of her birth. The late

Lord Hadley had been her father, but her mother had been wed to another man at the time.

“That spiteful bitch, Lady Elsingham, has had a hand in this! I just know it!” she continued. “She’ll pay for it too. And so will you... but now, I have to cut my evening short and go home to consult my books and see what I can do about moving this process along!”

“What process is that?” he asked, hating himself for it.

She smiled. “It isn’t enough to simply summon a demon, Mooney... you have to feed them to give them power. Best you don’t ask anything else because you will not like the answer.”

Mooney watched her sweep out but the relief he felt at her departure was short lived. He couldn’t fathom what she was about, but he was a part of it whether he wanted to be or not. He would burn in hell beside her, he realized, but he feared hell less than he feared her.



Hours later, tucked into a still dusty room with Vera sleeping on a daybed beside the door, Kit lay in her bed, staring sightlessly up at the brocade canopy as she contemplated everything that could possibly go wrong. He was too unpredictable, too raw and too—*him*. The man was like a force of nature. He’d come into her life and upended it entirely. Even if it was possibly for the better, it still left her feeling unsteady and frightened.

Rolling onto her side, Kit’s eyes followed the pattern of the stones in the wall next to the hearth. It was drafty and cold, but with all the blankets that had been heaped upon her bed, it was still warmer than she’d ever been in the small chamber she’d shared with her brother in her cousin’s attic. Making a mental note to check the attics for any tapestries that hadn’t been decimated by mice, her eyes traced a crack in the stones, following the jagged seam.

She wasn’t certain what alerted her. There was no sound, nothing seemingly out of the ordinary. And yet the feeling of not being alone, of being watched, overwhelmed her.

Reluctantly, Kit drew her gaze from the hearth and turned it toward the foot of the bed. The image was faint, but with the moonlight sifting through the lace covered windows, it was easy enough to see the pale and translucent figure of a woman at the foot of her bed. The features were indistinct, no matter how hard she tried to focus her gaze on that face, they remained unclear. She was left with only the impression of long, golden hair and a simple white gown or perhaps a night rail.

The scream was building inside her, fear taking hold of her. Against every instinct, she swallowed it down, forcing herself to speak to the apparition as if she were any other intruder. “Why are you here? Who are you?” she demanded.

On the daybed, Vera let out a moan and followed it abruptly with a loud snore. Kit spared a glance in her direction, but that was all it took. When her eyes darted back to the foot of the bed, the figure was gone. Vanished into the darkness as if it had been nothing more than mist, or perhaps her own overactive imagination.

“No. It was real,” she whispered to herself. “I saw it and I’m neither mad nor fanciful!”

Knowing that sleep would continue to prove elusive, Kit sat up in the bed and prepared herself to keep watch. The chill she felt had nothing to do with the temperature of the room itself and everything to do with the cold, overwhelming dread inside her. Haunted. Vera had said as much and so had her future husband. In all the times she’d come to Rosedale Hall with her brother to simply walk the overgrown park, she’d never been tempted to breach the sanctity of the house, call her as it might. Had she somehow sensed even then that the house held its own darkness?

In the deep shadows of her room, Kit spoke again. “What have I done? What in heaven’s name have I gotten myself into?”



Malcolm stood near the window, staring out over the snow shrouded park. He’d attempted to sleep, but tossing and

turning in the bed had simply left him irritated and frustrated. It was her. His bride. It had been an innocent enough kiss, a mere taste of her lips. And it had set him on fire. He was burning with need for her. Knowing that only a single door separated them was torture.

The fanciful notion of love at first sight or anything so lushly romantic he immediately dismissed. It was lust and nothing more. But he knew himself well enough to admit that it was also possessiveness sparked by the idea that she was now his. Right or wrong, by agreeing to be his wife, she had surrendered herself to him. She'd argue the point, no doubt, but she was his and when they were properly wed, he would show her just what that meant. In the meantime, he would spend one more lonely night, frustrated and aching for her.

Turning away from the window, Malcolm felt the chill that had nothing to do with the draft seeping in around the glass. It wasn't the first time he'd felt that preternatural cold. It crept upon him, inch by inch.

There'd been a woman once, one he'd thought of as simply a casual lover, but one who'd clearly thought of him as so much more. When he'd tried to extricate himself from their arrangement, she'd become possessive, clinging, even despondent. She'd threatened to kill herself if he left, trying to blackmail him into remaining at her side.

What he remembered so clearly from that experience was the panic, the caged feeling that had consumed him in her cloying presence. Whomever or whatever had entered his room there in the cold, dark hours of the night, the being that now lurked behind him, its chilly presence snaking along his spine, left him with that same feeling. It sparked inside him the desire to run, to flee and free himself from facing things that were beyond his ken. But this was his home and he would not give it up. He would not be driven from it by his own fear or by whatever entity had taken up residence there. Someway, he would find out what it was and in the doing, he would find a way to get rid of it.

CHAPTER 11

THEY WOULD NOT BE GETTING married that day. Kit stared through the window at the snow shrouded landscape and knew without question that it would be far too dangerous to attempt the journey, even if it was just to the village. So she was to remain unmarried, under a bachelor's roof with her seven year old brother, two servants, and a very active spirit to act as chaperone.

“What could possibly go wrong?” she muttered to herself. The answer was simple enough. Everything.

“I don't like it. I don't like it at all,” Vera uttered softly. “Did he plan it you think? To get you here, have his way with you, and then toss us all out with nothing but the clothes on our backs?”

It had crossed her mind, but Kit refused to feed Vera's ever growing anxiety about their current situation. “No. I think if he'd wanted to have his way with me, he could have done that easily enough when I met with him here alone just two days past. I think he will honor his word, Vera. No man can control the weather, much as they might like to.”

Vera let out a heavy sigh, as if she'd been holding a breath and were too afraid to exhale. “You're probably right, but I cannot help it, Miss. I don't trust men. Never had much reason to!”

“I'm aware,” Kit said. “You've had your share of misfortune, but I can only hope that we are both in a better place for us right now.” Of course, it would help tremendously if said place were not inhabited by restless spirits. If Vera had seen the figure at the end of her bed last night, she would have run all the way to Birmingham without ever looking back. And though she risked raising the maid's alarm, Kit had to know more.

“Vera,” she added softly, “You mentioned rumors about Rosedale Hall. What have you heard?”

Vera's eyes widened. “It's bad luck to speak of it! Speak of it and they'll hear!”

“Who will hear? There’s no one present but the two of us!”

The maid shook her head vigorously. “That we can see, Miss... but you talk of the dead and they’ll come. I’ll not be responsible for drawing them here.”

They were there already, but bringing that up would hardly aid her cause. Instead, Kit shrugged. “Superstitious nonsense, Vera! We can’t summon the dead just by uttering their names!”

“Tis not what my Nan told me,” Vera said solemnly. “She’s a wise woman... some called her a witch when she was a young woman.’Twas naught but harmless fortune telling and a few love charms, but as a girl, even those things were dangerous for her, lest she be tried for practicing the black arts!”

“Your Nan is still living, is she not?”

“She is,” Vera said. “But she’ll not come here. I think. She might, though. Knowing what she’ll do next is like picking which spot on the ground a hen will peck!”

“When the weather breaks, we shall go to her. I’d be curious to hear what she knows of this place... and surely there would be no danger in discussing our alleged spirits so far from here, would there?”

Caught and with no graceful way to decline, Vera chewed her lip nervously. “I suppose not. But if she says no, you should listen, Miss Katherine! This place gives me the chills... Like someone is pacing on my grave instead of just walking across it!”

“You don’t have a grave for anyone to cross, walking or otherwise. Really, Vera! There’s nothing here to fear!” Except for the stranger soon to be her husband, a house as riddled with decay as it was with secrets and ghostly apparitions that had the power to manipulate objects in the physical realm, slamming doors and the like. No, Kit reasoned, there was nothing to fear at all.

As if she'd conjured him from thin air, he appeared outside. Kit's eyes were drawn to him as he moved through the nearly shin deep snow. He carried lengths of wood that she knew from experience were a heavy burden to bear. Yet, they seemed to weigh nothing to him. Of course, she knew he was strong. She'd felt the firm press of his muscles against her the night before when he'd kissed her.

"He's certainly a handsome one," Vera whispered. "I still wouldn't trust him any further than I could swing a cat, but doesn't mean he isn't fine to look upon!"

There was no point in offering any argument to refute her, as Lord Hadley—Malcolm, she mentally corrected herself—was certainly one of the most handsome men she'd ever seen. But she and Vera were no longer compatriots, she was no longer a servant alongside her in her cousin's house. It would be imprudent to brook such familiarity and informality with the woman who would be her maid. She wouldn't encourage her by agreeing. "Vera, he is to be your employer. You mustn't say such improper things."

"Was it improper then to voice what I could see going through your mind?" the maid asked, her tone indignant and her feelings clearly hurt to have been reminded so callously that their positions were once again on very unequal footing. In a sharper tone, she added, "Have a care, Miss Katherine, that your face doesn't tell a truth you're not ready to have pass your lips."

Kit said nothing as the other woman stormed from the room. It was easy enough to stalk off in a tizzy during the bright light of day. The house was far less intimidating then, but when twilight fell and the dark shadows of the house formed menacing phantoms in every corner, she knew Vera would be more than happy to set their little disagreement aside.

Turning her attention back to the man she should have already been married to, Kit watched him as he stacked piece piece brick of wood near the door and within easy reach. She knew of no other gentleman who would do such, and yet it was clear that this was not an unfamiliar task to him. What had

he said to her? *I am not like these men you know, Miss Wexford. I come from a wilder place, a place where one has to work to survive.*

It was easy enough to see the truth of that. She had no idea how to carry on with him. He wasn't like anyone she'd ever known and predicting his behavior was simply impossible. She was at a terrible disadvantage and there was only one way to correct it. While he was busy outside, she would snoop.

Hastily, Kit stepped back from the window and made her way toward the kitchen. She didn't enter because she didn't have to. From beyond the door, she could hear Lytton instructing Joseph on proper etiquette. God bless the man, she thought, even as she turned toward the stairs intent upon pilfering through his master's things.



Malcolm paused in the bruising task of stacking firewood. He didn't mind hard work. He'd done more than his share in his life. Of course, he'd gotten little sleep the night before. Between the ghostly activity in the house and the knowledge that his voluptuous bride was tucked into a bed just a room away, he'd been wide awake for most of the night.

The snow had come down far heavier than anyone had anticipated. As it stood, they'd be stuck together at Rosedale Hall for at least another day before they could safely make it into the village, assuming that no more snow fell. He'd made a promise to himself that he would not dishonor her; that he would wait until they were safely wed before pursuing fulfillment of his desire for her. Of course, that promise had been easy to make when he thought he only had to make it through the night.

Wiping sweat from his brow, he reached for another length of wood and cursed as fumbled it and smashed his thumb. Placing the wood from the cart onto the pile near the door, he decided he'd done enough for the moment. He needed a drink, and while it was too early in the day for spirits, he was hardly in the mood for tea. To avoid a lecture or scandalized

Lytton, he'd return to his room and the bottle of brandy stashed there.

Entering the house, Malcolm scanned the hall but saw no sign of his bride, her kin, or their two lonely servants. Just as well, he thought grimly. Lytton would eye him just as suspiciously as Katherine's evil-eyed maid. The woman had glared at him or ducked her head like she expected to be beaten every time they had crossed paths. The boy had been positively hostile.

Climbing the stairs two at a time, Malcolm paused outside his chamber door. The noises from the other side of the door gave him pause. Deciding that those noises had a very earthly origin, he reached for the door handle and set the door swinging inward. He paused, reconsidering his initial assessment. The room appeared to be empty and yet one of the drawers had not been closed entirely. Malcolm stepped inside, and considered his options.

The question that came to mind, of who would be spying on him and going through his things, was fairly easy to answer. Lytton didn't have to. The man knew every item that Malcolm owned better than he himself did. The maid wouldn't dare as she seemed to be utterly terrified of both him and Rosedale Hall. The boy would, but Malcolm doubted he'd have the sense to hide. He was too angry and defiant for that. So that left his betrothed. Given her ample curves, there were limited places in the room where she could actually conceal herself.

Malcolm moved deeper into the room. Leaning down, he flipped back the bed skirt and peered beneath. It was empty. Next, he moved to the wardrobe and opened each of the doors. Again, nothing. His last option was the dressing screen in the corner that concealed the heavy and ornate tub. Moving toward it, his lips quirked as he heard a slight squeak of alarm. She'd been well and truly caught.

Rather than go behind the screen, he simply paused in front of it. "You can come out, Katherine."

No response.

“I know you are behind there and while I do not understand precisely what your purpose is in being here, I’ll be happy to assist you with it.”

He heard rustling and then she emerged, dusty and with cobwebs in her hair. Apparently, they hadn’t cleaned the room as well as he’d first thought.

“I imagine you are furious with me,” she admitted with a huffed breath.

“I have many reactions to finding beautiful women in my bedchamber. Anger is not one of them. Curiosity however, is. What are you doing in here?” he demanded.



She wanted to lie, but no believable excuses came to mind. It was humiliating to have been caught red-handed, but there was too much at stake. Taking a deep breath, Kit admitted in a tremulous and halting voice, “I don’t wish to say.”

He turned away from her and went to the trunk at the foot of the bed. From the pocket of his waistcoat he produced a key and unlocked it. Facing her once more, he said, “Go ahead... I imagine you’ve searched everything else. You might as well have a go at that.”

She could feel the heated blush stealing over her, giving away her embarrassment. But it was fear that prompted her to keep her gaze lowered. It was quite possible that he might toss them out into the snow. It was quite probable that he’d cast her aside and look for another bride since she clearly couldn’t be trusted. “I shouldn’t have searched your things, my lord. I apologize.”

His reply was firm, but remarkably calm, as he said evenly, “My name is Malcolm, Katherine. Since you’ve had your hands on every article of clothing I possess, including those items ladies should not see, I think it perfectly proper that you now use my given name.”

Kit did look up then. His expression was just as unruffled as his tone. “You really aren’t angry?”

“Should I be?” he asked. “We are to be married as soon as it is possible to safely do so. All that I have will then be yours and vice versa.”

“I don’t understand you! You should be livid with me!” she protested. “Under the circumstances, most people would be positively enraged!”

“Would you like me to feign anger to make you more comfortable? I can, if you wish it. But the simple fact is, Katherine, I am a stranger to you. If you were not curious, or at the very least concerned that I am all that I appear to be, you’d be quite foolish. And you are not a foolish woman... not at all. So look. Search through every drawer, every nook, and every cranny. Be my guest. If you wish, I’ll take you to the study after and you can go through the desk there, as well.”

Kit simply deflated for lack of a better word. It was as if the wind completely left her sails and she sank to the floor. Her dust covered skirts billowed about her prompting a series of sneezes. He was standing before her, a handkerchief in his outstretched hand.

Accepting it gratefully, Kit wiped her now teary and dust-irritated eyes. “I’ve simply no idea what to make of you... on the one hand you seem wild and reckless and even dangerous! Then you do and say things that are kind and generous... and I can’t fathom any of it!”

“Can I not be all of those things?” he asked, squatting down until they were almost eye to eye. “I’ve no ulterior motives. I’ve told you everything that I can about this house, about myself—.”

“How are you Lord Hadley? What’s your relationship to the previous lord?” she interrupted.

“He was a distant cousin to my mother’s father,” Malcolm answered. “There were others heirs between Lord Hadley and my grandfather who had perished from illness or injury. I am the last of the line, diluted as it may be. Sadly, when the representatives for Mooney and Drake found him, he was too ill to travel. He passed only days afterward and the title passed to me,” he continued. “My mother passed away

when I was a boy and it was my grandfather, primarily, who raised me as my father was something of a rambler.”

“Oh.” She couldn’t even explain why it had been necessary for her to ask. It was grasping at straws, feeling desperate to know enough about him to justify marrying him, to rationalize that she was marrying him for something beyond her own mercenary reasons. In another life, she’d sworn to marry only for love. That was a luxury lost to her, along with new gowns, a warm and comforting home and the belief that life could be something other than the bleak misery she’d endured for the last three years.

“Is there anything else you care to know?”

“I’m sure there is, but I cannot think of it at the moment,” she admitted.

“Please let me know when you do.” There was a hint of amusement in his words, as if he found her uncertainty to be entertaining.

“I’m afraid I cannot be as blasé about this as you, my lord —.”

“Malcolm,” he corrected. “My name is Malcolm and you will use it.”

“Well, *Malcolm*,” Kit shot back angrily, “You’ll have to forgive me if my thinking is clouded by the enormity of what we’re undertaking!” Turning away she made for the door, her strides angry and brisk. She was running away from him, from her guilt and embarrassment and from the fear that consumed her—the fear that she was making a terrible mistake.

Kit had just reached the door when she felt a strong hand close around her arm, hauling her backward as she let out a yelp of surprise.

“If it’s a mistake I’m making,” he whispered hotly against her ear, “Then perhaps I should start now.”

CHAPTER 12

FINDING her in his chamber hadn’t angered him. Finding her rifling through his possessions he’d easily attributed to natural

curiosity. But he was honest enough to admit that it stung his pride to have her continually suggest that their postponed marriage would be a mistake. Tugging her back against him, he felt her curves settle against him, felt the soft press of her flesh. If it was a mistake, it was one that he would make eagerly.

From their first encounter in the woods, he'd wanted her. Every second in her presence only increased his desire for her. Perhaps it was her fighting spirit, the way she held onto her dignity in the face of everything else, or her willingness to sacrifice everything for her brother. She was a woman worth fighting for, and in his experience, that kind of woman always required *fighting with*.

"I know you're afraid, Katherine. Let's lay some of those fears to rest."

He didn't give her time to protest. Instead, Malcolm spun her around in his arms and pressed her against the doorframe. The kiss they'd shared the night before had been chaste. He did not intend for this one to be so. When she let out a startled gasp, he seized the opportunity. She brought her hands up, placing them flat against his chest as if in protest, but it was a weak protest. He knew from experience just how strong she was and just how wickedly she could fight.

"A kiss, Katherine, a real one... it's a small price to pay for your trespassing."

