



# A Governess Should Never... Wager a Duke (The Governess Chronicles #4.5)

**Author:** *Emily Windsor*

**Category:** Historical

**Description:** "So tell me, Miss Webster, why should I employ you?"

The wintry Marcus Scarcliffe, the Duke of Shawdale, needs a governess.

The penniless Miss Charlotte Webster needs employment.

What could be simpler?

Yet when long-ago love, a wager, a wandering uncle and Christmas are involved... Nothing is simple.

A heart-warming short novella, inspired by Dickens' A Christmas Carol and set in the romantic scenery of the English Lake District, Charlotte must remind the duke of his past, show him the present and let the future unfold...

With elegant balls, a Lakeland wedding and a duke who has forgotten the meaning of love, the vocation of governess has never been such a festive adventure.

Contains sensual scenes.

This story was previously available as part of the Christmas in Cumbria anthology but now released standalone with additional content and epilogue.

**Total Pages (Source):** 14

## CHAPTER ONE

“A governess is pious, patient and is without prejudice.”

Private Education: A Practical Plan for the Studies of Young Ladies.

Elizabeth Appleton. 1815.

Shawdale Manor. Ambleside, Lake District. December 1817.

“So tell me, Miss Webster, why should I employ you as governess?”

Oh, for heaven’s sake...

And rolling her eyes, Charlotte reached across the study desk for another mince pie.

“For so many reasons, Marcus...” She ignored the ascent of ducal eyebrow at her informality. “It’s a mere eleven days till Christmas Eve. You cannot leave your fourteen-year-old ward alone with the servants. My previous employment has just ended. And no one else would be available at such short notice.” She munched the pie – such a luscious crust. “Indeed, I’m your only option.”

A grunt emanated from across the desk. “I suppose,” he began in a low rumble. “I ought to be thankful you’ve brought your references at all.” And he set to perusing them as though they formed a contract with the cloven-hoofed devil himself.

Withdrawing a threadbare handkerchief from her threadbare reticule, Charlotte patted

crumbs from her lips. Since her eighteenth year, she had worked as a finishing governess for families within the Lake District and was therefore well aware one should remain patient and demure throughout an interview.

Yet that was rather arduous when the duke conducting said interview was the neighbouring boy she'd played with as a mischievous child, the earnest young man she'd waltzed with as a wistful girl, and the handsome gentleman she now...

Well, at present, Charlotte was uncertain what her feelings were for Marcus Scarcliffe, the Duke of Shawdale.

Nigh eight years past, that earnest young man had left the Lakes and travelled to London for some Town polish and oh, how she had eagerly awaited his homecoming...

But a haughty pinchfist had returned to them in his place. A nobleman who'd appeared to care for naught but the state of his coffers.

Perhaps after the sophistication of the city, he'd considered his rural Westmoreland district neighbours beneath his ducal rank? Or had a broken love affair changed him?

Charlotte had seen him on occasion since his return, and although she treated him the same, his manner towards her had become as distant as the night-time stars.

She inhaled deeply to clear such timeworn musings. "And why are you not staying here in Ambleside with your ward for Christmas?"

That chestnut head of hair leisurely lifted and hazel eyes pierced to her very heart – so familiar and yet...not. As a younger man, a green tint had danced within them – carefree and trusting. Now they remained brandy-brown with the occasional fleck of pure gold – a hint as to where his true passions lay.

“You would not understand, Cha... Miss Webster.” He cast her a patronising smile.

She simpered her own in return.

Pompous presumptuous lackwit.

“But I am a busy man and Christmas Day is like any other day. I am to depart for Carlisle on the Eve of Christmas to discuss a canal construction venture with Lord Crockett.”

“Grief, any more canals and England will sink. And Lord Crockett? Truly?” Charlotte tutted. “He has a reputation amongst his house maids as a debauched buck fitch. They call him Lord Cockbawd.”

He shrugged those broad, finely clad shoulders. “His personal circumstances are no business of mine.”

“There’s no worse time of year to be leaving home either.” The joy of Christmas. The need for family and—

“I know. It might damn well snow.”

That wasn’t what she’d meant and he dratted well knew it.

Her lips thinned, eyes meandering to the study window to note that the crest of Wansfell Pike, the summit which shadowed the town of Ambleside and this manor house, was hidden by a stratum of fog.

With each day of advent, the weather worsened, the nights as icy as this duke’s heart.

When a girl, this neighbouring house had been so full of festive spirit, for although

Marcus' father had died young and during these same winter months, his mother had insisted on celebrating Christmas to the utmost, lighting candles for remembrance and decorating every room with greenery.

Marcus' gaze returned to her references, so Charlotte returned to the mince pies.

The monies from her work as governess just about kept her own family home from falling around her ears. But the roof leaked above her chamber, the attics were troubled with rampant mould, and her uncle Marmaduke had thrice this week escaped his nurse by climbing out the dilapidated library window to be later found in the duke's rose garden calling for a woman named Martha.

But more of that later...

"Have you a new school lined up for your ward after Christmas?" For Charlotte knew that Miss Dinah Lovcott had just finished at Miss Fanshawe's Most Excellent Seminary for Elegant and Educated Young Ladies . Established 1802. Board included. Ninety guineas per annum. Washing extra.

"No."

"Perhaps you should employ me as a full-time finishing governess then and not just for the Christmas season?"

His lips thinned, high cheek bones so taut one could bounce a sage dumpling off them. "You are...expensive."

Charlotte spluttered mince pie crumbs. "Your starched cravats for a week must cost more than my wages for a year." And no, this wasn't the best manner in which to gain employment but she was fast losing patience.

He straightened said cravat. “I have a certain deportment to project.”

“A starchy one?”

The duke slammed down her references, at last showing some passion. “I am coming to believe Mrs Mossop could look after my ward quite ably over Christmas until I find a new school.”

“Mrs Mossop’s job is to housekeep this vast manor, not be governess also and teach young Dinah etiquette and the reasons why the earth does not simply wobble about the universe.” She cocked her head and huffed. “Surely you can stay home for Christmas and keep your ward company? Canals can wait. There are more important matters than business deals and glossy guineas.”

His brow wrinkled. “Such as?”

“Laughter? Compassion? Joy? Family? The spirit of Christmas?”

Those wrinkles formed crevices of condescension. “Absurd, Cha— Miss Webster. Perhaps you’d be too fanciful a governess for my ward as what do you think life is? Some romantic drivel of a fairy tale.”

Heavens, if anyone knew life was no fairy tale, it was herself. Since her baronet father had died leaving a trail of vowel-waving creditors and a crumbling unentailed house, she had scrimped and saved, worked till her eyes drooped, and had even been forced to try smog-ridden London for employment.

For Charlotte, no fairy-tale prince had ridden to her rescue atop a golden stallion. Or even a donkey.

“No, Marcus, I do not.” She smiled and his eyes hooded. “But there is more to life

than ledgers and—” She bit her lip as a thought occurred. It would be bold, perhaps foolish, but... “You used to enjoy a wager, did you not?”

His visage hardened to stone. “Not any longer.”

“A deal then.” She broadened her smile. “If I can persuade you to stay home for Christmas Day, you’ll—”

A snort. “You’ve not a chance.”

Charlotte ignored him. “You’ll employ me as governess until Dinah reaches seventeen years of age. And you will have my roof fixed. And stop pestering me to sell you my home.”

He leaned back, crossed his arms, starched cravat unyielding, and narrowed those hazel eyes. “And when I depart for Carlisle still? What do I receive?”

Charlotte swallowed. There were no other jobs. She had less than a month’s worth of wages for Uncle Marmaduke’s nurse and the roof leaked in her bedchamber – as she might have mentioned before.

But if she succeeded, she’d be living here on this neighbouring estate to her own home and hence be near to her uncle Marmaduke for nigh three years, be able to pay the wages of his nurse for nigh three years.

“If...if I fail, I shall still work for you as governess until a school is found but...unpaid.” Well, at least she’d have a dry bed. “And I’ll...consider selling my house to you.”

“Consider?”

“Consider.”

But had she caught a flash of green in that gaze?

The old Marcus had never been able to resist her wagers – to climb the highest tree, to race to the tinkers, to dance with her at that last Christmas Ball...

“And how do you propose to persuade me to stay?”

He was contemplating it!

“You must accompany me to three Christmastide events of my choosing.” All she had to do was think of them.

“Hmm. Is that worth so much of my precious time away from rigorous ledger inspection?”

Charlotte munched another mince pie. If one had nothing clever to say, it was better to stay quiet and hence enigmatic.

He drummed his fingers on the mahogany desk. “If I were to agree to such a ludicrous proposal, I’d require you to start as governess on the morrow.” The drumming ceased. “If you happen to win, I will pay you at month end, but when you don’t...” The drumming commenced anew. “As part of your governess duties, I’ll also require you to eliminate a yet more ludicrous idea that my young ward has got in her noggin to become an...” He nigh choked within the confines of that starched cravat. “...an authoress.”

To be commended, surely?

“I could start tomorrow,” Charlotte merely stated, prodding the mince pie plate back



across the desk. “Come along, Marcus, what have you got to lose?”

In order to instil calm and reason, Marcus inhaled deeply but those two eminently ducal and sensible conditions refused to surface, likely due to that scent of bloody heliotrope that filled his nostrils.

Charlotte had forever smelled of sweet heliotrope.

With eyes blind, he stared at her references, his mind coldly calculating. If he agreed to her ludicrous proposal, he’d have a governess for free until he found a new school for Dinah. He’d be at liberty to visit Carlisle and broker that canal deal.

What had he to lose?

She’d never get him to stay for Christmas, short of tying him up.

Which wouldn’t be without its merits but...

From beneath his lashes, he studied his sometime neighbour, Miss Charlotte Webster.

A spinster with now twenty-six years, auburn-haired and slender, she had eyes the colour of mountain fells in spring. Tall for a female, she rose above most local men.

But not himself.

For eight years, he’d quashed any insipid sentiment – for both their sakes – but as soon as she’d perched on the study chair and treated him like a normal man rather than a duke, teased him and licked her lips of mince pie crumbs, all his boyish yearnings had returned – a sensation akin to indigestion after too much venison.

And why was she always so damn content? Broad lips curving. Through no fault of

her own, she'd been reduced to a mere governess, with a mad uncle and derelict house, yet she sat there munching pies like a blithe Marie Antoinette while the mob rioted outside.

Mind you, she was correct in that Mrs Mossop lacked the hours to care for Dinah, and even he was not so heartless as to leave his ward utterly alone for Christmastide. A twinge of guilt punched his gut that he'd not put aside the time to find a new school for her, but this canal venture would make him a mint.

His gaze twisted to the wall and met the portrait of his elder cousin Thomas who'd been a couple of years above him at Eton. A carriage tragedy in an autumn storm had taken the lives of Thomas and his wife two years ago, and Marcus wondered what they would now make of his cow-handed guardianship of their daughter.

Ostensibly shuffling papers, he debated Charlotte's proposed deal.

If he was to agree, should they have a written contract? Signed? Ask his man of affairs to scrutinise for loopholes? Mr Dilber was most adept at that.

A name on her references caught his eye and he glowered. "You worked for Cadwalader?" He'd met the London reprobate on a few occasions, most recently at a boxing club: women swooned over his handsome mug; gentlemen feted his droll deeds.