"Just as marriage is a small price to pay for breaking a window?" Her tone was angry, her words clipped and sharp, but the fire in her gaze was not about anger. It was something else entirely.

Malcolm didn't hesitate. He kissed her the way he'd wanted to the night before, with all the hunger, with the need to possess and dominate that consumed him. With her lips beneath his, parted softly, he slid his tongue into the sweet recesses, finally tasting her fully. Her lips were sweet, but it was the soft sigh that escaped her that fueled his desire.

Taking both of her hands in one of his, he pinned them to the door, leaving his other hand to roam freely over her body.

Cupping her hip, caressing the generous curve and moving up to her waist, he felt the shudder that rippled through her and savored it. Malcolm moved closer still, pressing against her fully, the softness of her breasts crushed against his chest.

Plundering her mouth, claiming it, every sound that emanated from her—a series of soft sighs and sweet, little gasps—only stoked the fire that had sprung to life in his blood. He needed her, craved her, but more than that, he needed to stoke that same fire in her. As long as Katherine was capable of thought, she'd be capable of doubt. Robbing her of that ability, even temporarily, was the only way to insure that she would go through with things and see their arrangement through to the end.

For the longest time, she remained passive, accepting his kiss but not actively returning it. When he felt the tip of her tongue slide against his own, a tentative and uncertain but completely welcome movement, he reveled in it. Deepening the kiss further, taking from her and giving back in turn, Malcolm prayed for the strength of will to walk away. He had no intention of taking her before they were wed, of giving into his urges and proving her suspicion that he was like the other men she'd known. He needed to introduce her to desire, to make her feel passion just enough to cloud her judgement. It was a dirty trick, he knew. But he felt that he had no other choice. If he let her imagination continue to run wild, she'd talk herself out of marrying him and ruin things for the both of them.

Bringing his hand up from her waist, coasting gently over her ribcage, he stroked the underside of her breast with his thumb. She didn't bolt, but he felt her stiffen slightly, but she did not push him away, nor did she pull back. It was permission granted with reservations at best.

Malcolm inched his palm upward until he could cup her breast in his hand. Her nipple hardened beneath his touch and her breath rippled out on a soft sigh. Dragging his lips from hers, he pressed a series of kisses along her jaw, down the delicate column of her throat. When he bit her neck, his teeth

scraping that tender flesh, she moaned. More telling, her back arched and her breast pressed more firmly into his palm.

Tugging at the ties of her gown, the fabric parted enough to reveal the deep valley between her breasts. He pressed a kiss there, licking and nipping at each lush, white mound with fervor.

“Stop,” she whispered.

He did. Against every urge that had risen inside him, he halted. As he moved to step back from her, she grasped the lapels of his waistcoat and held him fast. Her gaze was locked on a point beyond him, her eyes wide and a terror that he recognized only too well etching her features. It was only then, without the distraction of her sweet lips, or the softness of her skin beneath his own, that he felt the chill, as if every bit of warmth had been sucked from the room. Reluctantly, Malcolm turned, keeping his body between the spirit and Katherine. It was not the image he'd expected. It was not the same spirit he'd seen before in the house. Which meant there was more than one, and for that he uttered a curse.



Kit stood behind him, peering over his shoulder at the same ghostly figure she'd seen standing at the foot of her bed the night before. Positioned as she was in front of the window, light poured through the figure, but it was fractured, as if traveling through a prism. The chill in the air was unmistakable.

As terrifying as the presence was, how close she'd been to making a horrible mistake was even more frightening. Had the phantom not appeared, she would not have stopped him. Admitting that to herself was difficult enough, living with him in the aftermath would be even worse. As terrifying as the apparition was, in a strange way it had saved her.

Of course, she couldn't fathom his behavior. He'd placed himself directly between her and their ghostly visitor, as if he meant to protect her with his own body if need be. Could any man truly be that heroic? That willing to sacrifice? Her past

experience conjured skepticism, and yet the facts were undeniable.

“What do you want?”

He'd directed the question to the spirit. As Kit looked on, the figure turned slightly, her head coming up and her eyes narrowing as she fixed her glacial stare upon Malcolm. Her mouth opened, her lower jaw dropping unnaturally to create a gaping maw from which an otherworldly shriek escaped.

The sound reverberated off the stone walls, rattling the glass of the windows and setting the bed curtains to swaying. Unable to watch any further, terrified of what she might see, Kit grasped Malcolm's upper arms until even her shorn nails were digging into his skin. She buried her face against his shoulder, and willed the terrifying experience to end. Never in her life had she thought to come face to face with a ghost.

“She's gone,” he said softly.

“Not gone,” Kit corrected, her voice trembling for an entirely different reason. “She isn't gone at all. She's simply hiding.”

“Hiding from what?” he demanded.

“I am afraid to know that. As terrifying as she is to us, I cannot fathom ever wanting to encounter what frightens her...” Kit dared a glance at his face then as he'd turned back to face her. She noted the hardening of his jaw, the flare of anger in his eyes. But she also noted the way his arms closed around her, this time protectively. It was a strange thing to have a man put himself between her and danger. Of course, that didn't mean *he* was safe. He presented an entirely different sort of danger to her. She would need to guard her heart and her pride with him, because she feared that he could destroy both if given the opportunity.

“Tell me something, Katherine,” he said softly.

“What is that, my lord?” she asked, defaulting to formal address out of both habit and the need to create some distance between them, even if it was only in her mind.

“Had that apparition not appeared, would you have still asked me to stop?”

She wouldn't lie to him, but that didn't mean she had to admit the entire truth. She would not have. Stopping him had been the furthest thing from her mind until she'd seen their otherworldly visitor. Instead, she replied, “We will never know, my lord... but I did stop you. And I have no intention of letting you begin again. You asked me to be your wife, not your mistress. I expect to be treated with all the respect that position will allow.”

He laughed at that, laughed until he was breathless with it. When finally it slowed to occasional chuckles, he replied, “I assure you, Katherine, what just happened between us is precisely how a wife ought to be treated. That is where most men fail in marriage, especially the nobility... they think only women they have bought and paid for ought to enjoy pleasures of the flesh. That is why wives stray and husbands are discontent.”

“And have you not bought and paid for me?” she asked, hating herself for giving voice to the thought. It was how she felt, as if she'd bartered herself for the roof over her head, spirits and all.

His brow shot up, but it was no longer amusement he expressed. It was anger and for the first time, she felt the full impact of it being directed at her. Unconsciously, she took a step back, until she once again had her back pressed to the wall.

“I am not going to strike you,” he spat out between clenched teeth. “Is this truly what you think of me, or is that all the men of your past acquaintance have failed so miserably to be anything other than spoiled, sniveling brats who throw tantrums when they don't get their way?”

“I hardly know you well enough to have formed an opinion about you, my lord, one way or another. That alone should answer your question.” Her reply was mostly bravado, and false at that. She'd been struck by men before...by Ned when she'd refused him, and again in the aftermath, when he'd

threatened her if she dared ever utter the truth. Her father, as well, though it pained her more to recall that. When he'd lost everything, when his world had been crumbling about him, she'd returned home in ruin and it had been too much for him. But she could admit easily enough, that even as little as she knew him, he was nothing like any other man she'd ever known.

“I will never strike you. I will never force you. And I most assuredly have not bought and paid for you... We have a mutually beneficial arrangement, Katherine. But that's just a legality. What's between us, what happens in this room is *ours* and ours alone!”

Kit said nothing else, but there was no need. He was gone. After his last statement he stormed out, leaving her alone in the room. Not wanting to stay there for fear of the phantom returning, Kit picked up her dusty skirts and scurried after him.

CHAPTER 13

AS KIT STEPPED out into the bitter cold morning, even the weak sunlight which pierced the heavy, gray clouds was blinding. The glare from the heavy blanket of snow on the ground made it impossible to see anything so she stopped outside the door and waited for her eyes to adjust. At least the snow had finally stopped falling altogether, though for how long, one could not be sure.

Kit tugged at the sleeves of her pelisse, a vain attempt to pull them down to meet the frayed edge of her gloves and protect her skin from the chill. It failed. The dress was her best and it was nothing more than vanity that had prompted her to don it as it had short, puffed sleeves. Theirs might be an unorthodox arrangement, but in that regard, at least, she still wanted to feel like any other bride. It was also the first time she'd be facing Malcolm since their encounter in his room. She'd begged off dinner, too embarrassed to face him.

In the end, he'd sent Vera to her room bearing a tray. It was a more thoughtful gesture than she deserved. She'd had a great deal of time in the solitude of her room to reflect on everything that had transpired between them to that point, and

frankly, thinking of all that had been preferable to letting her imagination run away with her at every strange noise or creak that a drafty, old house could produce. She'd reached the startling realization that, of the two of them, he'd been the most honest, most forthcoming, and had never given her any reason to doubt his honor. On the other hand, she'd been judgmental, distant and difficult, she'd snooped through his private things and lied to him from the moment they'd met. And they were to be wed.

If there was any hope of having a life that was something other than miserable, it was time to accept him for all that he'd shown her. Instead of waiting for him to become her father with his temper and his recklessness, or Ned with his scheming and machinations, or any of the other men she'd fended off since her reputation had been destroyed, she'd have to judge him only by his own actions and not by her past.

With her eyes finally adjusted to the light, she looked up, her gaze locking on him instantly. He stood next to a team of horses that had been hitched to a sleigh. It would get them into town, but not much further she thought. It was older than the house by the looks of it.

“Is that sound?” she asked.

“We'll soon find out,” he answered as he reached into the vehicle and produced a bundle of cloth. “I had Lytton go through the attics. He managed to locate a cloak that isn't too moth eaten. It should at least keep you warm.”

“Thank you.” Kit accepted it from him. It was old and it showed signs of wear, but it had been very fine at one time and was still finer than anything she currently owned. Draping the heavy velvet over her shoulders and fastening the clasp, she ignored the musty scent of it and savored the sensual feel of the fine fabric. “It’s lovely.”

“We’ll get you new things once the weather clears,” he said, his gaze sweeping over her in a way that made her feel as if she hadn’t a stitch on. “But it will do for now. Come. We need to be there and have the service before noon. As it stands, we’ll just make it.”

Kit stepped forward and let him take her arm to help her into the conveyance. He didn’t. Instead, he closed his hands about her waist and lifted her easily into the vehicle. If it seemed that his hands lingered longer than necessary, there was naught to be said for it. Very soon he would be entitled to even further liberties and try as she might to feign reluctance, a part of her thrilled at the thought. He’d kissed her soundly only the afternoon before, touched her in ways that no one had ever been permitted to, though some had, regardless of her protests. It had been an eye opening experience for her. He’d spoken of passion and pleasure. Based on those few brief moments, she had to conclude that such a thing truly did exist, though it would be a first for her to experience it.

When he climbed up beside her and settled onto the bench seat, his hip rested against hers. Even through the layers of fabric separating them, she could feel the heat of him and it sparked something inside her that she was afraid to lay name to. He knew, of course. It was obvious from the slight smirk that he had not missed the slight indrawn breath or her tension at his nearness.

Lytton, Vera and a sullen Joseph emerged from the house. The valet and maid were accompanying them to act as witnesses. Joseph was accompanying them because he was far too young to be left unattended, especially in a house that harbored the terrifying secrets that Rosedale Hall did.

The long ride into the village was cold and silent. Between Joseph's pouting and all of the adults present knowing that there was a very real likelihood that the local vicar would turn them away, it was hardly a joyous wedding party. For Kit, it was more than that though, and she suspected that it was for Malcolm as well. Neither of them spoke, perhaps because they were both feeling the weight of the monumental thing that was about to happen between them. She'd thought during her London season, before her reputation had been ruined, that she would marry for love. Now, on the verge of marrying for convenience, for security, for the need to provide for her brother and to escape her termagant of a cousin, it felt, if not wrong, then somewhat disappointing.

As they entered the village, the few souls that were stirring looked askance at them. While other ladies could have ridden out in an open vehicle with a man and had no one spare them a glance, but everything she did was scandalous in the eyes of the villagers. Soon, she thought, it wouldn't matter. Once she was wed, there would be nothing for them to say.

"It'll all be over soon enough," he uttered softly.

"Tis hardly a joyous sentiment for one's wedding day," she replied.

His lips quirked upward then at her caustic remark. "I suppose it isn't. But I didn't mean our marriage, Katherine, I meant their whispers. Those vicious tongued vipers masquerading as the good women of Lofton will soon have naught to say."

Kit didn't respond. They'd stopped near the church yard. She watched the heavy play of muscles in his legs as he jumped down from the sleigh, his boots crunching the snow beneath his feet. He came around and helped her down, setting her easily on her feet. Lytton and Vera disembarked next and Joseph took off like a shot toward the churchyard. They took one step, and then she stopped abruptly. "Wait!"

He glanced over his shoulder at her. "Reneging?"

"Before we do this," she offered haltingly, "There are things I must tell you."

He stepped back, nodded to Lytton and the maid that they should go on ahead before he crossed his arms over his broad chest and offered a curt nod to indicate that he was listening.

“I didn’t break your window.”

He smirked. “I never thought you had. But it was admirable of you to work so very hard to protect Joseph.”

Of course, he’d known all along. Kit managed to just avoid rolling her eyes. “About the scandal surrounding us... it isn’t just my reputation or the fact that Ned ruined me so publicly.”

“Go on.”

“My father lost everything gaming... everything. That’s why we wound up living with Patrice, because the moneylenders tossed us out into the street. And—.” She paused and drew in a deep breath, hating to even utter the words. “He committed suicide. He shot himself while Joseph and I were out.”

“While you were out... and did you still have servants then, or were they all gone?”

“They’d been gone for months,” she admitted. “They’d given up on wages and simply left.”

“So he shot himself knowing that his children would return home to find him... Forgive me for saying it, Katherine, but your father was a worthless bastard. And a selfish one.”

His statement mirrored her own feelings so well that she couldn’t even speak. The truth was she had yet to mourn her father because she hadn’t been able to stop being angry with him to do so. He’d left them. When things were at their absolute worst, he’d simply left them. “Yes. He was.”

“I know most of these things,” he said. “All the gossip and rumors were repeated to me with glee. None swayed me.”

“You could marry other women... cousins or family connections to local gentry who would be thrilled at the prospect of being so closely linked to a lord. I cannot fathom

your determination to wed me when I am clearly such a poor choice!”

He shrugged, an elegant shifting of broad and powerful shoulders beneath the well fitted greatcoat he wore. “Women with a past are infinitely more interesting than their sheltered and virginal counterparts.”

Kit blinked at him in surprise, stunned once more by his extraordinarily unconventional views. But he simply turned and walked ahead toward the church. It was a calculated gesture. He would not pursue her further. She could follow him if she wished, or she could go back to her old life as a drudge in Patrice’s home, assuming she begged prettily enough to earn her cousin’s barbed version of forgiveness.

Picking up her skirts, Kit rushed forward to fall into step beside him. It was not a difficult choice. As they neared the door, their two lonely servants already waiting inside for them, he reached for her hand. Kit allowed it, feeling the warmth and strength of his fingers as they closed around her own. He terrified her in many ways, mostly because he’d given her something she couldn’t bear to lose again—hope.



Malcolm truly had no notion of whether or not she would follow. Katherine, in many regards, appeared to be her own worst enemy by creating obstacles where none existed. Yet, when she fell in step beside him, he couldn’t explain the overwhelming sense of relief that he felt when she did so. He could blame it on expediency. The time and effort of finding another woman who would meet the requirements set forth by the trustees in order to claim the estate would be daunting. But he prided himself on being honest with himself, at least. He was relieved because it was *her*, and because at some point during the brief acquaintance, he’d begun to think of her solely as his.

Entering the church, he passed Vera and Lytton who hung back and awaited instruction. He approached the vicar who stared at Katherine as if she had no right to even step foot inside the building. “Wait here while I speak to him,” he said, and indicated that she should sit in one of the empty pews.

“There’s nothing he will say that I have not heard before. He will attempt to dissuade you and will repeat every dirty, vicious bit of gossip that has ever been uttered about me.”

And she was determined to confront him while he did so, Malcolm surmised. But then he saw a spark of doubt cross her face. The worried look in her eyes gave him pause.

“He may refuse to perform the ceremony,” Katherine added. “He’d be within his right to do so, and I certainly haven’t endeared myself to him.”

Malcolm didn’t ask how or why. In his mind, it mattered little. No one, not even a man of a cloth, was above bribery. Enough coin could be ‘donated’ to ease any objections the vicar might have.

“Yes, and he’ll be less likely to maintain his refusal in the face of bribery without additional witnesses. This isn’t a consultation, Katherine. It’s a negotiation. Please, wait here.”

She sighed heavily, but relented and took a seat on one of the pews near the back of the church. Leaving her there, Malcolm walked ahead to face off against the vicar.

“We’re here to be married.”

“There’s been no reading of the banns!” The vicar protested.

Pressing Mooney for information of licenses, information the man had been most reluctant to give, had clearly been a wise course of action. “We’ll be married by a Common License, if you please. Katherine’s family situation necessitates moving quickly.”

“With child, then,” the vicar said with a sour twist to his mouth. “Are you certain it’s yours?”

“Not with child, sir, but tossed out by uncharitable relatives who are incapable of true regard for anyone other than themselves... I’d prefer to marry as quickly as possible for that reason, as Katherine has already moved into my home. Naturally, I’d be willing to make a generous contribution to the church for your trouble.”

The vicar raised his head, looked down his pinched nose, and asked imperiously, “How generous would you be, my lord?”

“Generous to the tune of fifty pounds. Now, will you perform the ceremony and issue the necessary license or shall I make my contribution to another church? Perhaps one in Birmingham?”

The vicar looked past him then, his beady eyes fixing on Katherine. In a supercilious tone, he stated, “I suppose for the sake of her wicked soul, marriage is the best possible solution... A firm handed husband will curb her willfulness and her licentious nature.”

Malcolm clenched his hands at his side. He wanted nothing more than to plant his fist in the man’s smug face. “Issue the license, perform the service, register the marriage and then you will be rewarded. In the meantime, please attempt to be courteous to my bride.”