But not himself.

"Hmm. Solely in an...advisory role."

His glower became a scowl. "A lavish reference too."

"Such a charming employer."

His scowl became a sneer. “Do you provide additional services now, Charlotte?”

The silence was extensive.

One could hear the wind buffeting trees at the end of the upper lake.

He cleared his throat. “I didn’t mean—”

“Yes. Yes, you did, Your Grace.” She rose and pulled her skirts straight. “And if you would care to review the reference, you will see it was written by Amelia Cadwalader, his new bride. They were most helpful to me whilst I was in London and I count them both as friends.”

Marcus got to his feet also, aware that in Charlotte’s company all his restraint and composure fell like damn dominoes. Emotion began to steer him and that must never happen again. He would refuse her proposal. It was best for all concerned. But first... “My apologies for my errant conjecture.”

She nodded, and it was at that moment he became aware of several matters.

Charlotte had always been slender but her wrists were...too thin.

Her woollen skirts were patched. And re-patched.

Skin pale as milk.

And for all that her lips smiled, the dusky shadows beneath her eyes conveyed utter weariness.

He knew she lacked money but...

“I agree to your deal,” his mouth said without his mind’s approval.

Mrs Mossop could at least feed Charlotte up.

“I...” She nibbled her bottom lip.

He shifted. “Not that you’ll win. Not a hope.” And then abruptly realised those words were taken straight from their childhood, further memories drifting in like dust motes.

When young, they’d wagered over the most nonsensical matters at Christmastide: what weight the plum pudding would be; the hour of the first snowfall; who’d trip over their own feet when they danced together.

He’d state those same arrogant words and she’d always reply...

“We’ll see about that.” And those broad lips grinned. “Shake?” Her bare hand waggled over his desk.

He clasped it – warm, silken and too bloody slender.

“May the best man win,” he murmured, releasing it as though it were molten.

“Three Christmastide events, Marcus. No hiding in your counting house or bank vault, although I doubt there’s much room amongst all the guineas.”

His fists clenched. “If we could avoid the most mawkish seasonal events, I would sleep better at night.”

“You’ll not have time to sleep at night, Your Grace.”

He allowed not a twitch of eyelash, not a tremor of lip, not a quake of groin at such

words – innocent or not. For so long, he had successfully purged Charlotte from his mind and body, and he refused to regress. Now he was a man of nigh three decades with his desires firmly in check.

So he bestowed a ducal nod.

“I’d best pack for tomorrow then.” A curtsy. “Your Grace.”

Marcus watched her depart his study, and then frowned as he noticed all the mince pies had gone, but before returning to his ledgers, he wandered to the window.

Wansfell Pike had now been smothered in a mantle of fog and drizzle and he could only hope that snow would not hinder his imminent departure for Carlisle and those canals.

For he never lost a deal. Business or otherwise.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:58 pm*

### CHAPTER TWO

“Her clothes are made genteelly but with dignity... I hope not inconsistently with her station in life.”

Private Education: A Practical Plan for the Studies of Young Ladies.

Elizabeth Appleton. 1815.

The drab brown or the snuff brown?

Charlotte held up her two finest teaching gowns and perused them. Hideous, both of them, but the snuff in particular had become so loose on her, she resembled an empty flour sack.

“The left one,” mumbled her uncle from the tatty sofa within her bedchamber. “It brings out the green of your eyes.”

“Thank you, Marmaduke.” So she folded the drab and thrust it to her portmanteau along with two other frightful frocks – a dismal grey and a dingy corbeau – although considering her garden abutted one of the duke’s paddocks, she could always nip back home for another gown. “Next...”

Two petticoats, three pairs of stockings, stays...

“Will you bring me back a present from your travels?” asked her uncle.

No matter how many times she'd told him about her being a governess, dearest Marmaduke never remembered and instead thought her leaving to gad around London or visit the coast for some air.

“What would you like?”

Two brown ribbons, Mama's hairbrush, the necklace Marcus had gifted her on her sixteenth birthday, three combs...

“A cat. A black one.”

Charlotte blinked, twisted and took a step forw—

A drop of water landed on her nose. She shifted the bucket with her foot. “Why a cat?”

Uncle scratched his white beard with gnarled fingers, hair standing in tufts. Today he wore a banyan of jonquil yellow. “I kept one in India and I do believe I rather like them.”

Fair enough.

And for once she may be able to grant his wish as there were numerous cats in the barn, and numerous mice, not that he'd likely remember by Christmas. She sighed and went to stand beside him, placing a soft hand to his shoulder. “I shall try my best, dearest Marmaduke.”

He seized her fingers and squeezed. “Thank you, Mary.”

Charlotte closed her eyes against the twinge of tears as he often called her by her late mother's name, his sister.

“Although,” he continued, “I don’t see why you have to wear such shabby gowns. I’ve pots of money.” He frowned. “Somewhere.”

Biting her lip, she crouched in front of him. If there had been any money, it was all gone now. A meagre pension from the Royal Society was the sum total. “No matter, Uncle. I wouldn’t want to get ink all over expensive silk gowns, would I?”

“S’pose,” he muttered, patting her fingers with blue-veined hands.

She rose to buss his forehead and resumed packing. Marmaduke had once been a great explorer, travelling the world – Brazil and India – but as his hair had whitened, so his mind had started to drift.

At first, he’d lived with a cousin, but two years ago Marmaduke had been dropped off by the stagecoach at her then employer’s abode in the next valley, scared, confused and alone, a note in his trembling hands stating that the cousin was to marry and there was no room for him.

With his lapses of memory, a nurse was required, and she knew some would send him to an asylum. But he was gentle and kind, and during her childhood he’d always brought her a present from his travels – maps and shawls. In more lucid moments, he was a joy to talk to and she wished she could spend more time with him. His nurse, Hannah Munro, however, was a good companion for him, with family in Ambleside; all of which meant Charlotte refused to sell this house to Marcus, who likely just wanted direct access to the River Rothay which ran along the boundary.

Why she wasn’t sure.

Perchance he was panning for gold.

A knock came and their lone maid-of-all-work poked her head around the door. “A



lady to see you, Miss. A young lady.”

Charlotte frowned. “A young—”

“I hope you don’t mind!” And a diminutive storm of blond curls and white skirts rushed into her bedchamber trailed by a harassed-looking lady’s maid. “But I couldn’t wait to meet you, Miss Webster. A governess! Just what I need!”

Charlotte had not seen Dinah Lovecott for all of six years. She’d certainly grown and gained some boldness at that school. “Well, we should enact a formal introduction, would you not agree?”

The young lady paused, blue eyes wide and comely as a doll’s. “Oh. Yes, of course.” Her lips pursed but she gave a credible curtsy. “Please excuse my interruption but when I heard the news, I thought to come and see you straight away. I am Miss Dinah Lovecott, the Duke of Shawdale’s ward.”

“And I am Miss Webster. This is my uncle, Mr Wainwright.”

Marmaduke rose to unsteady legs and bowed with a cavalier flourish.

“Yes. We met last week,” declared Dinah with a further curtsy to Charlotte’s uncle. “Looking for someone called Martha in my guardian’s rose garden.”

Charlotte groaned. For some reason that she had yet to deduce, Marmaduke made a regular habit of absconding from the house to wander the duke’s rose garden calling for some unknown woman. Most often clad in only his nightshirt.

“Did you find her?” Uncle asked, hands rubbing together.

“No one was there, Mr Wainwright.”

“Harrumph.” And he rose to toddle from the bedchamber.

“Well, Miss Lovecott,” Charlotte began, “I am pleased you are so eager for lessons.”

In point of fact, never in all her years of being a governess had a pupil appeared so enthusiastic.

“Er...” Dinah’s retroussé nose waggled. “Well...I mean, I am, of course. But it’s more...more that I’m planning to write a book about being a governess.”

Charlotte blinked. “An instructional guide for our profession?”

“Oh, no!” Dinah held dainty hands to heart. “A novel of...romance, the trials of a working woman, glamorous balls and grand dinners and dukes and...romance. Like *Pride and Prejudice* or...or that other one. But with more dukes...and more romance.”

Charlotte’s lips wobbled.

Little wonder Marcus had choked in his stiff cravat, but if being a governess had taught her anything, it was that the more one denied a young girl, the more they wanted.

“Well, I will try to impart what I can, but a governess’ life rarely includes glamorous balls or grand dinners.” Or romance. “Indeed, a fictional governess novel of romance might be rather difficult as the day-to-day just involves...lessons.”

“Oh...” Dinah’s lashes batted, rosebud lips pursing – she was ridiculously pretty. “But do you not work for haughty yet dashing handsome dukes or...or arrogant yet dashing handsome gentlemen, like Mr Darcy?”

She wished.

“More like Mr Collins, I’m afraid.”

“Eugh.”

“Well, help me gather my clothes and we can chat about the school you attended. Did you enjoy it?”

Or did Marcus pack you off there against your will?

“I adored it!” Dinah prodded at the drab brown in Charlotte’s portmanteau with curiosity. “It’s so...quiet here in Ambleside, especially the winter. Did you not find it lonesome growing up here?”

“No, not that I recall.” But then she’d had Marcus. They’d stomped the crags and fells, breathing in the fresh air whipped up from the lakes, and run to the waterfalls close to town, cooling their toes in the pools during warm summers. She missed her fell walks, she realised. The freedom of tramping around, wind buffeting her skirts.

Perchance there would be time this Christmas if snow held off.

It would come though.

Snow always came in the Lakes. It was just a question of when.

“Does your guardian still walk or ride the hills?” Charlotte asked, nosiness getting the better of her.

Incredulous eyes gazed up. “Not that I know of, Miss.”

“Attend the Ambleside fairs?”

A shake of head.

“The annual Christmas Ball?”

“Is there one?”

Charlotte perched upon the bed and folded her four handkerchiefs. “When I was young, a Christmas Ball was held at your guardian’s manor house each and every year. All the gentry were invited.”

“Were they? Did you attend, Miss Webster?” The girl wandered to the wardrobe and peered in.

“Twice. The last when I was seventeen. It was...magical.” She smoothed her grey skirts, recalled Marcus spinning her around, hazel eyes ardent and... “I believe it’s now held at Mr Fitzwilliam’s manor instead.”

“So are you attending this year?”

“No. A governess does not...” She paused, tapped her lip.

What better way to show Marcus what he was missing than to attend the Christmas Ball? And he was bound to have received an invitation. Not only that, but Dinah was old enough for a first social foray – it would be an excellent lesson.

“Miss?”

“Yes, Dinah?”

“I think you should pack this also.”

Charlotte turned to the exquisite russet gown held up by her new charge that had been a thank you present from Mr and Mrs Cadwalader in London.

With a grin, she hastened over to feel the delicate silk.

Her first event decided.

Marcus scratched his quill nib beneath the name of Mrs Brockbank. A widow for five years, she'd not paid rent for five months. His lily-livered steward kept making excuses for her – broken leg, poor harvest, deceased husband – and yet one could hardly let tenants live scot-free.

A month should be enough for Mrs Brockbank to find new lodgings.

He totted up the rents and came up sixpence short.

Damnation, and he resumed counting again to–

Squeals of laughter from the corridor.