The vicar snorted derisively. “’Tis your choice, my lord, to be as lax or stern as is needed with your new wife... It will take but a few moments to prepare the document. Assuming, that is, that you meet all the requirements!”

“And those would be?” Malcolm queried.

“Your bride is a resident of this parish, I know, as are you. But she still requires a consenting parent or guardian!”

“Katherine,” Malcolm called out, “Tell the good vicar how old you are, please.”

“I am two and twenty,” she replied.

“I am new to England, sir, but I have spoken with my solicitor at length and I understand precisely what is required by the Marriage Act of 1753, as my solicitor was kind enough to provide his guidance. Katherine does not require consent to wed and neither do I. We are here in good faith to be wed and we have even provided our own witnesses. You will comply, sir,” Malcolm stated firmly.

The vicar’s lips turned down in a sour expression. “Very well, then. I will see to the registration... You may have a seat

until I am ready, my lord.”

“Do not think to dally until past the hour of noon to avoid performing the service, vicar. I am not a man to be trifled with.”

The vicar’s brows shot up in mock offense. “That is an ugly accusation, my lord.”

“That is an accurate assessment of your plan,” Malcolm shot back. “You complete the ceremony, you complete the registry with precision and accuracy and you make damned certain that nothing about the legality of our union may ever be questioned, or you will rue the day.”

“I’ll not be threatened in my own church, my lord!”

“And I’ll not be bamboozled by a ‘godly’ man... We’ve come in good faith to be wed, prepared to pay the necessary fees and then some. You’ll do your job, vicar, and keep your judgements and interference to a minimum.”

Malcolm watched the clergyman slink off. Whether Katherine was guilty of all she’d been accused of or not, he couldn’t fathom that an entire village could so readily turn on a woman. But then they were not so far removed from the time when women had been burned for less. Public executions were still viewed as a form of entertainment. Whether it was assassination of the body or the character, clearly, the people of Lofton were clearly a bloodthirsty lot.

CHAPTER 14

KIT RECITED her vows as directed. She stood at the front of the small church and repeated what the vicar bade her to. Standing directly behind her, Vera was more nervous than she was and breathed so heavily that she feared the woman would pass out. When it was done, Malcolm slipped a ring on her finger. She hadn’t the wherewithal to wonder where he’d obtained it or to marvel that it fit her perfectly. When she was instructed to sign her name, she complied. And through all of it, she was quite numb, unable to fully reason that not only had he kept his word, but that she was returned, at least in theory, to the station she’d been born to.

They left the church just as the bells tolled the noon hour. Lytton and Vera preceded them, along with Joseph who had remained stubbornly silent and sullen throughout the proceedings. The vicar walked behind them, his mean glare a tangible weight on her back.

“Well, Lady Hadley, you are now officially above reproach,” Malcolm said, assisting her into the waiting sleigh.

Kit considered her response carefully. She’d once thought herself immune to hateful gossip, too well loved to ever have those dear to her turn her on. She’d been proven wrong. “No one is above reproach in Lofton. I’m simply of a rank that makes them think twice before giving voice to the nastiness of their thoughts.”

“Then when we reach Rosedale Hall, we shall drink to the power of my newly acquired title... and yours.”

“Before we return to Rosedale Hall, perhaps we could make a stop elsewhere,” she suggested.

“And where is that?”

“Vera’s grandmother lives close by and she may be able to provide information that would help us to make sense of what is happening.”

“Is that it... or are you trying to delay the inevitable?”

She blushed. “No, I am not, truly my lord. But it is vital that we have a better understanding of what is happening at Rosedale.”

Kit said nothing further as he climbed up beside her. He grasped the reins and said, “Vera, you’ll need to direct me to your grandmother’s home.”

Kit’s eyes widened and as she glanced back at the slack jawed maid, Vera gave a vigorous nod. “Yes, m’lord. Certainly, m’lord,” she uttered. “Through the village and the road to the left when you pass the coaching inn. It’s only a quarter mile past... a small cottage with a red door.”

They rode on in silence, once again ignoring the stares of the villagers they passed. Many of them were braving the snow

to get a look at them. There was little doubt that the vicar had already begun spreading the word of their marriage. It would probably reach Vera's grandmother before they did, Kit thought bitterly.

As they neared the small cottage, the vehicle slowed. There were children playing in the yard and Joseph asked to join them. Kit nodded her consent as her new husband assisted her down. With Vera leading the way, they entered the small cottage to find an elderly woman already pouring tea in mismatched cups. Gnarled and ancient in appearance, she still moved with surprising grace and ease.

"Drink and warm yourselves," the old woman said, gesturing towards the small benches that flanked the rough wood dining table. "After, I'll tell you what the leaves have to say."



Malcolm directed a dubious glance in Katherine's direction. Surely this nonsense wasn't what she had meant by helpful information? Fortune tellers were a dime a dozen and if they did manage to get something right, it was invariably a coincidence.

"Drink it," Katherine hissed as the old woman wandered deeper into the cottage for something.

"Surely you do not believe in this idiocy?" he demanded.

"What I believe is that this woman is incredibly poor and tea is expensive. She just served it to us and regardless of what we believe, it would be rude not to partake!"

As there was no refuting her admonishment, he relented. Sipping the musty brew, he missed America and the sweet relief of strong, black coffee. "This will come to naught."

"It may," she agreed, "But tea leaves or no tea leaves, she'll be old enough to recall the gossip about the late Lord Hadley and will be able to tell us more about him. I have the distinct feeling that your solicitor has not been particularly forthcoming about your predecessor."

The old woman returned. She glanced at Malcolm, pointed one bony finger in his direction. “Drain your cup, my lord, and come with me.”

He did as she bade, swallowing the hot liquid quickly before rising to his feet. She looked back at him over her shoulder. “Bring the cup with you.”

“Naturally,” he said, and retrieved it from the table. Following her into what might have been a small parlor, he took a seat on the rickety chair she indicated, praying that it would actually support his weight.

The woman took the cup from his hands and turned it round and round in her own, staring intently at the debris in the bottom. She made a sound as if greatly intrigued by what she saw there. If nothing else, the woman was an excellent showman.

“You’ve traveled a great deal, my lord.”

“As I’ve come here from America, that can hardly be a surprise,” he replied smoothly.

She smiled then. “I wasn’t referring to your journey to England, my lord. Your life has been a series of journeys. You’ve been a wanderer for some time, never feeling settled, never feeling at home.”

It was nothing more than a lucky guess, Malcolm thought. Still, he wouldn’t deny her accuracy on that score. “That is true enough I suppose.”

She turned back to the cup. “There are many obstacles in your path right now... your new bride is uncertain of her position, and uncertain of you. But there are others, my lord, who would see you fail in your attempts to make a home here. They are envious.”

“Who could be envious of me? I haven’t met anyone, in truth!” he said dismissively. He was a newly titled lord with an inheritance. Local gossip alone would have told her that. An envious enemy was a short leap from there.

“No, you haven’t met them. But they know who you are,” she said. “And they crave what is yours. Jealousy is an ugly

thing, my lord. Covetousness is the root of all sin and this person... there's a darkness about them that shields them from my sight. But that darkness has taken on a life of its own and it now resides within the walls you now call home."

That made him sit up and take notice. "What can you tell me of this darkness in my home?"

She placed the cup on the table and reached for his hand. Unlike fortune tellers he'd encountered in the past, she did not turn it over and trace the lines of his palms, but instead simply held it as she closed her eyes. "There are many spirits in your house... trapped in this in-between place of life and death."

"And what do they want?"

"To go through or to come back," she said softly. "But this dark being will not let them pass on and those that would come back are still hiding, waiting for an opportunity to take up residence in an unsuspecting body."

Her words chilled him because they perfectly mirrored his own fears, fears he hadn't even had the will to give voice to.

"You'll say nothing of this to Katherine," he warned. He wouldn't have some old hag terrifying her anymore than she already was.

"I will not," she agreed. "But if you mean to return to this house, I will join you there."

"You?"

"You need a cook do you not? And you need one in that house who knows how to combat what it is you're up against."

Malcolm sighed. "And what is that exactly?"

She smiled, "And that, my lord, is why I must accompany you. This is much more than simply the presence of spirits. There is dark magic afoot in your home... and to eliminate the danger these entities pose, you must first find their source of power."

Malcolm stared at the old crone for a moment, considering. Perhaps the most disconcerting thing about all of

it was that her words made sense to him. Something about the events in the house just seemed ‘off’ for lack of a better word. They were engineered in some way and he’d have it ended one way or another.

“Very well, madam. You will become our cook and our mystical advisor... I hope it is not a decision I will regret.”

“As do I, my lord... now be so good as to send your bride in. She would know her fortune too, I think.”



Kit entered the small parlor with trepidation. She wasn’t entirely certain she wanted to hear whatever it was that Vera’s grandmother would have to say to her. So much of her future was uncertain, the wisdom of so many of her recent decisions was still so unknown that at least she could cling to the illusion of having made the proper choice.

“Sit down, dear. I don’t bite,” the old woman said. “You want to know about this man you’ve married and I mean to tell you.”

Kit took the seat the older woman had indicated and placed her cup on the table. “What should I call you? Vera calls you Nan, but I haven’t the faintest notion of what your name is.”

The old woman cackled. “Tis Betsy, my dear. But if you like, though haven’t been called that since I was young girl and the men came a calling. I was a right pretty thing then. It’s been Mam since my children were born and Nan since theirs entered this world. You may call Mrs. Webb if you’re stuck on formalities since I’ll be joining you at Rosedale Hall as your cook. But if you’d like, being as your own family is gone, you may call me Nan, as well.”

She wanted to, Kit realized. She wanted to have someone who would look at her as kindly as this old woman did and stroke her hair while telling her that all of her problems would simply work themselves out. Kit smiled. “Nan it is then. Can you really tell the future just by looking into tea leaves?”

“Truth is, the leaves are just a tool to help me focus... I can tell the future with or without them. But it isn't really the future you're so worried about, is it? It's the present. You've gone and married a stranger and you want to know whether or not it is a good thing you've done.”

The old woman's sly smile as she uttered the very thought that was circling like spokes on a wheel in Kit's mind made her uncomfortable. Was the old woman that good or was she that transparent? “That is a concern, yes,” she replied primly.

“He's a good man, but I suspect that makes you even more uncomfortable,” Nan replied. “When you've come to expect the worst from men, 'tis a hard thing to be presented with the notion that not all of them are libertines.”

Was *that* it? Was her distrust of men so ingrained in her now that the idea of trusting her own husband terrified her? Possibly, Kit admitted. “But can I really trust him? Can any man really be trusted?”

“I can only tell you that in the reading of him, I did not find him false. He may have motives of his own, but he means you no harm... and if he gives you his word, he means to keep it.”

That was as good an endorsement as any, Kit thought. “Thank you for your reassurances.”

Nan picked up the cup and looked at the pattern of the leaves, a slight frown marring her features. “It'll not be smooth sailing though. You're both set in your ways, stubborn, pig headed, and even a bit hot headed. But if you learn to trust him, 'twill be easier for you both. But you must be cautious of the things at Rosedale Hall, dear. You are an obstacle in their path and that makes them a threat to you.”

“What is at Rosedale Hall?”

“We'll soon find out, my dear,” Nan said and rose to her feet. She walked over to a small cupboard and opened one of the many tiny drawers. Turning back to Kit, a piece of leather cord bearing a heavy black stone dangled from her hand.

“Onyx,” she explained as she stepped behind Kit and tied the cord around her neck. “It will offer you some protection, but be mindful not to take it off. If it isn’t on your person, it is no use to you.”

“When will you come to Rosedale Hall?” Kit asked, finding the older woman’s presence strangely reassuring.

“Tomorrow perhaps, if the weather permits. I’ll need to collect some special herbs before I make the journey.”

“How will you find them in the snow?”

The old woman offered a cagey smile. “Oh, my dear, they will find me.”

CHAPTER 15

THEY’D LEFT Nan Webb’s cottage later than they’d intended and it was nearly teatime. Lytton was driving and Vera seated on the front bench beside him, while Malcolm and Kit took the seats in the back with a sleeping Joseph tucked in beside them. He was stuffed to the gills on Nan Webb’s brown bread and freshly churned butter.

The brief reprieve from the harsh weather had ended and snow once again began to fall as they neared the estate. They had ridden in silence until they reached the gates, both of them preoccupied with what Nan had shared with them. There was an oppressiveness in the idea of returning to the Hall that weighed heavily on all of them.

“What do you know of the previous Lord Hadley?” she asked.

“Very little. He died without issue. The title passed, albeit briefly, to my grandfather and then to me.”

“He was married, was he not?” Kit demanded.

“I would assume so, but I cannot say definitively,” Malcolm replied. “What are you getting at?”

“I meant to ask Nan about all of those things, but I simply forgot. She has an odd way about her,” Kit said in a whisper before continuing, “The rumors of Rosedale Hall being haunted do not go back generations. They are fairly recent, or

so I believe... And since the spirit is clearly female, then I can only assume it must be the most recent Lady Hadley!”

The team of horses slowed then, and a heavy sigh escaped Malcolm as he stared ahead at the decaying heap of a house. “Nothing can be assumed. I have no notion of the character of this man. I know my grandfather never spoke of him or any family he’d left behind, considering himself well shed of them. Perhaps it is the late Lady Hadley, perhaps it is some poor misused servant girl... or a mistress, or a doxy he hired. I cannot say. What I can say, without qualm, is that there is more than one spirit residing within the walls of Rosedale Hall and some are infinitely more malevolent than others.”

Kit swallowed convulsively, allowing that information to sink in as the horses began to trudge forward again on the slick road. It hadn’t occurred to her that there could be more than one spirit. Her only encounters had been with the singular female spirit. She’d seen her twice since arriving at Rosedale Hall. Both instances had been utterly terrifying, but in truth, her own mind had produced the terror simply at the prospect of being in the presence of a spirit. The ghost herself had done nothing threatening.

“You’ve seen another spirit in the house aside from the one who...”, she trailed off, uncertain of whether or not it was wise to bring up what they had been doing the day before when the ghost had appeared.

“Not seen, at least not clearly. Felt. Do not ask me to explain it, for I can’t. I simply know that there are times when there is not another living soul present in the room and yet I am not alone there.”

“But you have seen something?”

He stared at the road, a muscle ticking in his jaw until finally he answered. “A dark, shadowy thing... skulking about in corners and lurking in the halls. It’s like a heavy weight on your chest when it is present. Have you not seen or felt it?”

Just once, she thought. But she understood what he meant when he said ‘felt’. There was something in that house that hovered just out of sight, just out of reach, always watching,

waiting, lurking. When she'd come to Rosedale Hall the day he'd proposed their strange arrangement, she'd seen a dark figure in the upstairs window. She'd convinced herself it had to be his manservant, but then they'd been alone that day in the house afterward, so clearly it had not been. "I'm not certain."

"You've seen it then... or you'd have just said no. This presence is dangerous, Katherine. I cannot tell you how I know that, only that I believe it to be true. And so did Mrs. Webb."

"You said we had naught to fear from the dead," she reminded him. "That it was other people who should be guarded against!"

"I was wrong."

Kit let that sink in, the ominous tone of his voice lending a gravity to his words that unsettled her. This man—tall and strong, powerful both physically and socially—was afraid. Her hand came up and touched the heavy stone dangling from the cord at her neck. Could it really offer any protection? While sitting in Nan's tiny cottage, it had seemed possible. Now, as they approached the estate, doubt was creeping in.

"Spirits can't actually harm us... we simply have to figure out what it is that they want! Once we've given it to them, then they'll go away," she reasoned.

"And what if what they want is to be alive?" he asked.

It was a valid question and one that left her stumped for an answer. There was nothing within their power to do about that. "The next time the blonde woman appears, I mean to ask her. I do not feel that she is malevolent."

"You didn't feel that Cavendish was either," he pointed out.

Kit drew back as if she'd been struck. He didn't know. No one knew the full extent of what Ned had done, of what he'd put her through. To have him toss that accusation so casually at her stung. Perhaps because he was the first person in a very long time to treat her as something other than the cast

off lover and reckless idiot who'd ruined her reputation and her life in pursuit of a man who claimed not to want her.

He sighed again. "I didn't mean it that way... I didn't mean to imply that it was your fault. Only to say that sometimes it is possible for people, living or dead, to conceal their true nature from us."

"I think you did mean it that way, my lord. You talk a pretty piece about not holding my past over my head, but you do and you have from the moment we met. You used it and my circumstances to blackmail me into marrying you. I may have had no choice in the matter, either financially or socially if I had any hope of being anything other than a drudge in my cousin's home, but I'll not lie to myself about it and neither should you. Were I not ruined, I would not be sitting here next to you... I would not be married to a man who has so little care for those who have wronged me in the past that he would make it seem I were somehow responsible for the damage they inflicted!"

There was no chance for him to respond. During their heated exchange, the horses had continued their plodding pace up the drive until they halted of their own volition before the doors. As Lytton secured the reins, Kit jumped down from the sleigh, slipping a bit in the snow and ice. Malcolm reached down to steady her from within the vehicle, but she pushed his hands away. "I require no assistance from you!"

"You'll break your fool neck!"

"And what concern is that of yours? I'm apparently too much of a dolt to know a villain when I see one... and since I've wed you, I'm inclined to agree with your assessment at the moment!" She snapped the last word and with a swish of her borrowed cloak, marched toward the house.



Malcolm watched her stalk away, her anger evident in the exaggerated sway of her hips as she stomped off at a pace that made it more than evident she wished to be anywhere he was not. He hadn't meant to offend her, and if she were a

reasonable woman, if such a thing existed, she'd understand that.

Another thought entered his mind, perhaps she had chosen to take offense, perhaps she wished to fight with him to avoid their wedding night. That wasn't going to happen. It couldn't. If he failed to convince Mooney and Drake that the marriage was real, and they'd been quite clear that the only evidence they'd be willing to accept was the actual or impending birth of an heir, he was still at risk to lose everything.

Seeing to the horses in the bitter cold, did not improve his temper. She was hotheaded, foul tempered, and so suspicious minded that everything he said or did could be twisted by her. He didn't mean to begin his marriage by walking on eggshells or he'd be doing so for the rest of his days.