Disrupting his numerical tabulation. He scowled.

Resumed cou–

There it was again. Dinah's squeal of mirth and Charlotte's husky chuckle.

She bloody haunted him. In fact, when he'd returned home earlier, he'd sworn her face had materialised in the large brass door knocker, those green eyes flashing.

With a grumble, he re-embarked at the top figure to sum–

A clanging echoed through his house, like...chains dragging across a floor.

Giggling.

More chains.

He shoved hands through his hair.

Giggling.

Chains.

“Could you not be quiet!” he bawled. “Some of us have work.”

Silence.

Giggling.

Chains.

He slammed the ledgers shut, stormed to the door, threw it open and glared.

A chain dropped from a stilled hand to clang upon the floorboards and resonate through his skull.

“Sorry, Cousin Marcus,” whispered an un-sorry Dinah. He knew she was un-sorry as her lips quivered with suppressed mirth and her feet waggled about like her father’s always had when he’d been fibbing to the Eton housemaster.

“Sorry, Your Grace,” simpered an un-sorry Charlotte. He knew she was un-sorry as she never simpered. “Are we disturbing you?”

Yes, they damn well were. Charlotte’s auburn hair had partially fallen with whatever exertions were taking place, chest rising sharply in that hellishly unpleasant gown.

“What on earth are you doing?”

Charlotte straightened. “My portmanteau lock broke, so we had to bind it shut with a chain but it’s too heavy to carry so we are dragging it.”

“I employ footmen for that, no?”

“They are helping Mrs Mossop with the decorations.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Decorations ?”

“Just a few, Cousin Marcus.” Dinah batted her lashes, hands in a clasp of prayer. “Pleeeaaaase.”

Devil take it, the girl would have London at her pink slippers in three years.

He strode forward; they stepped back.

Was he that much of an ogre?

Hefting the bloody portmanteau to his shoulder, he stifled a groan as it weighed more than his red-lacquered Chinoiserie desk, but refusing to show any unducal sign of discomfort, he stomped down the corridor with it, booted the schoolroom door open and dropped it to the bench.

“Er...” murmured Charlotte. “I actually wanted it in my bedchamber.”

He muttered, hefted it to the other shoulder, then stomped across the corridor with it, booted the bedchamber door open and dropped it to the floor.

Twisting, he noted Charlotte’s eyes were riveted to his neck. His bare neck as he’d cast his cravat aside earlier in the eve when ledger calculations had caused a certain excess of perspiration.

“Forgive my state of déshabillé. I was not expecting to be disturbed by chains and giggling.”

Dinah giggled.

Charlotte curtsied. “You are forgiven, Your Grace.”

Inhaling deeply, he stabbed a finger out. “A word concerning the schoolroom, Miss Webster.” He strode out, back along the corridor to his room and shoved the door wide.

She shilly-shallied in the corridor outside.

“If you would? My time is expensive.”

“But a governess should never...enter a duke’s bedchamber,” she at last spluttered.

“This is not my bedchamber. This is my second study. Thus, I can work before sleep. I moved the actual bed to the valet’s room.”

“How...industrious,” came a mumble as she stepped into his second study and peered around. “It’s most...” She trailed off to an exhalation.



Frowning, he peered around also. What was wrong with it?

Shelves with ledgers. Folders. Deeds. Maps of the estate with the lands circled that he'd still to acquire. Including Charlotte's house.

"Most what?"

She wandered to the bookshelves, placed a finger to the spines of books concerning business. "Do you never read for pleasure anymore?"

"No."

"Dinah says you never go walking the fells either."

"No. Do you?"

A wry smile pulled at her lips. "A governess rarely has leisure time, Your Grace. And when I happen to have a day free, I return home to visit Marmaduke."

"Doubtless he misses you when you are working."

Her smile dimmed. "I do not know. Time... Time has no meaning for him anymore. A blessing and a curse. But his mind oft lives in the past. Some days, I am a little girl, other days my mother." She twisted. "Do you recall when we climbed Wansfell Pike on the longest day of the year?"

How could he forget?

The view of Lake Windermere and the fells spread before them had been stupendous, hues of every imaginable green, the waters glittering beneath the ever-shifting skies. Charlotte had been just seventeen and stood upon the summit like a pagan goddess,

wind loosening her hair to a stream of chestnut and fire.

“No.”

“Shame.”

“I wanted to inform you,” he abruptly stated, “that your chamber and the schoolroom will be moved. To a differing floor than that of my own quarters.”

“I remember your mother moving them down so she could have you close by her and not shut away on the gloomy third floor.”

“Times change.”

She skewered him with green eyes, evoking that day on the summit – the grass had been scant but mountain sorrel and wild thyme had festooned the edges of the shepherd’s path to the top.

“Yes, they do,” she whispered. “But never so much as that year we climbed Wansfell Pike.”

Marcus comprehended her meaning. For that same year, with just over two decades to his name, he’d left for London. To gain some experience of society.

“Good night, Miss Webster.”

She returned a seemingly sad smile. “Then I shall leave you in your tedium.”

The cheek of the saucebox!

“My ledger summing,” he drawled, staring down his nose at her, “is not tedious.”

A quirk of brow. “I wasn’t referring to the ledgers.” And she swished – if one could swish in dreary grey skirts – to the open door but then turned. “Oh, and we have our first Christmastide event two nights hence.”

Damn. He thought she might have forgotten about all that.

“We are to attend the Ambleside Christmas Ball at Fitzwilliam’s.” She stalked back to him and leaned near – musky heliotrope causing the hair upon his bare nape to stand on end. “So don’t forget your starched cravat.” And after a pat on the arm, she stalked back to the door and closed it softly behind her.

He prowled to his desk, shoved himself to his chair and glared at the open ledger.

Began to count.

The inked digits darted like restless fruit flies on spoiled apples and he slammed the ledger shut.

Shoved his elbows to the leather inlay and thrust fingers through his hair.

“The Christmas Ball,” he growled. “A past best forgot.”

### CHAPTER THREE

“No dramatic reading should be permitted till a certain age.”

Private Education: A Practical Plan for the Studies of Young Ladies.

Elizabeth Appleton. 1815.

Ribbons trimmed with gold and sprays of holly with portly berries bedecked the corridor to the schoolroom and Charlotte halted her step, to breathe in the scent of greenery and Christmas.

Under the direction of Mrs Mossop and Dinah, the footmen had been kept most busy with the decorations – too busy to move the schoolroom to the upper floor of the manor. Indeed, Miss Dinah Lovcott appeared to hold the servants in the palm of her dainty hand. As Charlotte had partaken of breakfast in the kitchens not a half-hour past, the housekeeper had praised the girl’s cheerful nature, a sprig of a footman had blushed a fiery scarlet and a housemaid had told how the little Miss so enjoyed hearing about the daily life of a servant – likely the maid would find herself the heroine of a romantic tale one day.

This morning was to be their first lesson and as Christmas was fast approaching, Charlotte had decided to dispense with the more onerous subjects and begin with a lesson on poetry. A verse to engage the young girl’s vivid imagination.

She crossed to a corridor window that overlooked a bare garden of winter and flicked open her governess manual – Private Education: A Practical Plan for the Studies of

Young Ladies.

Miss Appleton, the authoress of this rather hefty tome which had cost Charlotte a fortnight's wages, could always be relied upon to put her in the appropriate mood for a first lesson.

The morn light from the window was meagre but she ran a finger down the page...

One reading lesson of poetry in the week is surely enough for children, but we must be careful in our choice of pieces...

Poetry, treating too often of love or satire, excites the most powerful feelings and should be selected with the utmost care. We should be ever on our guard against them if we do not wish to implant the seeds of romance in our pupils.

Charlotte pursed her lips – it might be too late for that.

She'd headed to the schoolroom early in order to assess its collection of books and, with the guidance of her governess manual, to choose an appropriate piece. But Miss Appleton's list of suitable works was not extensive.

Tales of the Robin... An innocent and pretty work.

Ode on Solitude... Children are delighted to read.

Edwin and Angelina... A beautiful ballad, but there is too much of love in it.

Hmm.

Shoving the tome beneath her arm, Charlotte pushed open the schoolroom door, stepped forward and closed it behind her.

A comfortable room for a governess and her pupil, there was a lit fire, two oak desks sat opposite from one another and a long shelf bearing a row of pristine books. She wandered over to them. Arranged by height, they appeared untouched and—

The door flew open with such force that it toppled the weighted brass lion's paw door stop.

“Miss Webster! I'm so glad you're here!” Dinah brandished a leather-bound book aloft. “For I've discovered the most wonderful poem.”

“Good morning to you also, Dinah.”

“Oh. Yes. Good morning.” She closed the door and curtsied, eyes rounding to blue marbles. “And I apologise for not knocking. At my old school, Miss Fanshawe said she'd never known anyone with such energy in the mornings. That it was...exhilarative.” She pouted. “Or some word like that.”

Charlotte suppressed a smile. “Well, how fortuitous as I was considering poetry for a first lesson also. Is that book from the schoolroom?”

“Oh, no!” Dinah wafted a hand towards the bookshelf. “They're so dull. Ode on Solitude ! I ask you!” She wagged her nose. “Where's the romance? No, no. This came from Cousin Marcus' library.”

Charlotte fretted a little for who knew what unsuitable volumes the library held upon its shelves. She placed Miss Appleton's tome to the desk and wandered for the hearth to warm her hands. “Which poem are you enjoying so much, then? Perhaps we can study the structure. Detail the themes and assess what it teaches us about life.”

“Oh, yes! It's called Edwin and Angelina .”

Ah. The poem with too much of love in it. And not a poem that Charlotte herself was overly familiar with.

Her gaze slid along the mantelpiece decorated with laurel and to the mirror above. Last night she'd slept poorly, mulling on the further Christmas events, and shadows hung beneath her eyes like saggy shawls.

With a sigh, she twisted from her reflection to suggest they read a different poem—

A miniature portrait caught her eye, one that had been shoved behind a brass candlestick, and she reached for it.

It was of Marcus.

As he had been all those years ago.

His lips were curved, hazel eyes merry and his cravat was somewhat crooked.

At Dinah's age, Charlotte had certainly harboured seeds of romance within herself, powerful feelings flourishing and seeking of their own will. And all without the influence of poetry.

Just Marcus.

With a glower worthy of the man he was now, she shoved the miniature back behind the candlestick and turned.

But perhaps romance was overrated.

“Why not give me a synopsis of the poem, Dinah. It will be a good exercise in literary critique.”

Her pupil clasped hands together with such charm.

“A boy...” Dinah winked for some reason. “Lost and forlorn in the dale encounters a lonely ragged hermit.”

Charlotte perched on the edge of her desk.

“The hermit offers the lost boy his frugal dwelling and frugal fare, for the frugal hermit doesn’t eat meat but frugal herbs and frugal fruits.”

Charlotte rather wished she’d eaten another mince pie for breakfast.

“The boy accepts and enters the hermit’s frugal dwelling with its frugal fire.”

Frugality was certainly overrated.

“The hermit tries to cheer the boy but unable, asks him what the matter is? Could it be unrequited love? The boy’s answer is scornful of love and the hermit is in accord, telling him to spurn fair ladies when...” Dinah winked again. “The boy blushes, and... You’ll never guess, Miss...”

Charlotte shook her head.

“The boy admits that... He is really a she!”

“Well I never. And the hermit never suspected?”

“Of course not! For she was dressed ever so boyish. Then she relates her tale to the hermit, for in truth, she was the daughter of a wealthy lord and had suitors aplenty. She’d been fond of a wise and virtuous boy named Edwin but he’d been exceedingly poor while she’d been exceedingly fickle, too full of pride and, if you ask me, rather



bird-witted because due to his humble status, she'd spurned his love." Dinah sniffed. "So distraught had Edwin been that he'd left to seek solitude in a dale and...lay down and die."

"Poor Edwin. So did she marry one of her rich suitors?"

"Of course not!" The young girl huffed. "She'd felt naught but sorrow and fault, realising she was in love with Edwin. So, she'd disguised herself as a boy and left to seek him in that same solitude, lie beside him until..." A hand went to brow. "Death was also upon her." Her eyes closed. "Except..." Dinah flung her arms wide. "At that moment, the hermit... You'll never guess, Miss..."

Charlotte thought she might be able to guess but shook her head in any case.

"The hermit announces that he is Edwin!"

"Well I never. And the lost boy, er, girl, never suspected?"

"Of course not! For the hermit was ever so ragged. Then Edwin clasped Angelina to his heart and vowed they'd live and love so true, never to stray from the dale and never ever to part."

Dinah flumped into her desk chair and let out a long romantic sigh.

Charlotte peered to the window, to the freezing fog rolling across the lawn. "And so, Dinah, what do you think that teaches us about life then?"

"Well, considering they failed to recognise one another, I'd say..." A grin curved her pupil's lips. "If you need eyeglasses, wear them."

They both laughed and Charlotte knew they would deal very well together, for Dinah

was a delight, keen and intelligent, although with an impetuosity that could one day cause grey hairs for all concerned.

“Well, an excellent synopsis.” Charlotte circled her desk and sat. “Perhaps for the rest of the morn, we should discuss tomorrow’s Christmas ball and what will be expected of you. I am sure Miss Fanshawe’s School covered all the necessary etiquette but we will rehearse curtseys, formal introductions and comportment at the supper table.”

Dinah’s head bobbed eagerly, even her curls jumped for joy. “Thank you so much for permitting me to attend, Miss Webster. A Christmas Ball sounds soooo romantic.” Abrupt wrinkles creased her forehead. “Although I overheard Cousin Marcus say balls are dull. And that he dislikes dancing.”

Charlotte pressed a fist to her chest. Is that what he’d thought all that time ago at their Christmas ball together? When they’d danced?

But she smiled. “A Christmas ball can be anything you wish, Dinah. A time to meet old and new friends. A time to reflect or look forward. And a time, just once in a while, for romance. So I hope the duke will find some pleasure in it.”

And maybe, just maybe, she might win this damn wager.

### CHAPTER FOUR

“We can seldom excite and interest if we ourselves do not feel a portion.”

Private Education: A Practical Plan for the Studies of Young Ladies.

Elizabeth Appleton. 1815.

A draught eddied the white ribbons and winter ivy that dangled from the Fitzwilliam chandeliers till they resembled windswept branches and drifting snow.

Charlotte endeavoured to remember that she was only at this ball in order to persuade Marcus to stay for Christmas, to remind him of laughter and joy, but she'd become swept up by the festivity, by recollections of the past.

She'd chatted with childhood friends, now with their own children; she'd laughed with bachelors who'd a little more breadth to their midriffs; the past was everywhere.

“Oh, Miss Webster,” Dinah gushed in between gulps of lemonade, impossible blond ringlets spiralling. “This is wondrous. And I've made so many friends.” And before she could take another breath, Lucy from the next valley over Wansfell Pike seized Dinah's hand, and giggling, they skipped off towards the orchestra.

Charlotte smiled and sipped her champagne, glad to see her charge enjoying herself so much.

“She's too young to attend this ball,” grumped a grump over her shoulder.

Instead of whirling, Charlotte took her time. For the vision of Marcus in evening wear took its toll upon a woman.

A damson tailcoat clad his slender frame, a silver-grey waistcoat his chest. Black breeches snugly fitted and he wore a cravat that was indeed thoroughly starched.

Clean shaven, his handsome aspect was set to a scowl.

“It’s important for Dinah to gain experience at local affairs such as this, Your Grace, so she doesn’t feel daunted at the prospect of her future Season. I was sixteen at my first Christmas Ball. I recall my aunt wouldn’t let me dance.”

“But you did,” he stated low. “I saw you twirling alone on the balcony.”

She swallowed. “I hadn’t realised you’d seen me.” And how pathetic she must have looked. Then, at the following year’s ball, they had danced together thrice and she’d thought his eyes had declared such emotion... Yet it must all have been in her fanciful young head. “I suppose this hasn’t the sophistication of a London Christmas Ball.”

But, oh how beautiful it was.

Silver and white swags of silk curled and flowed around the Pomona-green walls, cossetting the many portraits in its embrace. Holly, rosemary and laurel burst from vases while hothouse roses of white floated in crystal bowls, the many candles setting the ballroom to a glistening paradise. And the final flourish... “Wansfell Pike, I noticed, had a dusting of snow this morning.”

“Bugger,” she thought to hear him mutter, so Charlotte gazed to the dance floor, a riot of shades and gaiety.

Along with the magical décor, there was also a jovial informality to this ball as the Westmorland district gentry and their families all knew one another. She'd spied Fitzwilliam's young son snaffling rum butter crackers from the refreshments table.

Yet there was no informality to Marcus. He endured at her side with a nigh bored expression, still and taciturn, although...

The stiller he appeared, the more a...tension seemed to resonate from him. It was akin to being stood next to a tuning fork.

Charlotte wondered at its cause and if—

“Miss Webster! What a pleasure! And why have we not seen you here for so long?”

Charlotte's gloved hand was seized, kissed, and she smiled at their host, Mr Fitzwilliam. A handsome gent, his blue eyes twinkled with merriment. Now a widower of five years, it was rumoured he was on the hunt for a wife.

“Mr Fitzwilliam. A pleasure also. But nowadays I am only a gov—”

“She's my guest,” Marcus cut in silkily, thrusting forth his hand. “How are you, Fitz?”

“Exultant to see you, Shawdale, it's been too long. I was just telling my boy about the Christmas you persuaded me to gift my tutor with a frog.”

Charlotte was sure Marcus' lips had twitched. “A toad, I think you'd find.”

“Well, of the amphibian class. And if you don't mind, I would be most delighted to whisk your guest off for a waltz.” He proffered an arm. “Miss Webster?”

For all of a moment, she hesitated, wishing Marcus had asked her first. But his face held that expression of ennui once more and, if Dinah was correct, he disliked dancing now, so with the broadest smile she had within her repertoire, she took Mr Fitzwilliam's arm and wended to the dance floor without a backwards glance.

Balling his fists, Marcus glowered as Charlotte whirled within Fitz's embrace. They suited one another – forever smiling the both of them. If they popped offspring, the whelps would be born with upturned lips.

But the thought of them indulging in such coital behaviour in order to beget said offspring caused him to grab a glass of champagne from a passing tray and glug it down in one.

Damnation, what was the point to all this?

Why had she brought him here?

To drive him to Bedlam?

Charlotte's slender body was garbed in a gown of the most exquisite silk – the colour of autumn leaves. He wondered how she'd afforded it as it looked costly. Had some other fellow gifted it to her?

He recalled the last time they'd danced. At this Christmas Ball when hosted at his own estate, some eight years past.

And how he had ached to kiss her.

Plunge his hands through her silken hair and touch her.

Yet she'd had but seventeen years and even though he'd been a young lad full of

raging desire, he'd also known she was too young, too innocent.

And then he'd gone to Lond—

“Oh, that was too much fun.” And Charlotte tumbled back into his sphere and being, her leaf-green eyes bright. “And Fitz has such stamina.”

Marcus grunted. “Also had his lips nigh at your ear and his hand on your derriere. A governess must be heedful of her reputation and ascertain ways to mitigate such advances.”

Her smile dropped and he felt an utter dullard.

“Your Grace...” She sniffed. “I have worked in many households of the Ton and am not innocent—”

“What!” he roared, causing a countess to drop her champagne.

“Shush! Not that...” She tutted at him as footmen arrived with brushes and pans. “Not innocent to the ways of fending off gentlemen, I meant. One viscount pinched my derriere so often, I took to wearing a cushion beneath my skirts.”

“What was his name?” he queried casually, fists balled once more. “I’ll break his fingers.”

She pursed her lips. “Bad for one’s references that would be.”

“Oh, Your Grace!” A lady toggled in more ruffles and tassels than the ballroom curtains barged forward, clasped her hands together and squealed in delight. “How wonderful to see you! Lady Paggett, you remember me?”

“No.”

“You’ll remember my daughter though. Agatha.” And from behind the ruffles, a girl of approximately seventeen was dragged forth – short and with even more ruffles. “We are off to London this year for her first Season, and I imagine her vast dowry and docile manner will establish her as a diamond of the first water.” She batted her lashes. “And not on the market for long.”

Ah, now Marcus remembered.

Lord Paggett owned land to the west and had hinted the girl’s impressive dowry would also include more than a few acres. She’d be the perfect bride. Money and connection. And he wasn’t getting any younger.

“May I have this dance, Miss Paggett?” he mechanically requested.

The girl simpered, so with a nod to Charlotte, he led Miss Paggett onto the dance floor for a quadrille.

“Are you enjoying the ball?” he asked while they stood awaiting the music to commence.

“Oh, yes, I adore it.”

From the corner of his eye, he noted Charlotte now stood awaiting the same dance one couple down with Sir Edward, a bachelor with a ten thousand a year income.

“And are you looking forward to London?”

“Oh, yes, I adore it.”



“And are you looking forward to Christmas?”

“Oh, yes, I adore it.”

He frowned.

The quadrille commenced and when he briefly crossed paths with his dance partner once more, he felt compelled to ask, “Do you enjoy walking?”

“Oh, yes, I adore it.”

“Where do you adore walking? The hills? Meadows?”

“The drawing room,” she replied. “I adore walking around the drawing room. Outside is so...undomesticated.”

Marcus stared down at her tepid eyes and wondered what the devil he was doing?

And why hadn't he asked Charlotte to dance yet?

As the couples circled and the music dipped, he heard her low chuckle, mocking his asinine choice of dance partner based on wealth and land.

Charlotte had nothing, no coin or dowry or habitable house, and yet she brimmed with such life.

When they'd first danced at that ball a lifetime ago, she'd been like a flame in his arms, full of vibrancy and repartee, slender body curving with his, so in step with one another.

He stared down to Miss Paggett. She was most pretty, no doubt had hidden talents,

and would make someone a perfect wife.

But that someone was not him.

It never was.

The dance came to a welcome end, so after delivering the girl back to her mother, he strode through the crowd, dodging acquaintances and ruffles to make his escape through the French doors and to the terrace.

Bloody freezing.

Deserted.

Lamps had been lit along the wall of the house and frost crystals sparkled off the stone, but the candlelight barely penetrated the night.

Out here was solemn and bitter cold whilst inside all was cheer and genial warmth.