Once the animals were taken care of, he made the cold trek back to the house from the stables. Like any woman, in a fit of temper, she'd have gone to her room. Taking the stairs two at a time, he meant to confront her and be done with it. As he neared the top of the stairs, he heard a commotion not from her room but from his.

Tossing the door wide, he stepped inside to see Lytton arranging Katherine's meager possessions in the wardrobe next to his own. He also saw Katherine protesting angrily.

"There is no need for his lordship and I to share a room, Lytton. That isn't how it's done amongst *the ton*. Surely, you're aware of that!" Katherine said, clearly striving for a calmer tone than she'd used with him.

"I do understand, my lady, but given the limited staffing we have here at this time and the fact that chopping wood for the fires has fallen upon his lordship, it seems only prudent to use as few rooms as possible," Lytton replied, unflappable as always.

"But I'd be sharing my room with Vera. Where will she be?"

“I’ve given Miss Webb a room below stairs, just off the kitchen. It’ll be warmed by the kitchen fires and will be quite cozy without using nearly as much wood... as for young Master Joseph, he’s staying with me for the moment. As a newly married couple, you’ll be wanting privacy and a boy his age shouldn’t be wandering alone in a house such as this.”

Malcolm simply leaned against the doorframe, his anger deflating in the face of his valet’s impeccable handling of the situation. Katherine would remain in his chamber and they’d move forward with their farce of a marriage regardless of any misgivings either of them had. He’d simply have to explain to her what was at stake. Having been forced into poverty, she’d know the value of money better than anyone.

Watching his new bride being utterly confounded by his valet, he waited patiently until Lytton had finished his task and excused himself from the room.

“Are you here to claim your husbandly rights?” she demanded as soon as the door had closed.

“Are you so eager to complete your wifely duties, then?” he shot back. Once again, with little more than opening her mouth, she’d goaded him into being defensive and petty. It irritated him just how easily she could get beneath his skin.

“I’m not eager, my lord, but I’d just as soon not have it hanging over my head like Damocles’ sword!”

“What a flattering comparison... let’s hope I can live up to it,” he snarked under his breath. Her frown of confusion reminded him once again that while she was not a virgin, his bride was more innocent than her reputation painted her to be.

“Well?” she demanded.

Malcolm leaned his head back against the wall and for a brief moment considered repetitively pounding it against the stone. Finally, when he’d regained his composure, and didn’t want to alternately laugh at or throttle her, he spoke. “That isn’t precisely how it works... or at the very least it shouldn’t be. I’ve no intention of taking you to bed when we’re incapable of doing anything more than sniping at one another.”

Her chin came up and she looked ready and eager to lob another volley in his direction.

“We are strangers to one another,” he continued, preventing the deployment of her barbs, “And we will naturally, in the course of getting to know one another, occasionally be at odds. If it were within my power to postpone the consummation of our marriage until you felt more comfortable with me—.”

“Until we are more comfortable with one another you mean,” she corrected.

“No. I do not mean that at all. I’d have gladly consummated our union in advance of the union of itself. Either yesterday afternoon, the night before in the library, or any other time I have been in your presence... except when you’re kicking me, of course. That does tend to cool one’s ardor.”

She didn’t speak, but her lips did quirk and a sound escaped her that might have been a muffled giggle. Instead, she gave a curt nod as if he should continue.

“Waiting is a luxury that we do not have, Katherine... You married me to have financial security. I married you to obtain the full benefit of my inheritance, not simply the estate but the funds to put it right. The solicitors at Mooney & Drake have stated that the only thing they will consider absolute proof of the validity of our union is an heir.”

Malcolm studied her carefully as she sank down onto the small trunk at the foot of the bed. Her brow furrowed and she appeared to be deep in thought. Finally, she uttered. “I see. In essence then, we have bought and paid for one another... We are both whores.”

He shrugged. “I have been called worse. I have been guilty of worse.”

“And is there a time frame with in which we must make our happy announcement?”

“No,” Malcolm replied softly. “But I have a limited amount of funds... enough to see you clothed properly and to

hire servants to put the house to rights as best as possible. I could maintain that for six months... possibly a year. But after that time, we'd be begging from Peter to pay Paul."

"So you're suggesting we make every attempt possible to procreate and that we should do so as soon as possible."

He shrugged again. "I'm simply making you aware of the full extent of our situation. What you choose to do about it is entirely up to you... Naturally, I'd hate to have gone to such lengths to procure my inheritance only to lose it now because you and I cannot stop snapping at one another."

"Thank you for keeping me informed, my lord," she said stiffly.

Malcolm stood up from his slouched position against the wall. "I'll leave you to consider your options. You have a great deal to think about. If you elect to go forward with things, you may let me know at dinner tonight."

"There is no need for further consideration, my lord. The decision is a simple one, really... I cannot go back to my cousin's home and we cannot possibly begin to repair this one without adequate funds. I've just escaped one impoverished existence in drudgery. I'll not willfully put myself into another."

"I see. Then I will see you tonight."

"If it's all the same to you, my lord, I don't wish to wait. The longer I have to think of it, the worse my imaginings make it... so if we could just get on with it—."

Malcolm didn't need to be asked twice.

CHAPTER 16

KIT DIDN'T KNOW PRECISELY what she'd expected from him. Her only experience with carnal matters was limited to the horrific fumbling of Ned Cavendish and the interrupted but artful seduction he'd introduced her to the day before. To have him cross the distance between them in two long strides and simply scoop her up in his arms was not at all what she'd anticipated, if in fact, she'd had the sense to anticipate anything at all.

He held her firmly, his arms tight around her, crushed to him. And yet she could have pushed him away. She *knew* that. It was an intrinsic thing, that faith in him. Perhaps because he'd allowed it before, perhaps because against all odds, she'd somehow learned to judge the true nature of a man. If she protested, if she gave even a hint that she was unwilling, he would let her go.

Of course, that did not make her an active participant. He kissed her, his lips moving on hers as they had before—firm, yet gentle, demanding and tantalizing all at once. She wanted to kiss him back, in spite of everything. Yet, uncertainty plagued her. She hadn't the faintest clue what to do, so she simply permitted his kissing of her and savored the exquisite sensations that he created.

The texture of his lips against hers, the gentle glide of his tongue along the seam of her lips, the rough rasp of his whiskers against her skin were scintillating. And all of that was juxtaposed against the hard press of his chest and the way his hands cupped over the curve of her waist, his fingers splaying to grip her hips with a proprietary confidence that both thrilled and frightened her.

He pulled back from her. "It helps if you kiss me back."

"It helps if one knows how," Kit replied sharply.

He didn't laugh at her, but there was a slight quirk to his lips as he said, "It's simple enough... if you like what I am doing to you, do it in return."

Uncertain of how to respond to that, Kit gave a curt nod and waited for him to begin again. But it wasn't her lips he kissed that time. Instead, he pressed his mouth against the column of her throat, trailing soft kisses along the tender skin there. The feel of his whiskers rasping over her flesh, the occasional fleeting touch of his tongue, made her shiver. But it was the heat that built inside her, warmth burgeoning within her and growing until she felt she'd literally catch fire from it; that left her stunned. As he continued to explore her with his mouth, those wicked lips tracing a path over her collarbone, back up her neck and then to the shell of her ear, she found

that she couldn't breathe, much less articulate in intelligible speech what she was feeling. It overwhelmed her. It consumed her. And in some ways, it frightened her—not him, and not what he was doing, but what he could make her feel, that within a matter of seconds, her primal response to him had rendered her senseless.

As his hands moved from her waist, up to her breasts, her own eagerness shocked her. She wanted him to touch her, she wanted to feel what she had the day before and so much more. And then she wrapped her arms around him, holding him closer, savoring the heat of him, the hardness of his body against hers. Her hands slid over his shoulders, down his back, and it was so different than her expectation. It was all firm muscle, unyielding beneath her touch. Looking at him, it was evident that he had the body of a man who had labored. He was not the soft, spoiled noblemen and gentry of her earlier life. He was something else altogether.

His hands closed over her breasts, his touch gentle as he caressed her through the layers of cloth separating them. Even then, she could feel her nipples hardening to taut peaks, straining against his palms. Perhaps she *was* the wanton the good people of Lofton had accused her of being. When he tugged the bodice of her dress down, until only her shift shielded her breasts from his gaze, she didn't try to stop him. It was the furthest thing from her mind in fact. But it was the kisses he'd been raining upon her neck, kisses that moved perceptibly lower, that sparked alarm.

As his mouth closed over one hardened peak, tugging gently through the thin veil of cloth, any thought of protest vanished. The sensation was exquisite, but even that term was too mild a word for it. She hadn't the ability to describe what she felt in that moment. It was like lightning, arcing and splitting the sky, but it happened within her. Powerful. Compelling. She was incapable of doing anything other than riding out the storm. Kit tilted her head back, welcoming his touch, eager for all that he had to show her.



She was painfully innocent. Whatever had occurred in her past, the man involved had clearly been a clod. That thought alone kept him from rushing. He wanted her to know pleasure, but more than that, he wanted her to know that he would be the man to provide it. It was archaic, even animalistic, the need he felt to claim her. Not just to have her, but to possess her fully, for her to be his in every way that a woman could be. Not because he took her, but because she gave herself to him.

With one hand, he loosened the ties of her dress, never lifting his head from the lush bounty of her breasts. The fabric slipped down, binding her arms and snagging over the generous curve of her hips. It took little coaxing to remove it entirely. Her petticoat followed and then she was clad only in her chemise and stays and one woefully inadequate pair of stockings.

“Your cousin should be horsewhipped for allowing a relation, no matter how poor, to be clad in such sad garments.”

She frowned at him, puzzled. “Why on earth would you think to mention Patrice at a time like this?”

He chuckled in response. “You make an excellent point... our mouths can be put to much better use than discussing your cousin.” Malcolm lifted her up, holding her close to his chest as he moved toward the bed. He wanted to go slowly, to give her the kind of pleasure that he knew she was capable of, but he only had a finite amount of patience. The need to feel her silken thighs locked about him, to feel the welcoming heat of her body taking him in, was almost impossible to resist.

When she was on the bed beneath him, he lifted himself onto his elbows and untied the laces of her stays, parting the constricting garment. He could see the darkened circles of her nipples through the thin fabric of her chemise. The erotic temptation she presented would not be denied. Dipping his head, he captured one nipple between his lips, laving it gently with his tongue. She arched beneath him, her head falling back and her back bowing up to offer him freer access to the flesh he craved.

His other hand moved beneath her chemise, sliding up her leg, over her knee and then tracing a deliberate path up her inner thigh. Her legs parted, welcoming him to continue his exploration. When his fingertips brushed against the dark curls at the juncture of her thighs, she stiffened, clearly uncertain.

“I will stop... if you ask me to, I will,” he promised.

She gave a quick nod and then once again eased beneath him, letting him continue her introduction to passion. Malcolm didn't allow his relief at her acquiescence to show. He would stop, of course, but the cost would be great.

Skimming his hand once more over her soft curls, he traced the seam of her sex with the pads of his fingers, savoring the warmth and the wetness that greeted him. Sliding one finger inside her, he found the small bundle of nerves that would bring her the most pleasure and stroked it gently.

She let out a startled cry, clearly stunned by the sensation, but made no move to stop him. Her hips arched upward, seeking more, inviting him to give and take freely. So he did. He stroked her flesh expertly, watching the tension build inside her, listening to her cries and moans as they grew more ardent, more primal. She was on the verge of forgetting herself entirely, of completely giving in to the demands of her body and his. Again and again, he circled that small bud until she was gasping and shivering beneath him.

Once more pressing his mouth to her breasts, he toyed with one taut nipple and then the other, before finally closing his teeth over one. The bite was gentle, but effective. Her hips bucked against his hand as a keening cry as her body shuddered violently and then stilled. Her breathing was ragged, her eyes heavy lidded and her skin flushed from pleasure.

Rather than give her time to think and once again put them at odds, Malcolm moved between her parted thighs and with one hand, freed the fall of his breeches. Levering himself onto his elbows, he guided himself to her entrance. When no protest came, he nudged forward, parting the slick folds and easing himself inside her. As her flesh clenched tightly around

him, Malcolm closed his eyes and struggled for the control he prided himself on. But it was the small obstacle in his path and her sharp cry of pain that managed to break through the haze of desire.

“Tell me again what happened with Ned Cavendish,” he said softly.

“What?”

“It’s very important, Katherine. Tell me, please.”

She frowned at him, her consternation obvious. “I don’t know precisely.”

“How is that possible?”

“He was tearing at my clothes, and I was attempting to fend him off... We fell to the ground on the terrace and I struck my head. It all becomes rather a jumble after that. Why is any of this important? You knew beforehand that I wasn’t a virgin!”

“I believed you were not... as did you. It appears we were both very much mistaken,” he explained.



Kit blinked at him in shock. “That can’t be. It cannot be!”

“It is, Katherine,” he said firmly. “There are men who—hell and damnation, this is difficult to explain without you understanding it all more to begin with!”

He didn’t need to explain. In the aftermath of her ruin, people, specifically the maids after she’d come to reside in her cousin’s home, had been far less careful with what they would say in front of her. Recalling the wetness she’d felt on her thighs after she’d managed to rouse herself from the terrace floor, it appeared that Ned had climaxed prematurely. One of the maids had been giggling about a young and inexperienced footman who had done the same. As for her own aches and pains in the aftermath, those could well have been the result of his rough handling of her.

“I think I can guess,” she said. “So, what do we do now?”

He didn't answer her with words. Instead he pressed his lips against the hollow of her throat, kissing her there softly, his tongue stroking her skin gently until the same languid heat she'd known earlier began to return. As the heat built, her body softened, opened for him, and welcomed him in. Every kiss, every caress, allowed him to sink deeper into her until it became impossible to tell where his body ended and hers began. It was an alien sensation, to be filled with him so, to have the now familiar tension coiling inside her. But while she recognized that tension, there was an edge to it now that had not been present before, a compulsive element that prompted her to move beneath him, to undulate her hips against his.

It was then, in that precise moment, that she understood what he'd meant when he said there was pleasure to be had between them. He moved his hips counter to hers, driving even deeper, filling her more completely. As she closed her eyes at the exquisite sensation, she could see lights and sparks behind her eyelids.

Instinct took over for her entirely, her mind lost to the magic he created. It swept her away as their bodies moved together, straining in the dimness of their bedchamber. She moaned, a sound so animalistic that it would have shocked her had she the wits to process it. His hands roamed her body as he continued to thrust into her. The hard, rigid length of him filled her again and again

Her breathing became more ragged, punctuated by soft gasps and cries. The muscles of her thighs quivered and her belly trembled as the tension in her ratcheted ever higher. He dipped his head, closing his mouth over one nipple, sucking deeply as his teeth grazed the sensitive flesh. And then the tension within her simply snapped, shattered into a million glittering pieces as her body arched beneath his and she shuddered with the overwhelming sensation of release. Every rhythmic pulse of her inner muscles brought even more pleasure, drawing out the overwhelming sensation. And then she felt him stiffen against her, thrusting deep one last time, and then the hot rush as he spilled himself inside her.

It wasn't love. It wasn't the romance she'd wanted as a girl. But she'd given her virginity, if not her innocence, to her husband and in turn he'd given her pleasure she hadn't even known existed, much less hoped for. In so doing, he'd wiped away the lies and shame that Ned Cavendish had foisted upon her.



The house was luxuriously appointed. Every objet d'art, every decorative urn or figurine, every piece of furniture had been chosen to impress, to preen. The house itself was like a peacock spreading its feathers for any who was lucky enough to be invited inside. But it was quiet that night, empty save for one servant and her mistress. All of the other servants were gone.

Most assumed that when their mistress sent them away it was so that she could entertain a lover. Little did they know, the truth was infinitely more salacious and far more dangerous than any high society tryst.

She stepped into the attic of the house, which was just as pristine as any other room. There was no dust to gather, no cobwebs to brush her hair. There was a table filled with jars and bottles, some of them housing things both grotesque and fascinating. Her trusted maidservant lit the candelabra and then moved to the center of the room where she immediately rolled back the carpet to reveal a large circle drawn on the floor, marked it various points with ancient symbols.

When the mark was completely revealed, she loosened the ties of her silken robe and let it fall to the floor. Naked, her body perfect in every way, she stepped forward into the center of that wicked drawing and immediately moaned. It was infused with power, layers upon layers of magic had been wrought there and each had left a trace of energy behind. The maid moved quickly, bringing a large mirror over to the circle and placing it directly opposite her.

Shivering at the sensation of power as it moved over her naked flesh, she sank to her knees and raised her hands in supplication. Behind her, the maid retrieved the tray of

prepared items and placed them within reach before stepping well back from the spectacle that would unfold.

From the tray, she took small cage holding a single bird and slipped her hand inside it. When she could feel its tiny heart beating against her palm, she lifted the intricately carved hat pin and pierced its small body, allowing the blood to drain out into the circle. It smeared over her skin, down her arm and onto the silver cuff she wore at her wrist, marked with the same symbols that marked the circle she commanded. The blood trickled down her arm to the floor. As those rivulets ran along the boards, they defied gravity and all reason. The natural sway of the wood had no force upon them. Those drops of ruby liquid were pulled by some unseen force to the black marks upon the floor that formed the circle, and then along it towards the mirror that now danced and shimmered.

“With this blood, I call upon the dark one... the dark one linked to my bloodline! Hear me!” she called out.

The windows rattled as if a great wind blew from within the room. The flames flickered and danced, each one sparking higher rather than going out.

“Come to me!” she cried. “Hear my call and heed my will!”

The voice, when it answered came not from her or even from within the room, but from deep inside the mirror.

“Who are you to command me?” the question was uttered in a soft growl, but one that sounded so far from human the maid crossed herself. Immediately, the dark spirit that bore her mistress’ reflection turned its head independently of the woman whose face it bore and hissed in her direction. “Be gone!”

The maid scurried away, a soft keening wail echoing behind her.

“I command you because I am part of your line,” she replied to the spirit. “I may not bear the name, but I have the blood and the gifts! How else would you be here?”

Her own reflection smirked back at her, the features moving and shimmering in a way that could not possibly be human. “Any novice witch can conjure a demon!”

“But you aren’t a demon,” she said. “You’re something else... something older than the infantile Christian faith and the devils and demons they preach of. You were born with time itself and your power has flowed through the veins of every man and woman in this family who had the courage to call upon you!”

A sly smile curved the face in the mirror, but as the lips parted, they revealed black, sharpened teeth. “Aren’t you a clever little witch! What do you want of me? And be mindful, I’ve no need of you, child. The blood of your family is once again residing within my walls.”

“But he lacks my power and he is willful. He will never do as you bid and will fight you every step of the way as you guide him! I will eagerly take you inside me,” she said. “I will give myself to you completely... all I ask is that the land and the wealth you’ve bestowed on those who bear the family name be mine to claim.”

“Your laws prohibit it,” the dark one answered. “Not even I can sway that!”

“You won’t have to,” she replied. “All you need to do is terrify him enough that he’ll leave... and terrify his bride enough that she will abandon him within those walls. I will take care of everything else. Then I will be yours.” She rose to her feet, displaying the perfect body, “And what a form you would have!”

The dark one smiled again, and the eyes that looked so like her own became dense black pools with no light visible in them. “There is an easier way. Would you not be his wife in her stead? Would you not take all that she has?”

The woman swayed into the seductive voice. “Yes! Yes!”

“We will not get rid of him at all... not yet. But we will be rid of her! And your husband, as well. Will you mourn for him, my pet?” the spirit asked.

She made a moue of distaste in response. "I never wanted him. I never loved him. And now, I no longer need him."

"Then you will gift him to me. Take him to the well and put him with the others."

"I cannot... not yet. When the snow clears, I will convince him to go back to Lofton again, and in Lofton he will stay," she vowed.

"Do not think to play me, child! If you are false with me, or if you fail to complete all that you vow, you will suffer for it!"

She bowed her head. "I would never betray you. Not ever. Please!"

"I will do as you ask... but if you fail me in anyway, or think to renege, I will wreak such pain upon you that you will pray for the release of death!"

In an instant, the dark spirit had vanished from the mirror and she collapsed onto the floor, weak with the rush of magic that infused her.

CHAPTER 17

THE ROOM WAS COMPLETELY dark when Malcolm awoke. It was also frigid. They'd slept so soundly that he'd allowed the fire to go out. Neither of them had eaten, either. Not at teatime or supper, so as he rose from the bed, his stomach rumbled with hunger.

Crossing to the mantle, he fumbled for the tinder box before dropping to a crouch. He added several logs and kindling, but before he even struck the match, he knew something was terribly wrong. He felt it, the cold that went so much deeper than simply the chilled air in the room. This cold reached inside of him, digging into his flesh and bones. It burrowed in until he could feel it becoming a part of him.

The darkness in the room seemed to grow, becoming impenetrable. Thick and swampy, it made it hard for him to breathe, hard to see, hard to do anything but give into it.

You belong with us.

The whisper was not audible. It hadn't been spoken at all. Instead, it generated from that place inside himself where that cold blackness had taken root. Paralyzed with fear, paralyzed by the terror that those words induced and the bone deep conviction that they were true, he hovered on the verge of giving in to it. As the darkness swirled about him, thick and eddying in a way that muddled his senses and set him off balance, Malcolm was prepared to let it take him.

“Malcolm?”

The soft voice in the darkness, the questioning concern so evident in that single word, brought him back from that abyss. Sick from it as if he'd been tossed about on a pitching sea, he sank to his knees on the rug there and took in great shuddering breaths.

“Malcolm, what is it? Are you ill?” she asked.

He could hear the bed clothes rustling as she started to get up. “I'm fine, Katherine. Stay there, please. I'm only building up the fire.”

“I would hardly classify your breathing as fine! You sound as if you just charged up a mountain!”

“A tickle in my throat is all... the dust, I think,” he lied. “I am fine. I swear. Lie back and I'll join you again momentarily.”

“Let me help you,” she insisted.

“No!” he snapped, his tone harsh. Striving for a more neutral tone, he added, “The fire has gone out and the floor is like ice. It's senseless for us both to freeze. Stay in bed.”

The truth was that he didn't want her to see him. The gooseflesh on his skin had nothing to do with the temperature of the room, and everything to do with what he'd just felt. It wasn't simply what he'd felt; it had been, for lack of a better word, an invasion. Whatever entity had taken up residence in Rosedale Hall had, in that moment, attempted to take up residence in *him*. As much as it pained him to admit such a thing, he'd been powerless against it. Had it not been for Katherine calling out to him, he couldn't imagine what might

have happened. With a sheen of cold sweat on his skin, and his hands shaking, he continued with the task of lighting the fire.

“I’m going to the kitchen to get us something to eat,” he said, as he rose to his full height. He still didn’t look at her because he knew that nothing short of stark terror would be etched on his features. The last thing he wanted was to burden her with his fears or with the shaking, sweating aftermath of his most recent paranormal encounter. The errand of retrieving some form of sustenance for them would allow him the reprieve he needed to regain his composure.

“I can come with you,” she offered.

“I’d prefer you wait here... just as you are—naked and in my bed,” he added. “I’ll return in just a few moments.”



Kit frowned into the darkness as he disappeared into the hallway. The curtains were drawn completely and there was no light at all in the room save for the dim glow from the hearth which seemed to only deepen the shadows that gathered in the corners of the room. Had it not been for squeaky hinges of the door, she might not have even known he’d gone to be honest. The room was unnaturally quiet. The entire house was. With the heavy snow piled up outside, the quiet was, in fact, absolute.

Immediately, she missed his presence. It wasn’t attachment or clinginess, but self preservation. There in the darkness, in that impenetrable quiet that was as still as the grave, she felt incredibly vulnerable and exposed.

The afternoon had been idyllic. He’d made love to her, and afterward, they had stayed in bed. She’d asked questions and he’d answered every one of them, telling her about his life in America, about growing up in such a wild and untamed place. He hadn’t shied away from displaying his faults either. All of his past had been laid bare, hers for the asking. In the entirety of her life, she’d never known anyone so willing to tell even the darkest of secrets or who would so willingly paint himself in an unflattering light for the sake of uttering truth. Yet he had. And for the first time, there in their darkened

bedchamber just now, he'd lied to her and she could not fathom why.

Kit shivered and rubbed her hands over her upper arms as she sat up in bed and awaited his return. He'd been afraid. She'd heard it in his voice, but the question remained *of what?*

The air stirred around her. Dread welled up inside her. Compelled to do so even against her own will, Kit looked over her shoulder into the farthest corner of the room. It also happened to be the darkest. Black as pitch, she could see nothing. And yet, she was never more certain of anything in her life than she was of the fact that there was something there. Hiding, lurking in those shadowy recesses, watching and waiting for a chance to pounce.

Fear blossomed, panic skirting the edges of her mind. She struggled not to let it take over. Her encounters with apparition in white had been frightening, but this was something else altogether. He'd warned her about it. Malcolm had told her just that morning of the other presence in the house. But of course, she'd already been aware of it. It was evident in her reluctance to be alone in the house, to carefully scan each and every room before she entered for fear that something would be waiting for her.

Malcolm's dressing gown was at the foot of the bed. Kit reached for it, shrugging into it while never taking her eyes off that darkened corner. There was a certainty within her that if she turned her back on whatever was there, she'd regret it. With the garment swallowing her, inches of it dragging along the floor, Kit eased from the bed and backed toward the door, never taking her eyes off the shifting shadows. The closer she moved toward the door, the thicker those shadows became, swirling and eddying like a living thing.

Groping behind her for the door handle. When her fingers closed around it, she turned the handle, tugging it forcefully but nothing happened. Panic began to take over as the door remained firmly closed. She tugged again and again, tears threatening. The shadows surged forward, thick and dark, striking out at her like a serpent.

It was instinct more than anything that prompted Kit to grab the Onyx stone around her neck and lift it up. The shadow creature didn't retreat. It turned in itself until it vanished, leaving her staring into nothing more than a dimly lit corner devoid of any threat. Terrified, Kit grappled behind her for the door handle once more. It gave instantly beneath her hand and she tumbled out into the hallway. Rubbing her bruised hip with one hand, she slammed the bedroom door with the other, putting at least one barrier between herself and whatever was in that room.

Struggling to her feet, Kit secured Malcolm's dressing gown more tightly about her and made her way toward the stairs. It was dark, but the atmosphere in the corridor was quite different from that inside the bedchamber. It lacked the heavy and oppressive feeling. Taking a deep shuddering breath as she reached the stairs without incident, Kit grasped the excess fabric of the dressing gown and carefully made her way down to the main floor. By the time she reached the bottom of the stairs, she was shivering with the cold, but returning to their chamber alone, if at all, was not an option.

As she neared the kitchen, she could hear the faint sounds of movement from within. Opening the door, she found Malcolm there slicing ham and adding it to the plate of cheese and bread he'd already prepared. He looked up at her in surprise.

"What are you doing down here?" he asked with a frown.

"Escaping the same thing that sent you running from our chamber like a scalded dog," she said softly.

He stopped and looked up at her sharply. "You saw it?"

"I saw something dark and indistinct... but I felt it. I felt threatened. And then, when I tried to leave the room—." She stopped abruptly, uncertain of how to even explain what had happened.

"Tell me," he urged.

"It came at me...those shadows lifted themselves away from the wall like a living thing and struck out at me. Had it

not been for the talisman that Nan gave me, I cannot say what would have happened.”

“The talisman?”

She lifted the small black onyx stone which felt surprisingly warm in her hand. “She said it would protect me, and that I should never remove it. So, I held it up and it...the shadows... just vanished before my eyes. Afterward, when I tried the door, it opened and so I left,” she admitted.

He sighed. “I shouldn’t have left you there alone, but I didn’t think it would—well, I didn’t think it would focus on you.”

“It,” she said softly. “The one apparition is clearly that of a woman. Yet this thing, we only refer to as *it*. There’s no sense of gender, no sense of any sort of human connection at all. So what is it?”

“Evil is my best guess,” he answered. “My grandfather trapped furs in New York and had friends amongst the Mohican Indian tribe. They told stories about a creature—a demon. Dark, destructive, possessive. Those who maintained the old beliefs called it Atlantow, but those who’d adopted the Christian faith called it the devil. Regardless, the way they described both is quite similar to what I think is residing in this house.”

“*The devil?*” she asked.

“What else would you call it?” he demanded.

With no response to that, Kit closed her mouth. “If it is the devil, then what do we do about it?”

He grimaced. “Our local vicar will not be a help that much is certain. But there is a Catholic church in Birmingham. Perhaps they have a priest who could be persuaded to offer his assistance?”

Kit gaped at him in shock. “Catholics? You cannot be serious!”

He shrugged and returned to his task of preparing a simple repast for them. “I’m sorry, but if the Church of

England won't help us, then perhaps the Roman Church will. If that offends your Anglican sensibilities, I'm sorry."

It didn't offend her, but it was quite shocking to consider. Reaching out to the Roman Church was just something that she would never have considered. "Perhaps Nan will have more information to share. I can't help but think this must be connected in some way to the previous Lord Hadley. And there must be some reason why your grandfather left here and never once spoke to you of your remaining relatives."

Malcolm shrugged. He'd always had the sense from his grandfather that his life in England was something he did not ever wish to speak of at all. Perhaps he now knew why.

He nodded. "We will consult with Nan and see what she knows of the history here and what she can do to combat whatever has taken up residence within these walls. In the meantime, do you wish to return upstairs?"

"Do we have another option?"

"There's the library and a rather plush rug before the hearth," he offered.

At that point, she'd have gladly slept outside in the snow. "If it's just the same to you, I'd prefer not to return upstairs until the bright light of day."

CHAPTER 18

IT HAD BEEN two days since they'd both run from their chamber in the dark of night. For two nights, they'd slept in his study on a pallet of thick blankets on the floor. Crossing to the window, Kit looked out over the grounds. The snow remained, though it was beginning to melt and turning a dingy brown in the process.

The roads were barely passable still, and they were stuck with no more information than they'd had to begin with. Nan had not yet arrived and their trip to Birmingham to consult with a priest was delayed indefinitely. Whatever was occurring within the walls of Rosedale Hall was weighing heavily on all of them, but especially on her husband. While he was both

passionate and attentive at night, during the day, he had become distant, cold even.

A noise from behind her caught her attention. Kit looked back to see Joseph sitting at the table, kicking the legs of the chair he sat in and staring into space rather than reading the book before him.

“Joseph,” she admonished softly. “Once you’ve finished your reading, you can play! Don’t dawdle so.”

“I don’t want to read this! It’s boring,” he protested.

Undoubtedly, it *was* boring. She was not a tutor and he needed much more instruction than she was capable of providing. But until one could be obtained or until he could be enrolled in school, reading books under her supervision was the best they could do. “Four pages, Joseph, and then you may go.”

“Where? I can’t play outside. I can’t play inside unless it’s down here and everyone yells at me not to make noise, not to run, not to do this or that or anything else!”

At seven years old, running and mucking about were the best parts of life and he was being denied all of them. “If you finish your reading, I’ll put on my boots and we’ll walk out to the stables where you can see the horses. Fair enough?”

“*He’s* out there,” Joseph said with a sneer that perfectly revealed his disdain for her husband.

“Yes, and so are the horses, and there might be a cat or dog or two. Do not cut off your nose to spite your face, Joseph. You wanted to get out of the house and I’m offering to take you,” she chided softly. “Why do you dislike him so?”

“We’re no better off here than we were at Cousin Patrice’s! We’ll just be servants in this house same as we were in hers!”

Kit sighed and leaned back against the window sill. “Servants have been hired, Joseph, but the weather has prevented them from arriving on time... I’m sure they will be here in a matter of days. In the meantime, we will continue to fend for ourselves... and while I don’t expect you to work in

the stables as you did at Patrice's, it would be the right and honorable thing to do to offer your assistance to Lord Hadley!"

"Fine," he said, and slammed the book closed with such force that it bounced off the table and onto the rug.

"Pick that up, Joseph, and stop behaving like such a—." Kit stopped herself from saying something hurtful, but only just. Between the lack of sleep, being constantly on edge, and being trapped in a house that made her feel threatened at every turn, her temper was short and so was his. He was only a boy and he'd been cooped up for days.

He rose from his chair and picked the book up from the floor, placing it on the table. He looked contrite and a little ashamed and so completely precious to her that Kit simply caved in. "Go get your coat," she said. "We'll go to the stables now and finish your reading after, but you're not getting out of it! Do you understand?"

He nodded eagerly. "Yes! Thank you, Kit!"

He rushed forward and hugged her tightly and Kit hugged him back, grateful for the contact, for the comfort it offered. It was something she had been missing with all the upheaval in her life.

Heading upstairs to get her own cloak, or rather the borrowed one that Malcolm had bestowed upon her, Kit felt a frisson of fear. She hadn't been upstairs alone since her wedding night and she was petrified of a repeat performance from whatever being had taken up residence there.

As she reached the upper landing, Kit squared her shoulders and took a deep, calming breath. She could do this. Yes, it was frightening, but she wasn't without resolve.

Taking the first step down the long corridor toward their abandoned bedchamber, her knees trembled. But still she forged ahead. Every sound, and in a house as old and in such ill repair as Rosedale Hall there were many, set her heart to thundering. Nervously, she glanced over her shoulder.

Naturally, there was nothing behind her, but it did nothing to stave off the overwhelming sensation of being watched.

“There is nothing to fear,” she whispered aloud. Slightly louder, and with far more bravado than she actually felt, she said it again. “There is nothing to fear!”

Down the hall, a door slammed forcefully. Kit lifted her hand, closed it over the onyx amulet that Nan had gifted her and reminded herself that she had something that afforded her protection.

Another door slammed at the far end of the hall. But it was the door creaking open behind her that left her shaking. How could it be in two places at once?

“I’m not afraid of you,” she called out, her voice echoing down the corridor.

Run.

The word was a whisper in her mind, but it was not her own. It was a voice she did not recognize, and yet she trusted it completely. Whoever or whatever had spoken to her was giving her sound advice. Kit started to look over her shoulder, but instinct, or perhaps the guidance of whatever unseen spirit was communicating with her, prompted her to quickly change course. Instead of looking back, she ran ahead, hoping against hope to make it to the servants’ stairs at the end of the corridor and escape to the kitchen. For whatever reason, the worst of the activity seemed to be limited to the upstairs of the house.

As she ran, her slippered feet connecting painfully with the stone floors, she could feel something behind her. It grew closer, and then fell back, but she recognized the game of cat and mouse for what it was. It was simply toying with her.

Kit had passed their bedchamber door, passed the chamber she’d stayed in her first night in the house. As she neared the doorway to the servants’ staircase, hope flared inside her. But it was short lived. She felt the shove as surely as if a person had placed their hands in the middle of her back and pushed. Her skin burned there where she’d been touched by it.

Tumbling forward, the heels of her hands scraped against the stone. Even though the fabric of her dress, she could feel the hard stone biting into her knees. As she landed fully, the breath was knocked out of her and the cord at her neck snapped. She watched helplessly as the onyx talisman bounced away.

She felt the weight then, the heaviness of it pressing down on her, robbing her of breath. Gasping for air, she managed to roll onto her back, but she could see nothing but blackness, growing until it became absolute.



Malcolm was outside, stacking more firewood. They seemed to be going through it at an alarming rate. The sound of a small cart careening up the drive brought him up short. He peered into the distance until he could make out the small farm cart being driven by one of the young men he's seen at Nan Webb's cottage. The old woman was clinging to the seat, and for the young man to be driving so recklessly, she must have told him to do so.

Katherine. Fear gripped him suddenly, its icy cold finger curling around his gut. Dropping the armload of wood he'd been stacking, Malcolm ran for the house and found Joseph in the hall.

"Where is your sister?" he demanded.

"She went upstairs to get her cloak," the boy answered.

Malcolm dashed past him, unthinking of what might be laying in wait for him. As he neared the top of the stairs, he heard a strangled cry and immediately ran towards it. He could see Katherine lying on the floor, her face pale and her body completely lax.