He paced the bleak flagstones.

Agreeing to Charlotte's deal had been a mistake. He ought to put a stop to the whole matter. After all, he was a duke and so—

“Your Grace?”

And why had she stopped calling him Marcus?

“Miss Webster. I will be departing shortly but will send the carriage back for you and Dinah. Return inside. It's too bitter out here.”

“But you promised to attend my Christmastide events.”

“And I have attended.”

He could sense her just behind him. Heliotrope. Warmth. Honesty.

“Not for very long. But...how has it made you feel?” she whispered. “Surely it reminds you of the Christmases with your parents, when we were young. The fun and laughter?”

He breathed deep. Gritted his teeth. “Return inside, Miss Webster.”

“I do not understand. Have you not enjoyed it? The dancing and—”

He swivelled.

She was too close. Torrid fire before a backdrop of frosted stone. The only damn warmth in this cold night.

“Oh, yes,” he growled, “it reminds me of all that. And moreover it reminds me...”

A line creased her brow, the lanterns lighting her eyes to stars. “What?”

“You have no wish to know.”

“Yes, I do.” Then she sealed her fate as her gloved hand touched his sleeve. He could see her skin pebbling with the chill, the necklace he’d gifted her so long ago encircling her throat, breath misting with his own – entwined.

“Damn it, Charlotte, this is what it reminds me of.”

And he yanked her into his arms to kiss her.

Kiss her how he'd yearned to all that time ago.

But he was no longer a young lad so instead of some naïve brush of lips, he ravished.

Searching and urgent, crushing her to his body, kissing with an ardour that devoured him whole.

And despite the cold, Charlotte was anything but.

She was molten, passionate, and all he'd thrown away.

His lips seared to her cheek, earlobe, the scent of heliotrope so sweet while heady desire coursed its way through his veins, hardening loins in a moment, melting all restraint.

His hand grabbed her rump to press her closer – not close enough – and another hand clasped her nape, lips returning to clash and demand. He had to–

Laughter gushed as the French doors opened and glacial reality slapped his cheeks.

He stepped back, breath panting, arms dropping to his sides.

Hell and bloody damnation.

“That is what it reminds me of, Charlotte.” His fists clenched, nails biting into his palms, as he willed his body to calm. “But no one can go back,” he hissed. “So leave the bloody past where it belongs.” And he marched off to the corner of the terrace where steps led to the courtyard and the awaiting coaches.

Charlotte was akin to fire – incandescent, giving and everything he was not. He would only quench her flame with his cold heart.

Fanning herself with a hand, Charlotte watched Marcus stomp off, her skin rampantly hot, mouth tender, body pulsing.

What on earth had just happened?

Not that she'd minded in the least but—

A hushed sprinkle of snow drifted before her and she stared up to the heavens, watched the way the scant flakes began to fall within the realm of the lantern light like diamonds from the darkness.

“He’s right,” she whispered to the night, “the past should stay where it belongs. That cannot change or waver. But the future... That is anyone’s to embrace.”

### CHAPTER FIVE

“We must copy nature in her simplicity and in her majesty, in her smile and in her tears, in her tranquillity and in her phrenzies...”

Private Education: A Practical Plan for the Studies of Young Ladies.

Elizabeth Appleton. 1815.

A crisp wind gusted through the cobbled streets of Ambleside, sweeping it clean of the smattering of snowflakes.

Having concluded the appointment with his man of affairs, Marcus briskly stomped past the clattering hosiery mill, which had been rebuilt fifteen years previous with modern machinery. The noise of industry, although profitable, was damn deafening.

His pace held, cane swinging, despite a tip of hat for a lady and a nod for an acquaintance, but his boots did pause by the ancient slate-roofed Bridge House. Once an apple store, the minuscule dwelling was built upon an ageless bridge spanning the Stock Ghyll beck, the waters that were the lifeblood of Ambleside. He recalled how he and Charlotte used to dash through its tiny doors to the far bank.

Now a family lived there.

With a grimace, he hastened on up the gently sloping street. As a rule, his man of affairs would come to the manor, but today Marcus had felt a need to depart the house – to escape the scent of heliotrope, to avoid the holly that twined the bloody

banisters and to flee the seasonal piano music that drifted from the schoolroom that he'd yet to relocate to the third floor.

The town bustled like a well-paid housekeeper, the mills and market employing a goodly number of workers, and although he attended St Anne's Church each Sunday, he rarely walked the Ambleside streets anymore or attended the fairs. He'd even missed the Rush Bearing Ceremony in July, when they gathered sedges from the lakeside to replace the old with the new upon the church floor. In fact, it had been at least...hell, six years?

The chill wind fluttered his greatcoat capes while the sky threatened with lucent white cloud. Would it snow further, he wondered? Would he be snowed in and unable to leave for Carlisle?

And if that happened, would he be able to resist kissing Charlotte again?

Damnation, he should never have touched her.

All it had done was stoke the fire within that he'd thought extinguished. Now his imagination was not required to know how she'd feel in his arms, so vibrant and alive, twisting like flame.

But they could not go back.

He was a different man.

Although one who must apologise, for though he'd purged all sentimental emotions long ago, he was still a gentleman. The uncomfortable deed of an apology to Charlotte, however, would be akin to birching the bare soles of his feet.

The Salutation Inn lay ahead, a stagecoach impatiently waiting in the yard for the

passengers to embark, but Marcus passed the main door with the somewhat frail lintel proclaiming the establishment's birth of 1656 and made to collect his horse from the stables.

If he didn't dally, there'd be time for the quarry ledgers as they were merely clawing a twenty per cent profit and further value could be added by...

A shaft of sunlight dared to penetrate the cloud and he twisted, leaning on his cane to stare back down the street.

Struck by further shafts of sunlight were the distant hills beyond – browns and greens flecked with snow, the hues blending as though an artist had taken a brush to them.

How he used to adore striding the countryside. To feel the air in his lungs.

Memories stirred and bubbled, Charlotte asking whether he walked the fells anymore, and he wondered... He wondered if an hour away from his ledgers might not...be missed.

So, before cold logic could argue, he swivelled and hastened for the narrow lane that ran along the side of the inn, where one encountered the Stock Ghyll beck once more as it headed down into town. On the far side, bobbin mills roared their might, harnessing the now faster-flowing water, but as he continued up the lane, little by little the way became...quieter.

Nude winter branches stretched overhead to kiss like greeting lovers, the bank rising steeply to his right, and now one could at last hear the rush of water over stone. A few beech trees shone amongst the bareness, their copper leaves refusing to submit to winter's gelid hand, and a robin, finding refuge amongst them, sung with all his might.



The sounds of nature.

Nothing was more...valuable.

Clearing his throat at such whimsical waffle, he hastened on, losing the beck for some time as the lane ascended until an earth-tamped path veered left.

Smiling, he continued through woods scented with autumns past – damp leaves and lichen-clad stone. Ancient roots ripped the earth asunder but moss smoothed the wounds, slippery and magnificent in its intricacy.

And ahead, he could hear it.

The first waterfall.

Rains had been abundant this year and a glorious wide cascade gushed over a twenty-foot drop, white streams of beauty tumbling into the stone bed of the beck. He watched for a while, this endless feed of life-giving water, but then turned to head on up the steep path.

For the best was yet to come.

Further up the wooded ravine, the beck divided into three channels and a crash of water attested to the next set of cascades. The pathway was of beaten earth and sodden leaf, nature at its rawest, and he would have it all to himself. No need to be the duke or the businessman.

The water became louder and–

His boots halted.

“But sometimes it must be exciting to be a governess? Do you meet famous people?”

Dinah.

“Well, no, but I once saw Lord Byron as he came to a house party at my employer’s estate.”

Charlotte.

“Ooooh, did he speak to you? Did he fall in love with you?”

A man’s laughter.

Not a clue.

Marcus narrowed his eyes and crept closer.

“I’m afraid not,” replied Charlotte. “In fact, he failed to even glance my way.”

“Oh, dear.” A thespian sigh. “What a shame, Miss Webster. My readership might be disappointed at that, but one should never let facts get in the way of a good story. I can embellish.”

Utilising his cane for balance, Marcus leaned forward to peer around a tree...

A hatless Charlotte and a wrapped-up Dinah were watching the cascade while a gentleman to their side perched on a small stool, easel in front of him.

Marcus hummed and hawed. Should he make himself apparent or just slope off and—

A snap and all three of them turned to gawp.

“Cousin Marcus,” cried his ward. “Is that you behind that tree?”

His cane had shattered beneath his acute lean. Purchased in London, the shoddy stick was clearly not up to the rugged Lakes countryside, so he swiftly discarded it, sauntered out and tipped his hat as though dukes fell from trees every day.

“What are you doing here?” his ward asked with a frown.

“I was just...passing.”

Dinah peered this way and that. Charlotte’s eyes crossed in disbelief. And the gentleman rose from his stool.

“Your Grace. A pleasure. We met at the Association of Ambleside Business.”

“Ah, yes, Mr William Green, is it not?”

“Indeed.” And they cordially shook hands.

The gentleman was in his fifth decade or thereabouts and Marcus knew he had quite the talent for art, selling his paintings in a gallery within town.

“Look at this, Cousin Marcus. Isn’t his work a marvel?”

He perused the drawing. In just a few strokes of charcoal, the gentleman had caught the might of the waterfall and the bareness of winter. “It is beyond doubt a marvel.”

A ruddy hue gathered in Mr Green’s cheeks. “I am compiling a Tourist’s New Guide to the English Lake District and this might be included. There are so many special wonders here on our doorstep, are there not?”

Marcus' eyes had drifted to Charlotte who'd ambled towards the waterfall, her gaze fixed on its three channels of seventy-foot meanders down the ravine.

Parting, crashing, meeting and separating.

"Yes, indeed," he murmured.

"I wish I could draw." Another thespian sigh. "Then perhaps I could be a famous artist as well as an author."

Mr Green chortled. "Here, have some fresh paper and my charcoal and I'll show you some basic lines."

"Most kind," said Marcus.

With a wink, Mr Green led Dinah by the hand back to his stool and easel.

Ignoring that cold logic which again nagged him to return home, Marcus nonchalantly strolled to Charlotte and stared to the falls also.

"I haven't been here for years," she said softly, "and so thought we might make it before the snows come."

"I had the same notion," he answered. "Charlotte, I must apolo—"

"No." She twisted, gaze lowered. "I could have protested. And it was just a...just a kiss. Don't fret."

Just?

It had given him a restless night of turbulent dreams. So much so, he'd been forced to

rise and re-tally some variant sums in his ledgers.

Thoroughly vexed, he leaned close. “Did it not...” Both his breath and the breeze gusted the tendrils that had escaped her chignon. “Disturb you in the least? Did you not lie awake...”

Her lashes raised, eyes as green as the bedewed moss.

“Yes,” she whispered. “But that was because I was trying to think of a second Christmastide event for you to attend and came up with naught.”

Minx.

Though perhaps some small mercy as he could travel to Carlisle before any more of his wits were stolen by Charlotte. Before she roused further passions. Before he told her of London.

“But thankfully,” she continued, “Mr Green reminded me about Fred and Kitty.”

“Who?”

“The baker’s son Fred. And Kitty who works in the town dressmakers.”

Oh hell, please no, not—

“It’s their wedding tomorrow. What better event to celebrate Christmas than—”

“Mawkish sentiment and an excuse for them to demand costly gifts?”

She wagged her finger. “I expect you to be on your best behaviour. They are a fine young couple and destined to be together.”

Marcus briefly closed his eyes in sufferance.

Christmas and a wedding.

What could be worse...

### CHAPTER SIX

“It may be fashionable for a female not to sit with her spouse; but it is not, I apprehend, a very good lesson to instil.”

Private Education: A Practical Plan for the Studies of Young Ladies.

Elizabeth Appleton. 1815.

“Did you enjoy the ceremony?”

Marcus stretched his arms. “Very moving.”

Charlotte disregarded the somewhat sarcastic tone. “I thought so too. Fred and Kitty are so perfect for one another.”

He yawned. “Delightful.”

With a roll of eye, Charlotte clutched her thin shawl close about her neck. The wedding ceremony had taken place in the cold of St Anne’s Church, with many an askew glance that the duke had deigned to attend.

Now they followed the jubilant procession through town. Children dashed, farmers chatted and even the dogs barked with joy.

A feast was to be provided within The Unicorn inn on North Road, and as the groom’s father was the famed baker of Ambleside’s breads and delicacies, the

procession was considerable.

Dinah had been given permission to walk with her new friends which left Charlotte alone with the duke, and although her arm was latched through his, today it was akin to clutching a plank of wood. Indeed, as Marcus was also at his most laconic, a plank of wood could be deemed to have more personality.

Maybe she should...prod a little.

“Have you...never been in love? Like they are?”

The plank of wood creaked. “Perchance...once.”

Was that the reason he’d returned from London so cold, closing his emotions to joy?

“A-and? Did it end badly?”

“I found that...” The plank imperceptibly shivered. “I found I was not worthy.”

Charlotte frowned and nigh tripped over her boots. Not worthy?

What bird-witted goosecap would find Marcus unworthy?

She was about to interrogate further but The Unicorn inn came into view.

Two lines of guests stretched out from the ribbon-strewn door and waited for the bridal couple who’d been obliged to tarry in the church and sign the registry.

Amongst the babble and excitement, she and Marcus joined a line.

Everyone wore their Sunday best: velvet bonnets and beaver hats, finest woollen



skirts and worsted waistcoats, although many a sturdy boot could be spied beneath an elegant petticoat trim as the roads were icy.

The duke's attire was pristine, of course. Top boots were shined to a mirror, fawn buckskins held not a crease, and his cravat was white as frost.

Cheers and applause erupted as the happy couple at last arrived on a hay cart. Soft heather and glossy laurel were tied to the wooden slats and even the stout workhorse had green ribbons twined in his mane.

The groom with his boyish looks descended, cheeks ruddy as he held forth slender arms for his bride.

With brown pretty curls and bright-blue eyes, Kitty tumbled into them with a laugh and a kiss.

Whoops abounded, along with some rather ribald suggestions from the farmhands, so the bride drew away with a blush, keeping a death grip upon her new husband's hand.

One could tell her dress and coat were patched but the fresh ribbons that curled her hair, the white lace at her cuffs and the sheer jubilation that shone in her eyes meant it mattered not a jot.

The morn sky was a hoary grey but all were in high spirits as the wedded couple embarked down the corridor of beaming well-wishers and old women casting herbs for luck, to arrive at the decorated door, applause heralding their entrance to the inn. Guests followed suit, a lengthy line of stamping feet and empty stomachs.

"I should not be here," growled the duke. The plank of wood was no longer quite such a plank but more akin to a wind-blown oak as he leaned near. "This is for the townsfolk."

“There are other gentry here,” assured Charlotte, “and I told townspeople to tell other townspeople to all ignore you. We are merely here to bear witness to the wedded couple’s happiness.”

Removing his hat, he scowled but dipped his head to pass beneath the inn’s lintel before a barmaid showed them to a finely laid table.

“This is not ignoring me,” he grouched, as although the wedded couple and family were seated at tables, most of the townsfolk had to make do and stand.

More guests piled in and soon it was chock-full: lads perching on the stairs, Dinah and her friends giggling in the corner, the handful of local gentry discussing horseflesh at the bar.

This inn was said to be the oldest in town, and acorns together with horseshoes to gather luck had been added to the usual dried hops hanging from the low beams.

At the clang of a pan lid by the beaming but exhausted-looking landlady, a host of kitchen lads brought forth the food: game pies with golden crusts curled in perfection; a roast of the local Herdwick Hogget sheep – somewhere between tender lamb and strong-flavoured mutton; a vast curled sausage spiced with pepper and nutmeg; Windermere char fish; thin oat clap-breads; and roasted chestnuts.

A sizeable game pie was placed upon their table, along with roast potatoes and bread sauce.

Charlotte nigh slavered at the sight but felt a nudge to her side.

“The guests are dropping coin into a pot on the newly-weds’ table. What’s that about?”

She frowned. “As in the old Lakes tradition, the couple have asked for money not presents.”

“Hah,” the plank muttered. “And you claimed that glossy guineas mattered not.”

“Don’t be preposterous, Marcus. I meant they should not be...not be what defines us.”

“Well, I say it’s not right of them to take money from relatives and townsfolk and then spend it on hell knows what. Even poor Blind Will has put coin in.”

Charlotte blinked.

Surely he knew?

Marcus helped himself to the Ambleside baker’s magnificent game pie that had never been matched by his London chef, despite the additions of mangetout and herbes de Provence .

Maybe those additions were where he was going awry.

“Your Grace! What a kindly and pleasant deed to grace us with your graceful presence, Your Grace.”

Rising to his boots, Marcus shook the baker’s hand with fervour. “No need for that, Luke. I filched enough of your pies as a cub to rid us of formality.”

“Aye, that you did. I remembered game was your favourite, so made sure Nussy brought the largest one over.”

It was so kind and Marcus felt an absolute curmudgeon that he’d not visited

townspeople and tenants for some time, leaving it all to his steward.

He picked up his glass of ale and raised it forth. “I toast your son and his beautiful wife. To many, many years of happiness.”

The baker’s eyes dropped, skittered to Charlotte. “Aye, well, Your Grace. We can only hope. There but for the grace of God, eh...Your Grace?”

Blinking at all those graces and feeling as though he was missing something important, Marcus nodded. “Just so.”

As the rotund baker turned to the next table, Marcus sat and gripped Charlotte’s wrist before it could fork another roast potato into her mouth.

“What are you not telling me?”

“I thought you knew...” She sighed. “You used to be so perceptive, Marcus. Look around. What do you see?”

He perused the inn.

Lads fought over bowls of pork crackling; men propped up the bar and discussed the harvest – it’d been abysmal; women of the town crowded the fireplace, cradling babes; and a hound chomped crusts that a tot was feeding it under a chair.

His eyes shifted to the newly-weds’ table where various children squabbled, an uncle was two sheets to the wind and the bridesmaid was flashing her ankles at the best man.

All in all, a normal wedding.

Then he looked anew.

His gaze fixed on the bride who refused to release her husband's hand. Then Luke the baker whose mournful eyes flitted back and forth to the couple. The mother of the bride's lips smiled yet held a tremble...

"It ought to be a scene of elation," he said quietly. "The groom's cheeks are glowing more than the bonnie bride's but...there's something not quite right. A hint of melancholy."

"Indeed, Marcus. But that's not a glow," she murmured. "Fred has a lung illness. The doctor says he must leave this damp Lakes climate or he won't live to see next Christmas. The townsfolk are giving money to pay for their travel and board further south. Even then, it might not be enough to help his lungs."

Marcus felt as though he'd been punched in the gut.

Now he could sense it. See it. The guests laughed and gambolled but with the knowledge that happiness could be too fleet.

"Why didn't you tell me? This did seem an odd month for a wedding."

"I thought you knew up until you grumped of the money. Fred is a tenant of yours. As is Luke."

"I don't interfere in their private matters," he bit out. "And how can they be so damn cheerful? Why is Kitty marrying him? She could be a widow in six months, left with child."

Charlotte stared at him, and he could not look away from the hurt in her green eyes.

“She loves him, Marcus. If Kitty has but a few months with him, then I believe she considers it worth the possible heartbreak. He is worth it. And besides, did not the bard say, ‘What is love? ’Tis not hereafter: Present mirth hath present laughter.’”

With mind awirl, Marcus stared to his plate, the table stuffed with food, a cost that could contribute towards their travel, and he couldn’t consume a damn morsel.

“I need... I need some air.” He rose and with a curt bow, blundered through the throng and escaped out the side door.

There, he leaned back against an outer stable yard wall, shoving hands through his hair.

What the hell was Charlotte doing to him?

This was why he couldn’t involve himself in the lives of the townsfolk. It affected him overmuch and a detachment was necessary in order to run a profitable estate for everyone’s benefit.

“No!” a girl shouted from within the stable yard. “He’s no skinflint, I tell you.”

“Is so,” a lad retorted. “The steward says he wants Widow Brockbank out her house within a month. Not her fault her eldest broke his leg with that old tiller.”

“I’m sure he just doesn’t know that. He’s not a skinflint, just...just careful.”

Dear heaven, and Marcus closed his eyes as his ward defended him as best she could.

Why did she bother?

He was the curmudgeon who was going to leave Dinah alone for Christmas. Who’d

asked his secretary to choose presents for her birthday.

“Pah,” said the lad. “He’s a tightfisted—”

“No! My father said he was the kindest boy at school. One who fought the bully-ruffians and...and—”

“Tightfist. Penny-pincher. Muckworm,” jeered the lad before...

A splash and...

“Oy, yer little bitch, I’m gonna—”

Marcus tore around the corner and hauled the drenched lad from the horse trough before he could lay one finger on Dinah.

“Away with you,” he hissed. “And never use such language with ladies.”

The young lad scowled but Marcus released him and he scarpered.

Dropping one knee to the muddy courtyard in front of Dinah, Marcus patted her ruffled curls and flushed cheeks. “Are you well? Did he touch you?”

“No, Cousin Marcus. I-I didn’t mean to push him in the trough.”

He crushed her into a hug. “I’m not worth it, Dinah,” he whispered into her hair.

“But...but...” She drew back and patted his shoulder. “Papa said you were good and kind, and Papa was always right. But he’s not here anymore so you need someone else to stand up for you.”

Damnation, he felt tears burn at the back of his eyes. “You mustn’t...” He cleared his throat. “I’m not worthy of any...”

“To us you are, Marcus,” came a soft voice from behind. “Come, the both of you, before we miss the special mince pies Luke has baked.” They both twisted to Charlotte who smiled. “Or miss the jug-bitten uncle who’s about to make a speech. Or miss the search for the bridesmaid who’s disappeared...as has the best man. Or miss Fred and Kitty who are to dance their first jig as a wedded couple.”

Marcus got to his feet, breeches besmirched, boots likewise, cravat skew-whiff and hair doubtless at all angles.

But he held out a hand to Dinah. “Shall we, my lady?”

She giggled and lifted her skirt hem, even though it was soiled and sodden, to give a dainty curtsy. Then she reached out to clutch his hand.

Marcus turned and thrust forth his other hand, bare and somewhat soiled also.

Charlotte clasped it and his fingers curled around hers.