As he reached her, her eyes opened, but it wasn't Kit who looked back at him. It was something else. The eyes were black as pitch, no white visible, and so deep that he feared falling into them.

"You belong with us."

It was her lips that formed the words, but it was not her voice that escaped them. Seeing the piece of onyx on the floor only a few feet from her, he snatched it up and pressed it to her skin. She let out a scream unlike anything he'd ever heard. Her body arched upward from the stone floor and a black mist seemed to pull itself from her body, rising toward the rafters and disappearing within them.

Immediately, she collapsed again, her body falling to the floor and curling in on itself like an infant. She shivered violently. Still holding the onyx amulet, Malcolm scooped her up in his arms and carried her toward the stairs. He was afraid to look behind him, and terrified to look at her. If it wasn't *his* Katherine in his arms, he didn't know what he would do.

As he neared the bottom of the stairs, there was a commotion near the front door as Nan Webb entered. Her young grandson followed her in, carrying a large wooden crate.

"Oh, I was so afraid I'd be too late," Nan said on a heavy sigh of relief.

"You very nearly were," Malcolm replied. "I do not possess the ability to put into words what I have just seen."

Nan stepped forward and placed her hand over his where it curved over Katherine's back. "You will not have to," she said softly.

After a moment, the elderly woman staggered backward, her face pale and her hand clutching her chest. "It is far worse than I initially feared," she whispered. "This dark spirit has never made itself known on this level of the house, has it?"

"No," Malcolm replied. "We've been staying down here at night for precisely that reason."

Nan nodded. "It cannot cross the boundary... these stones that comprise the original part of the house were part of an abbey. Holy. That is why it cannot breach these rooms!"

It was as likely an explanation as any. Malcolm moved toward the library as Katherine began to stir in his arms.

Lytton had taken Joseph to the kitchens but Vera stood there, wringing her hands and appearing terrified.

“We should not have come to this place,” she said tearfully.

Malcolm didn't disagree. “I very much fear you are correct.” He walked into the library and placed Katherine's still limp form on one of the sofas there. “I vowed that I would protect her and I have failed at that task miserably.”

“Twas foolish of her to go upstairs alone,” the maid said, her tone less than gentle. “She knew what waited up there!”

“Vera Webb, you will remember yourself!” Nan admonished her. “Go and help young William with my case. I'll need my herbs in here!”

Malcolm said nothing further on the subject because Katherine had awoken. She sat bolt upright on the sofa, a scream escaping her.

“You're safe now,” he said softly and closed his arms about her. She struggled against him, but he held her there, stroking her shoulders and back gently until she calmed. “It cannot hurt you down here. You're safe.”

“It was inside my mind,” she whispered brokenly. “I could see you, I could hear you calling me, but it wouldn't let me answer you... and then it... *used* me to speak to you.”

“I know,” he said. “It's over now. It's over and neither of us will go upstairs alone again... no one in this house will go up there alone.”

Nan moved toward them and took the talisman that was still clutched in his hand. “It broke the charm I put on this... but I'll make it stronger next time. I'll use a more powerful binding agent so that it never comes off again until you take it off.”

“What is it?” Katherine demanded.

The room grew silent, all eyes turned to Nan Webb as they waited for the answers that it seemed only she possessed.

THE OLD WOMAN, when she spoke, did so softly and in the same tone that storytellers had used for millennia, like an ancient high priestess. “I call it a dark spirit, but in truth, it has no name. It existed long before names did, certainly before Christians did. I heard tales of it as a child from my mother, just as she’d heard tales of it from her own. I never taught Vera or her mother because I believed that with the last of the Hadleys gone from this place, there would never be a need.”

“The Hadleys?” Kit asked. “So it is tied to the family, then?”

“Oh, yes. They did not call it into being, but they have imbued it with more and more power over the centuries as they have cavorted with it, keeping it bound to them like a pet, like a familiar! But nothing will corrupt the way that power does and soon they were at each other’s throats... this family has turned on one another, murdered and feuded, schemed and lied to one another. In my grandmother’s time, one brother sent all of his siblings to the pyre, saw them all burned as witches when he himself was the one doing the darkest of spells!”

“But I don’t understand why it has turned on us... if it bound to the Hadley line and Malcolm is the last of the Hadleys, why is it trying to destroy him?” Kit demanded.

“Perhaps I’m not the last,” he said. “I’m simply the only one of the proper gender and birth to inherit.”

Nan nodded sagely. “That is all true. I do not know of any bastards, but given the way the last Lord Hadley carried on, it would not surprise me... but there is another possibility. Perhaps it no longer has need of the Hadleys. Perhaps it is tired of being bound?”

Neither of them spoke, instead they sat back and allowed Nan to ruminate on this thought, to expand upon it at will. And she did.

“It has soaked in all of their energy. Their anger and hatred of one another has fed it until it no longer needs them. It is strong enough now, having fed on that jealousy, spite and rage, to continue its existence without them.”

“By them, you mean me?” Malcolm said.

“And your wife... if she provides the heir, if she bears a child of your bloodline—I suspect that it is longing to rid the world of Hadleys altogether, and then it will finally be completely free,” Nan finished.

“And what would that mean... if it were to be free?” Kit didn’t want to fathom a world in which such a thing ran rampant.

“We must find how it is bound to this house,” Nan stated. “Your grandfather, I remember him, my lord. He distanced himself from the whole of his family and the dark magic they practiced. That is why he fled to the Colonies. And that is why you, my lord, have never learned the dark arts that were imparted to every child born into the Hadley line.”

Malcolm looked at her steadily, his face betraying his complete and utter belief in everything she’d uttered. “It spoke to me the other night,” he said. “No. It spoke *in* me. It said ‘you belong with us’. And now that makes sense.”

“Who is the young woman with blonde hair, Nan? I cannot believe that she is an evil spirit!” Katherine protested. “As frightening as her presence is, she’s never attempted to harm us... and upstairs, when I was told to run, I can only believe that it was her voice, warning me.”

Nan nodded. “The late Lady Hadley. He murdered her, or his mother did... we can never be sure. She was a Hadley, as well. First cousin to her husband. The boy, the heir, was never right. Mean and vicious, he’d kill small animals for the pleasure of watching them die... and yet they taught him all the ways of magic, they gave him such power, and it was terrifying... and then he married that young girl. Her father traded her to them in payment of a debt and what a sad day that was.”

“And now she’s trapped here?” Kit asked.

“They’re all trapped here, my dear,” Nan said. “But the others have no reason to interact with you. She thinks she’s

saving you, I believe... and she thinks, because your husband is a Hadley, that he must be a devil too.”

“So what do we do now? We are safe down here, but for how long is anyone’s guess,” Malcolm said.

“We must find the root... we must find the place in this house where the Dark Spirit is bound. And when we find it, we can use it to rein it in.”

“But not to get rid of it?” Kit said incredulously. “I’ve no wish to keep this thing on a leash the way they did!”

“My dear, you cannot be rid of something that is elemental, that is as old as the earth. At best, we can hope to bind it... and whoever is feeding it power right now. We must identify them.”

“Mooney,” Malcolm said. “He’s the only one that makes sense. He’s been managing this estate for years. Anyone else with a stake in it or a claim to it would surely be known to him.”

Nan shrugged. “He’d be as good a place to start as any, my lord. But for now, no one goes anywhere on the upper floors alone. We’ll search in pairs starting tomorrow. From top to bottom we’ll go... and in the meantime, I’ll have my work cut out for me making amulets to protect the lot of us. They’re not perfect, but they’re better than facing it empty handed.”

The conversation drifted then. Nan asked to be shown to the kitchens, where Vera and her grandson had put her collection of herbs and what Kit could only assume were magical items. It dawned on her then that they’d invited a witch into their home when they’d set out to find a priest. But given what Nan had been able to tell them, she couldn’t help but feel it was the right choice.

“Do you think this is wise? Seeking out its hiding place, as it were?” he asked. “If it feels threatened—.”

“What choice do we have?” Kit asked. She could see the worry etched in his features, and beyond just worry, fear was clearly evident in his gaze. “This is your home. Your birthright. You’ve traveled half the world to claim it!”

“And if I were to travel half the world to get away from it, would you go with me?” he asked.

It wasn't a question she'd expected to have put to her. But she answered it honestly and without hesitation. “Whither thou goest... You are my husband, and I will follow you.”

He smiled then, a slight turn of his lips. “What would the good people of Lofton have to say about Wicked Wexford quoting the Bible to me?”

She scoffed at that. “The good people of Lofton clearly know nothing of wickedness or they would have caught on to the fact that someone was summoning dark spirits right into their midst! Frankly Malcolm, the good people of Lofton can go to the devil!”



Malcolm stared at her for the longest time. Her face was still markedly pale and she had any number of scrapes and bruises from her fall that would undoubtedly bloom into an assortment of colors over the coming days. Yet she was lovelier to him than any woman he'd every encountered. He'd chosen her for the wrong reasons—primarily because she truly had no other option and was the most likely to agree to his proposal. He'd preyed on her desperation. Yet in spite of their dubious beginning, and in spite of the terrifying events that had unfolded since they'd come together, he couldn't bring himself to regret any of it.

Having her in his life, having Katherine Elizabeth Wexford Bryant as his wife, was worth whatever hell he had to walk through to claim her or to keep her.

Unable to stop himself, unwilling to deny himself, Malcolm reached for her, tugging her forward until she was pressed fully against him. He kissed her hungrily, as if he needed to consume her. Some part of him did. But when she kissed him back with the same eagerness and the same hunger, he was lost. He'd have her in that moment or die of wanting her.

She pulled back and gazed at him through half lidded eyes. “Lock the door. I don't want to be responsible for

sending Nan to an early grave if she catches us!”

He laughed at that. “I doubt there’s much we’d do that would shock her!” Nonetheless, he rose and walked to the door to do as she bade. He was locking out more than their servants and her inquisitive brother. Worry, fear, stress, the idea that they were not safe in their own home, for just a brief moment, they would forget all of that.

CHAPTER 20

WHEN HE TURNED BACK to her, the look on his face made Kit’s breath catch. Fierce, protective, possessive and yet oddly tender—no one had ever looked at her that way. She wanted desperately for it to mean *something*. She had not married for love, but just because the marriage came first, it surely did not mean that love could not follow. Perhaps in time, she would have what she’d dreamed of as a girl.

As he moved toward her, his long legs eating up the distance quickly, she reached out for him, eager for his touch. But he didn’t immediately step into the circle of her arms as she’d anticipated. Instead he stopped a hair’s breadth from her reach.

“Take the pins from your hair,” he said, his voice deep and gravelly, roughened with what she’d come to recognize as desire.

She’d never get it put right again, but she was beyond caring. Reaching up, she slipped the pins from the chignon one at a time, until her hair tumbled over her shoulders and down her back. He stepped forward then, his hands delving into the strands, and tugging her head back. It might have made her feel powerless, or even afraid, had she not felt the slight tremor of his fingers. Whatever was occurring between them, he was just as affected by it.

Then he kissed her. He leaned down over her until she was forced to lie back on the settee, he devoured her mouth. His teeth scraped at her lips, and when they parted, his tongue eased between them. She understood that carnal play now, understood the acts that it mimicked, and she welcomed it. His hands moved down to the laces of her gown, untying each on

at the bib front of her ancient gown, until it gaped open and he could slide it from her shoulders. The room might have been cold, but the heat she felt burning her up inside from his wicked kiss and roving hands kept her more than warm enough.

Not satisfied to merely be a passive recipient, Kit reached for the buttons of his waistcoat, freeing each one until he could slide her hands beneath and tug his shirt free from his breeches. Allowing her own fingers to explore him, to trace every dip and indentation between the firm muscles of his stomach and higher, to the powerful muscles of his chest, she reveled in the satiny feel of his skin and the sharp contrast of the crisp hair on his chest.

He broke the kiss long enough to divest himself of his shirt and waistcoat entirely, dropping the garments into a pile on the floor. Her gown and petticoat soon followed. Wearing only her stays and a chemise, tugged at him until he was on the settee with her, his body a welcome weight on top of hers.

As he kissed her neck, her breasts, she felt that familiar languid heat stealing through her. Her hands traced the hard planes of his back, the firm rounded muscles of his shoulders. And he moved lower still, dragging the hem of her chemise up, he pressed hot, open mouthed kisses to the soft skin of her belly. The rasp of his whiskers there made her shiver. Then he slid off the settee altogether to kneel on the floor next to it as he licked and nipped at her inner thighs, moving higher with each pass.

Suddenly and inexplicably nervous, Kit tried to clamp her thighs together, but he was having none of it. With his hands hooked behind her knees, he raised one of her legs and placed it over his shoulder.

“What are you doing?” she demanded. “Surely you cannot mean—.”

“I surely can and I will,” he answered, his lips curved into a wicked smile.

She wanted to protest, to tell him that what he was proposing was indecent. But before she could even formulate

the words to utter such a thing, his mouth had descended on her. His tongue stroked over her damp, heated flesh and the pleasure of that single touch robbed her of thought and speech. A strangled cry escaped her as he repeated that caress, more firmly and insistently. Her head fell back, her eyes closed and she simply gave herself up to the exquisite sensations he stirred within her.



Malcolm savored the taste of her, the softness of her body beneath him and the sweet nectar of her on his tongue. More than that, he gloried in the pleasure she so clearly felt. There were many aspects of lovemaking and many carnal pleasures he had yet to introduce his innocent bride to. This would be the first of many.

With every stroke of his tongue, he felt her body tighten, her thighs trembling against him and her belly quivering with tension building inside her. When her back arched, her hips lifting off the settee entirely, he closed his lips around that small bundle of nerves and sucked deeply. The soft, keening cry that escaped her and the familiar shudders that rippled through her body as she climaxed spurred his own need.

Unable to wait, Malcolm freed the buttons of his breeches, and coming down onto the settee, he lifted her on top of him. Her legs parted and she sat astride his lap, his shaft pressed against her mound.

She required no instruction, but rose up onto her knees and took him in her hand, guiding him into her. As she sank down, the wet heat of her enveloping him, he clenched his jaw tightly and tried to hold onto what little control he still possessed. Then she moved, her hips circling against his, and all was lost.

His hands closed over the generous curves of her behind, lifting her, and bringing her down again as he thrust upward into her. She cried out, her back arching to thrust her breasts forward. It was a temptation he could not and would not resist. Taking one berry colored tip into his mouth, he thrust into her again.

It was not a slow and gentle thing between them. It was fast, harsh, *hungry*. It was about clawing, aching need with little room for tenderness. He wanted to give her those things, and perhaps, when his need for her was less intense, less consuming, he'd be able to offer it, but for now, he simply wanted to drive himself so deeply into her that he would be a part of her forever.

She quickened again, those delicate muscles clenching tightly around him. He was lost, thrusting deep one last time, he let his release take him, spilling deeply inside her until they were both breathless.

She lay limply against his chest, her head on his shoulders, and he shuddered beneath her in the aftermath of a need unlike anything he'd ever experienced. There was an awareness between them that something in their burgeoning relationship had shifted, had morphed into something neither of them had expected.

To break the tension and to avoid making an ass of himself with protestations of tender feelings he didn't even understand himself, Malcolm said, "I'm beginning to think should have married that horse faced chit. My poor heart will surely give out if we keep this up."

She laughed softly. "When my limbs will support me again, I'll gladly go fetch her for you."

He brought his hand down on her bottom in a playful smack. "Don't you dare," he admonished. "I may rally yet."

"Surely not," she replied, her tone scathing and doubtful.

Malcolm shifted them so that she was once again lying back on the settee. He kissed her neck, tasting the saltiness of her skin. "My ancestors might have practiced their dark magic here... but I've a kind of magic that is all my own."

CHAPTER 21

IN THE ATTIC of the house, with Nan and Joseph in one corner, Lytton and a terrified Vera in another, Kit looked at her husband and said, "I've never seen so much dust in my life. We'll all be in bed with colds before the day is out."

“Speak for yourself. I’m made of sterner stuff than that!” The statement was ruined as it was immediately followed by a sneeze.

“Quite stern, my lord,” she said with a laugh. “What is it were looking for?”

He shrugged. “I haven’t the faintest clue. Nan said we would know it when we saw it... that we would feel it. Whatever that means.”

Kit shuddered. “Whatever it is, it cannot be good.”

Moving deeper into the collection of dusty trunks and crates, Kit lifted one lid and immediately screamed.

“What is it?” Malcolm demanded, as he rushed to her side.

“At one point, I think it was a cat. Now it’s just a particularly ugly skeleton,” she said. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

He took the trunk, lifting it easily. “I’ll dispose of that later. Just keep looking.”

Kit moved on to the next trunk. Inside were delicate underthings and lovely pieces of embroidery. They were also not exceptionally old. They must have belonged to the last Lady Hadley.

“Malcolm, I think these trunks are hers!”

“Whose?”

“The blonde woman! Lady Hadley,” she said. “Well, the other Lady Hadley!” As Kit spoke, she continued to remove items from the trunk, each one feeling more sad and tragic. A young woman, sold as a bride, with no notion of what kind of man she’d been bartered to. Forcing aside her more tender feelings, Kit focused on the task at hand.

As she neared the bottom of the trunk, she found a writing box. Lifting it out carefully, she opened the lid. It was empty. Completely empty. Not even any blank paper had been left behind. Kit started to set it aside, but something, some inner and inexplicable knowledge made her halt. She turned

the box until she could look at the back side of it, and there, near the seam at the bottom, was a small latch nearly concealed by the scrollwork.

Her heart pounded as she pressed the lever and the secret drawer at the bottom sprang open. Inside were a dozen letters. Written in a woman's hand, but never sent to anyone. Because there was no one to send them to, Kit realized. The poor girl had been abandoned by her family and left totally at the mercy of a cold and heartless man. It was a plight she was not unfamiliar with.

Picking up the first letter, Kit began to read. It was clearly the last one she'd penned as she spoke of fearing for her life.

My husband's mother has come to reside with us. I cannot explain it, but they have an unnatural relationship. I hesitate to even put my suspicions into words because they are so vile and so wretched. Yet, I have seen them embrace and it is unlike any mother or son I have ever witnessed. But that is not the worst of their crimes or their sins.

One of his mistresses has just given him a daughter, a bastard foisted off upon a local man who owed him a great deal of money. The mother, a relative, still comes here and her husband utters not a word of protest. Like me, he fears my husband as well.

I cannot fathom what sort of madness my father has sold me into. I walk into a room and they are all there, whispering to one another, and at my appearance, they stop. I know it is me that is the subject of their conversations. I cannot help but feel I will not survive much longer in this house. I've stopped eating or drinking anything put before me because I suspect it is poisoned.

The only time I feel safe is when they've sequestered themselves in the ballroom which to my knowledge has never entertained guests. I hear them chanting in there and I can't imagine what sort of evil they conjure. There is a dark presence in this house. I feel it watching me, waiting. And one day, at their bidding, it will be the end of me. I know this to be true.

"Malcolm," Kit said, "You need to read this! It was here even then... this thing we've encountered. It killed her!"

He took the letter from Kit's outstretched hand. She didn't wait for him to read it but moved on to the next. Each one was the same, each one expressing a hopelessness and despair that she couldn't begin to fathom. Even at her lowest point while being beaten down by Patrice's constant disapproval and the menial, back breaking tasks put before her, she hadn't felt so despondent.

“And she’s she’d trapped here,” he said. “Still surrounded by them even to this day. What a miserable existence.”

“Not for long,” Kit vowed. “We need to find this illegitimate daughter. I would lay my last shilling that she’s the one controlling it now... or rather she thinks she is. In truth, I believe she’s playing right into its hands. It wants her to use it, so that it use her in return. And when we’re gone, eliminated, it’ll turn on her, just like Nan said.”

“It will not happen,” he promised. “We will prevail. I refuse to accept any other alternative.”

“How?”

“We know two things that we did not before we entered these attics... we now know the gender of Lord Hadley’s offspring, and her age. And we also know, or have a good idea of, where they performed whatever strange rituals they were a party to. We will find the answers, Katherine. I promise you that.”

She wanted to believe that, to believe him. But so few things in her life had worked out as planned. Nothing was as painful as lost hope. “I wish I could be so confident.”

“Get up. We’re not wasting any more time in these moldering attics. We’re going to the source,” he said.

Kit rose and dusted off her skirts. She didn’t leave the writing box behind, however. As she gently placed the other items back in the trunk, she wondered at the short and tragic life of her predecessor. With the writing box in hand, she waited as Malcolm gathered the others and they made their way down to the third floor and the ballroom that had been closed up for nearly two decades.

Vera and Joseph were sent to the kitchens, ostensibly to prepare luncheon, but in truth because they had no idea what sort of items would be found in the room that had been mentioned. If the perversions that had been alluded to were true, there was no predicting what might be awaiting them inside.

“We should identify the daughter first,” Malcolm said. He turned to Nan, “Given the date of this letter, she’d be close in age to Katherine. So who is it?”

Nan cocked her head to the side. “Your mother was gone from here then, she left Lofton and took off for London and never looked back... We never even saw you here until she’d passed away and your father returned. And then you became thick as thieves with the Fairington girl, Georgiana. Her father never left Lofton, and if I recall, her mother was a bit of a scandalous creature... and very much a frequent guest here at Rosedale Hall.”

“How do you know all this?” Malcolm demanded.

Nan shrugged. “Lofton thrives on gossip. It always has and I suspect that it always will... But Georgiana, other than the little spectacle created by Ned Cavendish when he claimed that you tried to seduce him, has never had her name attached to any scandal at all. Funny that.”

“Are you suggesting that *Georgiana* is responsible for all of this?” Kit demanded, aghast. It was a ludicrous thought. Georgiana had never hinted at any kind of magic. She’d even scoffed at love charms when they’d attended a fair together. But as she recalled that incidence, she remembered how strange Georgiana’s words had been. She hadn’t denied that love charms existed, she’d denied the power of the woman selling them.

“I’ve no need of her homespun potions. That woman has no power at all.”

“Oh, heavens... what if it *is* Georgiana?” she asked. “She hates me so fiercely. I cannot fathom what she might be capable of!”

“We shall soon find out, my dear,” Nan said, and gripped the handles of the ballroom doors. They opened inward with a dramatic swoosh. There were no curtains, only heavy shutters over the windows, and all of them locked and barred. Malcolm and Lytton made quick work of opening each one to let in as much light as possible.

Looking around Kit frowned. There was nothing out of place really, and yet the room felt oppressive and threatening. “There is something very wrong here.”

Nan stepped into the center of the room. She looked decidedly uncomfortable. With a pointed look at Malcolm and Lytton, she said, “Roll back this carpet and we’ll see what’s beneath it.”

They did as she bade, and as the carpet was rolled back, beneath it was a large circle painted on the floor, black as pitch and marked at intervals with symbols she could not fathom.

“Runes,” Nan explained. “Like the ancient ones used in the stone circles nearby.’Tis powerful magic.”

“Is this what binds it here, then?” Kit asked.

“No. This is what allows it to travel. They’ve created a doorway for it... It’s bound to a small object, something that the one who called it could carry upon their person!”

Kit threw up her hands in frustration. “That could be anywhere. How on earth, in this mess of a house, will we find such an item?”

“More to the point,” Malcolm said, “What if it isn’t here to find? What if it is in the possession of the late Lord Hadley’s bastard, presumably Georgiana Cavendish?”

Nan shook her head. “She’ll have an object to call it, to establish communication and if it is here, there’ll be a circle similar to this in her home... But the object that binds it will be here, well hidden. We’ll not find it by looking with our eyes.”

“What the devil does that mean?” Lytton muttered.

Kit cast him a quelling glance. Turning her attention back to Nan, she asked, “How do we do that?”

“Dousing,” she added. “In my chest downstairs, there are two metal rods. Get them bring them to me.”

Lytton left, still muttering under his breath.

“What is dousing?”

“It’s like looking for water with a forked stick, but instead of water, we’re looking for power,” Nan explained.

“Which is fine, but there’s an abundance of power in this house. What if it leads us in the wrong direction?” Malcolm asked.

“Power is concentrated at its source... This thing, this dark spirit, will be after protecting its power source in this house. The thing that gives it power is also the thing that binds it!”

“And again,” Malcolm demanded, “How do you know this?”

Nan shrugged. “It’s instinct as much as anything. My mother knew things. My grandmother knew things. All the women in my family before me, they knew things too. I trust that whatever guided them and provided those answers is the very thing that guides me now... You must trust in that, as well.”

Kit squared her shoulders, stepped forward and said firmly, “Tell me what you need me to do and I will do it.”

Nan stepped out of the circle. “Let’s cover that back up. We don’t need to give it any more access to us here than it might already have.”

Rolling the carpet back into place, they concealed the circle entirely. Immediately, Kit began to feel better, less threatened. It might only have been the power of suggestion, but given everything that had happened since she’d come to Rosedale Hall, she couldn’t imagine that was the case.

“You said the others were trapped here as well... why haven’t we seen them?” Malcolm asked, dusting his hands on the legs of his breeches.

“I think that you have heard them. The slamming doors, the moved objects... that is all of them. The late Lady Hadley has shown herself to you for a reason, to warn you, and perhaps because she feels protective of Katherine.”



Malcolm considered her reply, and based upon the unfortunate timing of many of their phantom's appearances, he could only assume that Nan knew precisely what she was talking about. "That makes more sense than anything else in this mess has."

Lytton returned then, his face flushed and sweat beading on his brow. If he'd run, it hadn't been because of urgency to complete the task. It had been fear of being caught out there alone. He passed the two metal rods he carried to Nan who accepted them and began to hum softly as she placed one in each hand. As she walked the room, carefully avoiding the circle that was now covered, the rods swung wildly from side to side and then stopped. They vibrated in place, pointing directly toward the cavernous hearth.

Malcolm moved toward it first, keeping the rest of them behind him as he approached. Whether it was instinct or whether it was simply his own heightened fear, he couldn't suppress the feeling that there was something very dangerous lurking within the confines of that room.

As he neared the hearth, wind kicked up, not from outside the house, but from within. Air swirled and danced within the room, kicking up dust and debris until they formed a thick cloud. In the midst of that cloud, a large black mass began to form coalescing into a nearly solid shape.

Nan reached for his hand, linking their fingers. In her other hand, she held Katherine's. She began to chant softly.

"Spirit, I bind thee! Harming none and protected by three! Spirit, I bind thee! Casting down to the depths that bore ye! Spirit, I bind thee! As I will, so mote it be!"

They were words unlike anything he'd ever heard, but it seemed the very earth shook beneath his feet as they old woman repeated them again and again. At last, the cloud began to dissipate, the black mass shrinking in on itself until it vanished.

"What just happened here?"

Nan started to answer but swayed on her feet. He caught her, lowering her to the floor. "It's strong... too strong for me

alone. But there's no coven anymore to combat such things. It isn't gone, only licking its wounds. If you mean to find this object, you'll have to do it now and do it quickly."

Her voice was weak and breathless, whatever spell she'd just cast clearly having taken much of her energy. "Wait here," he said. "Keep your eyes open for any sign of its return!"

Malcolm rose from the floor and continued toward the hearth. He'd been in a high stakes card game once, and the gentleman, if such a term could be applied to him, who had hosted it, had possessed a pack of vicious but well trained dogs. They'd lain by the door and watched every move of every man present. That was precisely how he felt at that moment, as if something he could not see was watching him, waiting for an opportunity to strike out and literally rip his heart out.

As he neared the hearth, he heard what could only be described as whispering. It was coming from within the stones. A chill swept through him, raising the hairs on his skin and making him want to run. But he did not. He forced himself to forge ahead and to face whatever might be awaiting him. He refused to live in fear and what he was determined would be his home.

It was the faint stirring of the air that alerted him, not to the presence of the Dark Spirit as Nan had referred to it, but to something else altogether. Peering into the hearth, he could make out the entrance to a small passage there. "It isn't a hearth at all. I thought it was overly large for this room, and now I know why. It's a doorway. There is a chamber beyond here."

Katherine moved forward supporting Nan's weight as the old woman was still terribly weak. Lytton was coming up behind them, pale faced and clearly terrified.

"That's it," Nan said. "That's where they will have hidden their most valuable and most powerful objects."

Malcolm stepped through the opening, having to duck his head inside the smaller space and pushed at the forged iron door. Lytton, terrified as he was, stepped forward to help him.

“This is hardly what you signed up for, is it?” he asked the valet.

“I do not dictate my duties, my lord. As your manservant, it is your right to direct me,” the little man answered with false bravado.

“You’re a good man, Lytton. And I owe you a great more than I can hope to repay.”

The door finally gave with a loud groan, scraping over the stone floor as they created a wide enough gap for them to squeeze into the small chamber. Not trusting anything in the house, Malcolm took a chair that had been placed in that little chamber of horrors and put it between the door and the frame. He didn’t want to see the lot of them locked in there to die.

Lytton had already found a candle on the table and he lit it. What it revealed was a macabre collection. Jars and bottles filled with unspeakable things, unnatural things, but it was the small altar in the corner that drew him. Two blades, coated with a dried brown substance he could only assume was blood, flanked a small piece of stone carved with a series of symbols not unlike what they’d just seen on the floor.

“This is it,” he said. “This tiny rock is the root of all its power?”

“Pick it up,” Nan said.

Malcolm reached his hand toward it. He was still inches from touching it when he felt the frisson of current running up his arm. When he finally closed his hand over it, his entire body trembled with the force exerted by that small piece of stone.

“What is it?” he asked breathlessly.

“It’s a talisman... like the onyx about our necks. It is how they focused their power to bind that spirit to them.”

“How can we destroy it?” Katherine asked.

“We cannot,” Nan said. “We must return from whence it came. There is a circle not far from here.”

“In the woods,” Katherine surmised. “I never realized that those large boulders where Georgiana and I would walk were anything but that. Is that the place you mean?”

“Aye. It is. There’s a deep well there to a mineral spring but it has long been covered over... that is where you must return the stone,” Nan said.

Malcolm couldn’t hold it for that long. There was something dark about it, something that, as much as he feared it, also tried seduce him. It whispered inside him of power that he hadn’t even recognized that he’d ever wanted.

As if sensing his discomfort, Katherine removed the fichu she wore and passed it to him. “Wrap the stone in that.”

Not feeling that it offered enough breathing room for his peace of mind, Malcolm removed his cravat and created a second layer of protection. It only muffled the sensation, rather than dissipating it entirely, but it was enough for now.

“Can you take him to this place, Katherine?” Nan asked.

“I can. I remember the way,” she reassured them.

“Then go. And God be with you both,” Nan uttered solemnly.

CHAPTER 22

GEORGIANA SLOWED her horse as they made their way through the woods. Ned was on his mount beside her, grouching and complaining. She’d be glad to be rid of him finally. The truth was, she’d only ever wanted him because he’d wanted Kit. The entirety of Kit’s ruin had been her doing, a fact she’d never been able to truly crow about.

She’d engineered all of it, even arranging their discovery. Ned was so very easy to manipulate that it had taken little persuasion, in truth it had taken no more than a mere suggestion, that somehow all of it had been Kit’s own fault. He’d happily laid it at her door, accusing her of being fast, of seducing him because she was jealous of his affections for Georgiana herself. The remainder of Kit’s ruin had been her doing as well. The heavy losses at cards by her father, the deep melancholy after and then his ultimate suicide.

It hadn't all been magic. Some of it had simply been knowing how to navigate society and not being burdened with a conscience. But other aspects of it had taken spells and magic to push people in the directions she'd wanted them to go. It was the same tactic she'd used to get Ned to drive to Lofton yesterday when the roads were not nearly clear enough for such a journey. And yet, they had arrived unscathed. She'd used those same skills again to convince him to accompany her on a ride, but the potion she'd poured in his morning tea was beginning to wear off.

"What the devil were we thinking, George?" he asked. "It's foolish enough to drive to Lofton in this weather, but to be out for a ride?"

"It was your idea, darling," she said with a smile.

He shook his head in confusion. "Was it really?"

"Yes... and I hate to be a bother, dearest, but I'm a bit fatigued. It's so trying to ride sidesaddle after so long. There is a rock formation just ahead. Can we rest there for a moment?"

He wanted to refuse her. It was plainly evident in the firming of his lips and the muscle that ticked along his rather weak jaw. But after a second's hesitation, he forced his lips to turn into a false smile and said, "Of course, darling. Naturally. We'll recoup here for a bit."

Georgiana allowed him to ride ahead, plodding along behind him at a snail's pace. Her athame was concealed in the sleeve of her riding habit. She'd slit his throat and deposit him in that well just as her mother had done with the late Lady Hadley. It was what she'd promised after all, and the reward for obedience would be great.

As she neared the rocks, Ned had already dismounted and was hastily sweeping snow from the stones so that they'd have a place to sit. "This place is a bit odd, don't you think?" he asked.

"Whatever do you mean?"

He looked over his shoulder, as if he felt the presence of someone else. "It feels a bit eerie here... like someone is

watching us from the woods.”

“Probably a poacher,” she said. “Far more terrified of us catching him and turning him in than we’d ever be of him!”

He smiled. “Of course, dear. You’re always so sensible about these things.”

“Let’s take a turn about these stones... some of them look quite interesting. I think there are carvings on some of them!” She knew every carving by heart. Her mother had brought her there and taught her each one of them as a child.

He offered his arm as if they were at a ball, going into dinner. She didn’t roll her eyes as she wanted to, but instead smiled at him just as she had when he’d first begun to court her, when he’d first fallen under one of the many love spells she’d used to hold his interest over the years. It wasn’t only Ned’s eyes that wandered. It would be a relief, she thought, not to have to worry about him bringing home some horrible pox.

The weight of the blade against her wrist was like a living thing, pulsing there in anticipation of what was to come. Soon, she thought, very soon. It would be good to be a widow, she thought with a slight smile, for a time at least.



Kit walked ahead of Malcolm through the woods. The trail was still snow covered, but wide enough to be clearly visible. They had elected to make the journey on foot because it would take longer to saddle horses than it would to simply set out on foot and make the short hike.

They were almost upon the clearing when Malcolm grasped her arm and pulled her back. Kit looked up, startled. She’d been so intent on where to place her foot with each step that she’d been looking down rather than ahead. But she could see that the clearing and the stone circle within it were already occupied. Georgiana and Ned were already there, dismounting from their horses.

“What are they doing here?” she hissed in a low whisper.

“Whatever it is,” he replied, his voice pitched low and deep, “It cannot be good.”

“Do you have a weapon?” she asked.

“A knife. I didn’t think to bring a pistol,” he admitted. “Conventional weapons, up to now, are useless against anything we’ve encountered.”

Kit hunkered down behind a fallen tree, Malcolm beside her. “This cannot be coincidence. There must be a reason that she’s here while we are! Do you think it warned her?”

“Do you really think Ned has the courage or the wit to be involved in something like this?” he asked. “The man strikes me as a coward, and did at first glance, before I even fully understood what had transpired between the two of you.”

Kit considered it carefully. Ned would never be fully committed to anything that required any degree of difficulty or danger. “No. If she’s brought him here, unaware of her true intentions, then perhaps she poses more of a threat to Ned than to us at the moment!”

“Whatever she has planned for him,” Malcolm stated firmly, “is nothing more than he deserves. He’s a coward, an opportunist, and lacking any kind of honor.”

There was only one argument that would sway him. They had to stop Georgiana and the reasoning behind it had nothing to do with any tender feeling or sympathy for Ned. “He’s all of those things, but he doesn’t deserve to die at her hand... and if she plans to kill him, there must be some ritualistic reason for it. The last thing we need is for either Georgiana or this being that she’s linked herself with to have any more power!”

He was silent for a moment, a muscle working in his jaw. She knew the last thing he wanted to do was play hero for Ned Cavendish, but under the circumstances, she also knew they had no other alternative. Finally, after a heartbeat’s hesitation, he said, “Fine. Stay off the path. Follow me through the trees. And turn your cloak inside out... the fur will blend more into the landscape than the velvet will.”