“Let us ‘do nothing but eat and make good cheer,’” he said with a smile. “For time is precious and fleet for us all.”

And Marcus led them both from the cold and into the welcoming warmth of the inn.



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:58 pm*

### CHAPTER SEVEN

“Every one of us may, and does commit mistakes in judgment, memory, and perception.”

Private Education: A Practical Plan for the Studies of Young Ladies.

Elizabeth Appleton. 1815.

“ U ncle Marmaduke?”

“Yes, Charlotte?”

“Why are you wandering in the duke’s rose garden?” With one hand, she wrenched her cloak tight against the teeth of bitter cold that sought to nip her. With the other, she lifted her lantern. “It’s almost midnight.”

Wearing a green woollen banyan, Marmaduke frowned, twisting his beard to a spiral. “I must find Martha. Before it snows.”

In sadness, Charlotte smiled and brought a hand to his arm. “I do not believe she is here, Uncle.”

A dejected sigh flowed from him. “I am beginning to fear the same. Perhaps...perhaps she is no more.”

“Perhaps so.” She squeezed his arm. “Shall we go home now?”

Marmaduke shivered. "'Tis rather nippy, isn't it? Colder than the Himalayas, I'd say. And darker." He twisted and held her freezing cheek. "You are the best sister I have, Mary."

"Mary is your only sister."

"Isn't she just." He chuckled to himself. "Oh, look. Who's that? And what's she doing out in this frosty weather, eh? She'll catch her death."

Wrapped up in a housecoat, two cloaks and a scarf, Hannah Munro came dashing into the rose garden, lantern swinging. "Oh, I'm so sorry, Miss Webster. He must have left through the kitchen door. The latch has come away where the frame's rotted."

Marmaduke tutted.

Charlotte closed her eyes. "It's my fault, Hannah. I'll...I'll try to fix it in the New Year."

"Don't yer fret, miss. I'll have one of my lads nail it back on further up. They're home for Christmas."

"Thank you, Hannah, you're a blessing. I'll walk you back and—"

"No need," came a low rumble from the darkness. "I've instructed the stablemen to ready a carriage to take Mr Wainwright and Mrs Munro home."

Charlotte swallowed. Oh no. He's seen Uncle.

"Your Grace!" gushed Hannah. "Thank you, but you mustn't put your stablemen out this late. 'Tis not far if we nip through the hedge and we've done it a few times now."

Charlotte winced while the duke frowned.

Uncle Marmaduke merely raised a bushy white brow. "I remember you," he said to the duke. "Such a thoughtful lad. Nice to see you haven't changed."

The thoughtful lad nodded. "Charlotte, go to my study as the fire there is still lit. The terrace doors are unlocked. Mr Wainwright, Mrs Munro, it's no bother at all and a carriage will be warmer. If I may escort you to the stables? This way."

Hannah beamed while Marmaduke followed along, enquiring if the duke had seen his beloved Martha anywhere about the place.

Charlotte loitered, watching their lanterns disappear into the dark before, with a weary trudge, she made for the duke's terrace. A gust of wind blew, chill and bitter, and she paused to stare into the foreboding night sky that brooded with the scent of snow.

What was she to do about Uncle?

Some quarter of an hour ago, she'd been lying in bed upstairs in her governess chamber unable to sleep, when she'd heard footfall on the gravel of the duke's garden outside.

A thief? A badger?

She'd crept to the window, drawn back the shutter, and in the weak moonlight that seeped through the soft clouds, she'd spied her uncle, looking somewhat like St Nicholas on his Christmas rounds.

Throwing on her woollen cloak, she'd prayed the duke was safely tucked up in bed as she still worried he may use Uncle's trespass in his gardens to tell her she should sell

the house to him and use the money for Uncle's care at some asylum.

Or tell her the obvious: that her precious home was crumbling away.

Once it had been a beautiful house, when Mother had been alive, but she'd died when Charlotte had reached twelve years and her father had increasingly stayed in London – drinking and gambling. Years' worth of repairs had not been made and now Charlotte couldn't afford any either.

The stairs had woodworm, the chimney breasts percolated smoke and the roof joists were rotten. Her governess pay was not enough for its upkeep. Yet it was her home – her constant haven and future security. And now Marmaduke's place of refuge too.

She stared to the cold night sky, watching her breath mist and vanish before wiping away a foolish tear. She never cried – what was the point?

“Charlotte? What the hell are you doing?”

Twisting, she was caught up in a black cloak, warm and scented with leather and Marcus. “I...”

“You're freezing.”

She watched him reach for her hands but could hardly feel them. “I-I...” Her teeth chattered.

“Damn it, why are you still out here?” And she was hastened to the terrace door, the handle was twisted and she was propelled none too gently inside.

A fire crackled in the study hearth while a half glass of amber liquor sat on the desk aside reams of papers and documents.

Cosy warmth, shelter and protection.

The terrace door was bolted, a hefty curtain drawn across, a leather-upholstered chair lifted with little effort and placed aside another by the fire. Then she was thrust into it before he shook off his greatcoat and a glass of similar amber liquor appeared in her hand.

“Drink.”

Charlotte obeyed. Well, sipped at least. The glass clattered on her teeth and the brandy seared her throat.

“I-I’m fine. I was just wool-gathering.”

“You were crying.”

One tear. That’s all it had been, hadn’t it?

“The c-cold made my eyes water,” she muttered, opening a palm to the flames.

Marcus grunted and kneeled before her, flipping her hem upwards.

“What are you doing?” she nigh shrieked.

“Your feet are wet.”

In truth, she could not feel them to know they were wet.

“A governess should never reveal her ankles.”

“Charlotte, I have seen them before. I used to lose our wager of running to the

tinker's cart deliberately so I could lag behind and watch you hoick your petticoats."

"How contemptible," she said, waggling her toes as he eased off her frost-sodden boots.

"I know. I felt all sorts of a lecherous fiend but the sight of your ankles caused me odd sensations at that stage of boyhood."

"Harrumph. And I suppose you moved on from ankles when you went to London."

He glanced up, scowled. Then stood.

Oh, why had she said that?

Her glass was refilled before he turned to loiter in profile to her, staring into the flames.

His throat was bare of cravat, shirt loose and waistcoat unfastened, and yet he seemed more aristocratic than ever.

Not the eager boy she'd known but a formidable man of command and strength.

"Thank you for offering the carriage, Marcus."

"You need a footman at your house."

She stayed silent.

"And the door frames fixed. It's not safe. If you sold me the place—"

"It's my home," she railed. "And that of Marmaduke. W-where would he go? I

suppose you'd send him to some madhouse."

He spun. "But if you sold that colossal old place, you could buy something smaller. In the town, perhaps? With neighbours to help you. My intention is simply to assist you when I offer to buy your house."

Oh.

Charlotte closed her eyes. "I suppose...perhaps, you're right." She opened them and sipped the brandy. "It's just... It's my home too. So many memories are there."

"Memories are not in the fabric of a house, Charlotte. They are held within yourself, never to be forgotten. Even ones we'd rather forget thrust their way to the damn surface to catch us unawares."

Her lips curved to a smile. "Such whimsey sounds like the old Marcus."

"No." He grimaced. "He is no more."

"What... What happened to him?"

The fire spat, his shirt rustled, yet he made no reply.

But the brandy had compelled a certain boldness within her. "When you came back from London, Marcus, you...you'd changed. I... It was as though we were all too lowly for you. Country bumpkins that—"

"Leave it be, Charlotte," he growled. "Leave it in the past."

"But..." She stood, her thin cloak and his woollen one tumbling to the leather chair. "You left Ambleside as a...a carefree, l-lovable young man and returned a haughty

duke who seemed to think only of money.”

He twisted, nostrils flaring as he took in her déshabillé of solely a night-rail. “I do not wish to discuss it.”

“But—”

“Not now, Charlotte. You wouldn’t understand.”

“I thought you hated me and—”

“Bloody Hades, Charlotte, it wasn’t you I hated but myself!” He pinched his forehead. “Leave it be, I beg of you.”

“I don’t understand.” She reached for his sleeve. “Why would you—”

“Because I lost it all!” he thundered, grabbing hold of her upper arms, bringing her so close to him – warm skin and leather. “Satisfied now?”

“Lost...” She frowned. “What do you mean?”

Shaking his head, he abruptly released her to pace the rug, muttering, fingers raking through his hair. Then he paused, thrust hands to hips. “Oh, why not? Why the bloody hell not?” And he swivelled, eyes fierce.

Charlotte lowered herself back into the chair and remained silent.

“When I left for London, I was so cocksure of my future. Mother wanted me to go, to take my place in society, but I was keen also to gain worldly experience, have a lark, attend the theatre, balls and have a bushel of friends. I would drink and carouse while young.” He scowled. “Then, I told myself, after a year or so when you were old



enough, I would return and whisk you off your slippers. We'd..."

He inhaled sharply.

As did she.

For so many years, she'd thought that emotion in his eyes at the Christmas Ball had been youthful folly. "Why didn't you?" she whispered.

His lips were gnarled with bitterness.

"Because it was me who'd been the country bumpkin in London, Charlotte. Green as a sapling. I had no elder to guide me and I was..." He snorted. "I was fleeced at every turn. Plucked and hustled. My new exciting crowd of friends took me to gaming dens and we'd wager on the most preposterous contests. At first, it was just a bit of fun. I was rich and the dukedom had enough money. I told myself it was only a few quid." He quaffed his brandy in one gulp. "But those cardsharps can smell a gullible young fool of a newcomer at thirty paces. They beguiled me. Befriended me. Duped me. I'd no idea. And it spiralled. I lost guineas and guineas. I got...scared. So, I gambled more to recoup the losses. Except one never does, you know. I started to offer my unentailed lands and deeds to businesses. I was likely hoodwinked lock, stock and barrel. And I...I bankrupted the estate."

Charlotte closed her eyes. "Oh, Marcus, why did you not tell us?"

"Why!" he almost yelled. "I'd returned to hell. Mother was ill, your father had died, and I so wanted to help you all. Damn, how I wanted to help. But there was no money, nothing, and I was still drowning in debt and creditors. I was..."

"If you'd told us..."

“No.” His voice was hoarse. “I was shamed. A disgrace to you. I could not bear to look at all the people here who relied upon me, whom I’d betrayed. Tenants and townsfolk. I’d nigh thrown away their future. And then there was you, my dear Charlotte, who in my absence had been left destitute through no fault of your own, while I...” He fisted his chest. “I had thrown away any future we might have had on the turn of cards and roll of dice.” His breath heaved. “I could not look you in the eye because...” His throat bobbed. “Because...there was worse...”

Charlotte hugged arms around herself, eyes moist. Could not speak.

“Because when I was desperate,” he continued in a whisper, “and full of cheap liquor, when I was so afraid and drowning, I...” He turned to the fire and she strained to hear him. “At a card game of deep play, I... I cheated.”

“Cheated?” She’d never known anyone as honourable as Marcus.

But he slowly nodded. “You recall our venerable butler who taught us some tricks?”

“Y-yes. Old Lanton?”

“I-I thought if I could just...gain some back, I could make a new start. So, I... I cheated.”