Kit did as he bade, removing the garment while still concealed behind the fallen tree and turning the velvet inward. As Malcolm moved forward, she fell into step behind him, using his footprints in the snow as her guide. They zigzagged through the trees until they were close enough to the circle to hear the conversation between the other couple.

“Can we go now?” Ned groused. “It’s wet and freezing out here, George. Why the devil we came here today of all days, I cannot begin to understand!”

“I love this place,” Georgiana replied. “Did you know that I came here as a child with my mother? She taught me to read the symbols carved into the stones.”

He rolled his eyes. “What symbols, Georgie? It’s a bunch of rocks!”

“Come here,” she said, “And I’ll show you.”

It was the seductive tone of her voice that alerted Kit to the fact that she was using magic at that very moment. She herself wanted to heed Georgiana’s call and the woman terrified her. Recalling their friendship, she wondered how much of it had been a product of that same kind of spell, that same allure? Had the girl she remembered never actually existed at all? And was the cruel, vicious creature Georgiana had revealed simply who she’d truly been from the start?

As she watched, Ned moved toward the large stone where Georgiana stood. It was lower than the others, flatter. It was the entrance to the well, she realized. “Malcolm, you have to stop him!” she whispered.

Her voice had carried too far. Georgiana glanced up, her gaze zeroing in on them. “Who’s there?” she demanded.

Ned, oblivious as always, continued to walk towards her. He was no more than a yard from her, when Georgiana placed one hand at her opposite cuff and pulled out a heavy, silver dagger identical to the ones they’d found in the secret room. Ned shrieked like a young girl.

“What the devil is that? What are you doing, Georgiana?”

“I cannot—I *will not* let them interfere!” she shouted. She lunged at him then, swiping at him with the blade. He fainted out of reach, but the blade still caught on his sleeve, creating a superficial slice.

Malcolm dashed forward, charging into the clearing with his own knife drawn. Knife. He’d told her only that he carried one. He had not told her that it was a wicked looking blade nearly the length of his forearm.

“She tried to kill me!” Ned shouted, still obviously a play or two behind.

“Yes,” Malcolm replied, never taking his eyes off Georgiana. “She did. And if you have an ounce of sense, you’d be moving further away from her!”

Georgiana made a sound that wasn’t even human. It was animalistic and filled with rage. She lunged towards Ned, intent upon making fatal contact.

As Kit ran into the clearing, slowed by the heavy cloak and boots that offered little protection from the remaining snow, she saw Malcolm leap toward Georgiana, tackling her to the ground.

“Don’t hurt her,” Ned pleaded. “She’s gone mad.”

There was no response from Malcolm as he was focused on getting the knife away from Georgiana. Kit realized he was only going to be a liability. “Ned, you must step away! She has gone mad, and she is dangerous right now! Let him subdue her!”

Ned whirled on her then, glaring and spilling his vitriol. “You did this to her! Parading yourself about in polite company as if you had the right! She was fine until the night of the Assembly!”

“No,” Kit replied patiently. “She was not fine, Ned. Georgiana has been playing with powerful and dangerous things for far longer than anyone realized. She lured you here because she meant to sacrifice you! Look at the dagger she was using, Ned? Can’t you see?”

The dagger, now lying in the snow, while Malcolm held onto Georgiana to prevent her from reclaiming it, gleamed at them. Ned stooped to pick it up, turning it over and over in his hands. "It's just an antique!"

"Ned," Georgiana called softly, her voice taking on a sing-song quality that was as terrifying as it was mesmerizing. "You cannot live without me. The very idea of it fills you with despair. The agony of your existence would be unbearable."

Kit felt a cold dread snake through her. "You did this to my father, didn't you? You made him take his life!"

Georgiana didn't answer, but her lips did lift into a satisfied smirk as she continued to call to her husband. "You'd rather end it all than to go on without me, wouldn't you, dearest?"

"Yes, Georgie! I can't be without you," Ned said, but his voice was strained and odd sounding, as if some part of him was battling against her.

"Then do it, Ned... Take the knife and place it to your throat. It only takes one cut!"

"Malcolm, stop her! Don't let her speak again!" Kit shouted as she dove toward Ned, attempting to take the knife from his hands. He knocked her aside, sending her sprawling into the snow as he turned toward his wife. Before Kit could even collect herself, he'd grabbed her by the hair, hauling her onto her knees and pressed the knife against her throat.

"Let her go," he said to Malcolm. "You let my wife go, or I'll see yours dead!"

As Kit watched in horror, Malcolm shoved Georgiana away from him and rose to his feet. He still held his own knife. "Fine. I've let her go... and she'll see you dead. You do realize that, don't you? She brought you here to kill you and shove you down that well with countless other victims to this maniacal demon she worships!"

Ned's hands were shaking as he moved towards Georgiana, dragging Kit with him. "Show me the well," he said to his wife.

“Let her go,” Malcolm shouted. “Let Katherine go!”

Ned ignored him, as Georgiana led him back to the stone that shielded the well. “It’s covered, but the rock moves easily enough if one knows the enchantment,” she admitted, her eyes glittering with madness.

Ned coiled his hands tighter in Kit’s hair. She yelped in pain as he uttered, “Then open it.”

Malcolm moved toward them, but Ned was having none of it. Pressing the tip of the blade to her throat, it pierced the flesh just enough to draw blood. “Not another step from you, Lord Hadley,” he ground out. “Or I’ll slit her throat right here!”

“Do it,” Georgiana urged. “It isn’t the sacrifice promised, but I cannot imagine that it would not be satisfying for my dark spirit to consume her!”

Malcolm stopped. Kit stared up at him in abject terror. They were in an impossible situation, but it was evident that Ned meant to see her dead one way or another.

Georgiana began to chant softly, words that were in a language none but she could understand. The rock covering the well began to tremble and shudder, before rolling to the side and revealing a gaping hole in the earth.

“You meant to see me dead, and to shove me in the dark hole— forgotten,” Ned said accusingly.

“But I don’t have to now,” Georgiana said. “I see it now! You will be able to help me!”

“Yes,” he agreed. “I will.”

A movement to the right of the well caught Kit’s eye. She turned her gaze in that direction and saw the apparition of the previous Lady Hadley standing there. It was different, no, Kit, thought, *she* was different. There was a peacefulness and a serenity about the spectre that she had not previously felt. The strength of that calm reassurance seemed to reach out to Kit, as if she’d come there specifically to tell her that things would be fine. The spirit lifted one hand and pointed toward Ned.

Immediately, Ned began to shake, his hands trembling violently. Before Kit could even fathom what he meant to do, he shoved her aside, flinging her away from the well's opening. He reached out, clasped Georgiana to his chest and then leapt into the chasm.

There were no screams. The whole world seemed to go silent in that moment. Kit rose to her knees and peered over the edge, but there was nothing, just blackness.

“Back away,” Malcolm urged. “I don't know what's in there! What just happened here?”

“It was her compulsion, I think. Ned was never a naturally heroic person. She compelled him to kill himself, to believe that he could not live without her, but she never specified that he had to die without her.”

“The stone,” Malcolm said, retrieving the heavily wrapped runic talisman from his pocket. As he unwrapped it, the entire circle seemed to come alive. It was as if the stones themselves were humming, vibrating with energy. He didn't hesitate for even a second, but threw the ancient talisman into the open well.

Kit glanced over to where Lady Hadley's ghost had stood only moments earlier. She was gone, and Kit felt to her bones that the apparition was gone for good. In banishing the darker spirit, they'd freed hers. She could not begin to explain how she knew this, only that it was true.

Slowly, the world began to right itself again. The humming ceased and the ancient rocks around them, became just that—ancient rocks. Whatever power had been channeled through them was now locked away again, deep within the earth below.

“Can we move that stone back into place?” she asked.

Malcolm was already ahead of her, gathering fallen limbs to use for leverage. “Whatever it takes, we're covering that up. I'll not have anyone stumbling upon it by accident.”

It took the better part of an hour, both of them using tree limbs to budge that heavy stone an inch at a time. By the time

the task was complete, their hands were bloodied and blistered, and both of them were covered with sweat in spite of the frigid temperature.

“I suppose it’s a good thing Patrice worked me like a dog... else I’d have been useless at this task,” she said with a tired smile.

“Lets go home... assuming that the Hall is still standing.”

“Do you think it’s really ours now?” she asked. “Do you think we’ve done what was needed to banish it?”

“I can only hope so... If not, to hell with Rosedale Hall and to hell with that inheritance,” he said. “I’ve made my way in the world before and I can do it again. I’ll go back to America.”

Her heart stuttered in her chest. He would leave her. “Oh, I hadn’t thought you’d be so eager to go.”

He smiled at her. “You’ll like it there, I think... and Joseph. It’s a wild place at times, but a boy like him would appreciate the challenge, I believe.”

“You’d take us with you?” she asked, surprised at the notion.

“You’re my wife. Whither though goest?”

Kit stepped into his outstretched arms and placed her head against her chest. He was her husband, and her home would be with him, wherever that was.

EPILOGUE

ANOTHER WEEK HAD PASSED. The last of the snow had melted and with a few bright days, the roads were clear enough to travel. The servants had begun arriving, the first few only the day before. Thankfully, since they’d found the talisman and removed it from the house, things had been relatively quiet. Nan had taken care of the rest.

Malcolm didn’t ask what that meant. He didn’t especially want to know. The truth was, he’d be perfectly content to live out the rest of his days never hearing another word about magic, spells, witches, demons or ghosts. He intended to be a

proper and boring country gentleman. To that end, his wife needed to be outfitted as a proper and boring country lady. She was beside him on the bench of their small gig heading into the city.

There were a few loose ends to tie up, primarily those involving his less than trustworthy solicitor. The local gossip had it that Mr. and Mrs. Cavendish had gone out for a ride and never returned home. The common opinion was footpads or highwaymen. He saw no reason to gainsay that. Not even Nan or Lytton knew the whole truth of what had happened in the woods that day. After much discussion, he and Katherine had elected to keep that piece of information to themselves. No one would believe them anyway and the idea of authorities reopening the well to investigate was simply too much of a risk.

“I really don’t need an entire wardrobe. Just a few day dresses,” she protested. “But specifically, I do need new petticoats and a new pelisse. My old one simply won’t hold up much longer.”

They were nearing the dressmaker’s shop. “I knew you would say that, and that is why I have written, along with a bank draft, a note for the dressmaker to ignore your wishes entirely and outfit you from head to toe with whatever items a lady might need... and a few items that a lady’s husband might wish for her to have.”

She blushed. “I am not wearing anything scandalous. I am not some opera dancer or light skirt that you’ve picked up!”

“No, you most assuredly are not,” he agreed. “But if in the privacy of our chamber you ever wanted to dress as one, I’d be very receptive to such a spectacle.”

“And they said I was wicked,” she retorted.

“You will be,” he vowed. “Just as soon as we return home!”

“Where are you going while I’m being used as a tool for the dressmaker to commit robbery?” Katherine demanded.

“I have a meeting with the man who will be Joseph’s tutor and then I have some other things that I need to attend to,” he dodged.

“Mooney,” she surmised.

“Perhaps. The less you know the better.”

The gig stopped and he looped the reins before jumping down to assist her.

“I don’t like it,” she protested, a worried frown marring her lovely face. “If he was in league with her all along, he cannot be trusted.”

“No, he cannot. I am in perfect accord with you on that... but he is a man that can be bought and I intend to appeal to the more mercenary aspects of his character.” Malcolm walked her to the door of the shop, introduced himself to the dressmaker and passed the woman the bank draft and his instructions. She scanned both and a wide, happy smile broke over her rather plain face. Within seconds, she’d whisked Katherine away to see her properly wardrobe. Money was a great motivator. He could only hope it would be just as motivating for Mooney.

Leaving the shop, he climbed back into the gig and drove it to the livery stable nearest the solicitor’s office. Heading inside, he found a flurry of activity. It seemed that the offices were in the midst of moving. He didn’t knock or even announce his presence. Instead, he stalked toward Mooney’s office and kicked the door open.

“Going somewhere?”

Mooney was stuffing papers into a case and looked like he’d been caught in the proverbial hen house. “My lord,” he said, pasting a false smile on his pale features. “What an unexpected surprise.”

Clearly, Malcolm thought. In a tone that brooked no argument and that relayed precisely how dangerous he could be if pushed, Malcolm ordered, “Sit down, Mooney. We’re going to come to an agreement.”

The little man did as he had been bade. Sweat beaded on his skin and his breath was labored to the point of gasping.

“My lord, I do not know what you think is happening here, but let me assure you everything at Mooney & Drake is above—.”

“Shut up,” Malcolm snapped. “When I want you to speak, I will let you know. In the meantime, you’re going to listen.”

Mooney swallowed convulsively and offered a vigorous nod. His whole body trembled. The fear rolling off him was a tangible thing.

“Mrs. Cavendish is well and truly gone. Whatever hold she had on you is also at an end,” Malcolm stated.

Mooney relaxed immediately. In fact, the man melted like a candle sat too close to the hearth. He just sank into the chair he occupied. “Oh, my lord, you have no idea—.”

“I haven’t finished,” Malcolm interrupted. “Whatever you’ve done, whatever convoluted legislative hoops you’ve created to keep me from my inheritance, you will undo—.”

“The trustees, my lord—.”

“Enough!” Malcolm bellowed and sent the man into cowering again. “*You* are the trustees. You and Drake. If there are others, which I doubt, you hold sway over them. You will release my inheritance to me or so help me, whatever Georgiana Cavendish threatened you with will pale in comparison to what I will actually do to you. Are we clear?”

Mooney nodded vigorously. “Are you certain she’s gone, my lord?”

“Quite.”

Mooney hesitated. “And the other? Is it gone, as well?”

Malcolm cocked his head in surprise. “You really are a vile, wretched, little weasel of a man, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Mooney agreed. “When Mrs. Cavendish did not return, I feared... I was on the verge of running, my lord, but not from you or my responsibilities to the Hadley estate. You must believe me!”

“I believe you are a coward and a liar, but even liars are occasionally honest,” Malcolm conceded. “If you make me regret this, Mooney, if you attempt to flee or if you fail to see to it that the funds are made available to me, I will hunt you to the ends of the earth. Is that understood?”

“Yes, my lord,” the little man said, his head bobbing and quite possibly with tears in his eyes.

Malcolm said nothing further. He turned on his heel and strode out of the office. There were other issues to be seen to, namely getting a tutor for Joseph as he’d promised Katherine he would.



Kit felt like she’d spent hours at the dressmaker’s. It had been so long since she’d had new things made, and not just hasty alterations from Vera, that she’d forgotten what an arduous process it could be. Still, as bolt after bolt of lovely fabric was brought in for her to choose from, she couldn’t help but be excited. It would be a lovely thing to no longer look like a drudge.

She knew the moment Malcolm arrived to retrieve her because she could hear the nervous tittering and giggles of the other patrons. His effect on the fair sex was something she would simply have to learn to live with, she thought with a pang of jealousy.

As one of the seamstresses helped her back into her ragged gown, she could hear him asking the dressmaker to have something ready for her by the morning for a hefty bonus. As she stepped out into the showroom, she arched her eyebrow at him in censure for such extravagance, but he only winked at her in response. Even the dressmaker blushed.

“Why would it matter if it’s ready tomorrow?” she asked as they stepped outside. The gig was waiting for them, being held by a boy no older than Joseph. Malcolm tossed him a coin and then helped her up into the seat. “We’ll be back at Rosedale Hall and unable to retrieve it! We surely cannot make trips to Birmingham two days in a row!”

“We are not making two trips,” he said, climbing up beside her. “We’re staying in town tonight. I’ve gotten us a room at the finest inn in town and made arrangements for a lovely dinner.”

It sounded terribly romantic and also completely unnecessary. “Really, Malcolm! Are you so dissatisfied with Nan’s cooking?”

“Not at all. But I want to be alone with you!”

“We are alone at Rosedale Hall all the time now, since our unwanted guests have departed,” she reminded him.

“No, we are not. Lytton is coming in every morning to help me dress even though I’ve told him it’s unnecessary. You can’t turn around without bumping into Vera, and Joseph—well, he terrifies me honestly. Every encounter with him he looks at me like he wants to knock me on my as—.”

“Shhh! Don’t say that!” She glanced around to be certain no one had heard him. “You are a gentleman now! You cannot say such things!”

He laughed at her. “It’s a poor honeymoon, but it’s the best I can do for now. Come with me, Katherine. Spend the night with me in an inn where not a soul cares who we are... let me do wicked things to my Wicked Wexford?”

It would take a stronger woman than she to deny such a plea. “Are you trying to seduce me, husband?”

“Am I succeeding, wife?”

“Possibly. Will there be wine?” she asked.

“Will it increase my likelihood of success?” he queried with a grin.

Like he needed to have her foxed! They couldn’t stop touching one another, hadn’t in fact, since that day at the stone circle. Cheekily, she answered him, “In all probability, yes.”

“Then you may have it by the barrel, if you wish.”

He snapped the reins and the horses moved forward, easing into the street. “Do you still wish you’d married that

horse faced chit?” she asked.

“No. Because then *I’d* need wine by the barrel,” he answered. “And because I’d spend the rest of my days pining for the woman I love... a woman who can kick like a mule, by the way.”

She loved him too. Although she wouldn’t tell him just yet, she decided. While hearing those words from him was an infinite relief, she didn’t want sarcasm and wit. She wanted him to reveal the true depths of his feelings.

“Tell me more about this woman,” she said. “Did you meet her in America?”

His jaw firmed and he arched one eyebrow. “You’re going to make me work for it, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” she answered with a smile. “But if you prefer, we can shelve all confessions until we’ve both partaken of that barrel of wine.”

They were both grinning like cats who’d gotten the cream as they headed for the inn and their delayed honeymoon.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chasity Bowlin resides in Central Kentucky with her fiancée and their menagerie of animals. She’s a sucker for any four-legged sob story. She loved all things English and specifically all things Regency. When not writing Regency Romance, she is busily penning Contemporary Romance as Seraphina Donovan, particularly her Bourbon and Blood Series set in her home state of Kentucky. If you’d like to reach Chasity, you can email her at ChasityBowlin@gmail.com.

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