Charlotte swiped away a tear. She knew the gentleman’s code. Raise a fist to your wife and the Ton shrugged but if one was labelled a cheat... You and your family would be ostracised from society forever.

Another tear fell. Because for Marcus to do such a thing was so contrary to his nature, it meant he had been in an exceedingly desolate place.

With no other hope.

“And?”

“Old Lanton’s tricks were for children. I was caught.”

“Oh, Marcus.”

He closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against the mantle. “The...the man I cheated... I shall forever see that moment in my mind’s eye. He looked at me with such...distaste. And then he leaned forward and slapped my cheek with his glove, demanding recompense, and no apology I could stutter out was enough, so...”

“No, Marcus, not...” She rammed a fist to her mouth.

“So, two days later,” he rasped, “at a dawn full of drizzle and mist, I found myself in Saint James’ Park, readying to face a duel of honour with Lord Woodford, a man twice my age. All my so-called friends had deserted me, of course, and only Cousin Thomas stood at my side.” Marcus twisted, his face stark with pain. “My hand was shaking so badly I could hardly lift the pistol from the black velvet of the box. I was sick to the stomach. I didn’t want to die. I didn’t want to kill.” He scrubbed a hand over his face. “Soldiers say that when you think your life is to end, you see past moments flash before your eyes, but that wasn’t so with me.” He shook his head and stared to her. “I saw the future I’d thrown away. I saw a prosperous estate. Our Christmas Ball. My mother smiling. I saw you.”

Charlotte let the tears flow. Could picture it all. Marcus scared and alone in a fog-cloaked field, a pistol in his young quaking hand. Back-to-back with his opponent. Ready to walk, turn and...

“Did...did you...”

“I stumbled those twenty paces whilst with each step I vowed... I vowed that if I

lived, then I would never cease until I had recouped all the monies. I vowed to work till I dropped.” Marcus lowered himself into the chair beside her. “But I knew I could not do that with a man’s death scarring my soul. So, I turned, straightened my trembling arm. And I...I shot in the air.” His lungs heaved. “Then I waited. I waited for death. Or another chance at life. I waited for pain. I watched Lord Woodford’s pistol lift. Watched the barrel level and steady at me.”

Charlotte held her breath.

“And he too shot in the air.”

She let it flow.

“I fell to my knees as Thomas rushed to me. And I promised there and then on my father’s grave to fulfil my vow.” He flung his head back in the chair. “Hell, Lord Woodford could see well enough the state of us both, dragged us to his carriage, and I found myself blurting all that had happened to me. He listened, told me he admired my honour during the duel and so...so he...lent me money, with conditions, a lot of conditions. But he aided me in brokering plans of payment with the creditors, guided me on business and gave me a chance, took me under his wing and I swore to him... I swore I would pay him back. Every single penny.”

Charlotte struggled with emotions so fierce and overwhelming. “Did-did your mother know of...”

He slammed his eyes shut. “I never told her of the duel. I...couldn’t, but I had to tell her of the monies lost as we needed to economise. Hell, the look in her eyes, Charlotte. She was so disappointed in me. You could see it.” He pinched his brow. “I begged her forgiveness.”

“And she would have.”

“I think so,” he whispered. “You remember Mother, a kind word for everyone, and she told me she’d no doubt I’d regain it. That it was only money.”

“And you did regain it. So she must have seen—”

“No, Charlotte.” He grimaced. “The losses I made could not be recouped in those years alone. She died while I was still struggling, interest still mounting.” He gave a bitter laugh. “I know I project an aura of wealth and attend all the right clubs in order to broker deals as money begets money, but the truth of the matter is that although the estate is just about running in credit, I still have one more year of debts to pay. It’s not over. Even now.”

Lines of fatigue furrowed his brow, eyes glazed in pain as though the past was here and now.

Charlotte swiped at her wet cheeks. How wrong she had been. And she knelt on the rug beside his chair, to clutch his hand.

She brought his knuckles to her lips.

What could she say?

“It sounds to me,” she said at last, “that throughout your despair, those who truly knew you never lost faith in you to rebuild what was lost. Your mother, Thomas, Lord Woodford. They saw the good in you that I see. The kind man who only wants to ensure the estate’s future. Your honour at the duel that saved your life. They all forgave you. But...it seems to me that you have not forgiven yourself, Marcus. The young man who made a mistake, like we all do. I understand—”

“Can you?” His eyes sought hers. “I threw away our future. I should have been able to help you when your father died. Instead you had to leave your home, become a

governess and...”

“I have managed, Marcus. I... It has not always been easy but I have made a life for myself. And I now understand what drives you and your need for more but... Do not forget who and what you work so hard for – Dinah and the tenants. The memory of your mother and your cousin Thomas. Do not lose sight of that honourable and kind man who we are all...all so fond of.”

He rubbed his stubbled cheek. “I’m not sure he’s inside me anymore.”

“Oh, he is. I have seen him.” She smiled. “I’ve seen him being kind to my uncle. I’ve seen him care for Dinah.”

I’ve felt it when he kissed me.

“And,” she continued, “I renounce our deal.”

His head shot up. “What?”

“It was unfair of me to suggest it. If you need to go to Carlisle for the prosperity of the estate, then...you must go. I shall be governess here unpaid until a school is found for Dinah.”

“Charlotte... No...” He clutched her arm. “You need the money. And you still have one last Christmastide event for me?”

“It doesn’t matter—”

“I wish to attend it,” he said firmly. “And you will be paid no matter what. After all, we...we are friends, are we not? Always have been.”

Charlotte forced a smile. “Of course. And...very well. Tomorrow night then. After which, you must go to Carlisle.”

“Tomorrow night.”

So with a nod, she stood and slipped from the study before she did something foolish.

Like tell him she loved him. That she’d always loved him.

That she always would.

### CHAPTER EIGHT

“At meals, people should be careful to accustom themselves to every delicacy of behaviour.”

Private Education: A Practical Plan for the Studies of Young Ladies.

Elizabeth Appleton. 1815.

A shadowed spectre seemed to hover over the manor house as dusk fell, clouds gathering apace, the air harsh with cold.

Marcus frowned from the carriage window before twisting to Charlotte. “Why the devil are we at old Grimslee’s place?”

“You wished to attend my third event, so this is it.” Her eyes shone bright in the coach’s lantern light. “The Duke of Shawdale, that’s you, and a guest, that’s me, have been invited to dinner. With a few other neighbours.”

“He sends a yearly Christmas invitation which I always refuse. The wine is watered down and the meat unidentifiable – likely the corpses of his servants.”

Charlotte smirked. “Too late to be lily-livered now. You agreed.”

With a growl, Marcus threw himself back into the squabs. “If you’re not careful and I leave here famished, I’ll have my governess for dinner.”



Silence fell as Marcus ruminated on nibbling Charlotte's nape before the carriage came to an abrupt halt.

He peered through the window once more. The manor was straight out of some Radcliffe novel – not that he'd read them, of course. Nude twisted creeper stems smothered the stonework and the steps looked mossy and dank.

“Did you know,” Charlotte said whilst gathering her cloak about her russet dress, “that Grimslee is Lord Crockett's second cousin? The man you are to deal with regarding canals.”

“I did. But then everyone seems to be related somehow in this area.”

The coach door opened and a meagre globe of light shone forth.

“Welcome,” declared a rasp, “to Roachford Manor. The master is awaiting you in the parlour.”

Marcus rolled his eyes.

They followed the skeletal butler up the steps, through the front door and down a hallway, dingy as Hades and reeking of mould.

Marcus cast a glance to Charlotte, his emotions a shimmering cascade.

After raking up the past last night, he'd expected to sleep poorly as nightmares still tormented him on occasion – of himself as a callow youth, scared, trembling and facing death.

Yet instead, he'd dreamed of Charlotte, of chasing her over fells trimmed with snow. She'd hoicked her petticoats, flashing her ankles with a laugh, and he'd felt...young

again.

Joyful.

Last night, she'd listened. Understood why he'd become the man he was. But he was aware she would need time to assimilate his revelations. In the cold light of day, she might well feel resentment towards him for ruining everything.

The funereal-black parlour door was opened and they paused on the threshold.

In utter silence stood five people, as though attending a wake and not a Christmas dinner – the dour host, his dour wife, the vicar who hoped to save Grimslee's eternal soul, Sir Edward Spratt who would attend a sacrifice if there were free victuals, and a young Mr Slater who was new to the Lake District having inherited a goodly sum; he looked petrified.

“Shawdale,” crooned Lord Grimslee, gliding forward, a gaunt hand appearing from his dark sleeve. “So pleased you could attend this year. And I hear you are to do business with my cousin Crockett.” His lips formed a line – possibly a smile? “Welcome to the family.” A hacking laugh sprung forth.

It gave Marcus the shivers.

“Grimslee. A...pleasure to be here. And nothing is signed yet. May I introduce my guest, Miss Webster?”

The lord gave a shallow bow and then raised an eyeglass. “Ah, John Webster's chit. A governess now, I hear?” His magnified eye lingered on her décolletage. “Lucky you, Shawdale, eh?”

Marcus gritted his teeth and stepped forward to—

“No longer a chit, my lord,” replied Charlotte with a pull on Marcus’ coat-tails. “And yes, I am a governess.”

“The best,” interrupted the vicar, rubbing his hands together for warmth. “Miss Webster was governess to my brother’s daughter in Keswick for a year and wrought miracles.”

Charlotte curtsied with a broad grin. “How pleasant to see you again, Vicar. And Rosie is an adorable girl, just...”

“Has feathers in her head, you can say it, Miss Webster. We all adore Rosie but she just gets in such a fluster.”

“I fear she is quite shy, Vicar, and reacts as such when people focus on her. We sought ways for her to feel calm in company.”

“Pah!” croaked Grimslee. “Sounds like she needs a sound beating and a school for correction.”

The young Mr Slater nervously chuckled. “Oh, goodness, you shouldn’t joke, Lord Grim...” No one else joined in and he cleared his throat. “It wasn’t a joke?”

“No,” said Grimslee, pitch-black eyes narrowing. “I never joke.”

Marcus cleared his throat. He’d once thought nothing could be worse than that carriage journey home to the Lakes after his time in London.

“Your ward?” Grimslee muttered. “Have you a suitor in mind?”

He frowned. “She’s fourteen.”

“Marry her off as soon as you can. My cousin Lord Harris is hunting a wife.”

“He’s in his sixties. And has gout.”

“Your point? Our daughter married Blakley. Fifty-eight years to his name but with two hundred acres to the west and robust loins. Thought you were seeking to expand your own acreage?”

Marcus thought of Dinah’s youth and vibrancy sold off for a couple of fields. “My ward will marry whom she chooses.”

Grimslee’s brow wrinkled. “Crockett must be mistaken about you.”

Silence fell, and Marcus cast a glance at Charlotte who was peering to the cracked ceiling architrave. Her expression appeared innocent enough...until he noticed her lips trembling.

Mercifully, the creaking butler announced the commencement of dinner and they all filed in as if for the reading of a will.

An elbow nudged his side.

“This could have been your future.” Charlotte winked. “In a few years.”

His lip quirked. “I’d never water down my wine.”

Although truth be told, he did have to admit a certain unease within.

Grimslee’s tenant houses were in a state of disrepair and he evicted non-payers within a fortnight. Known to be a miser, everyone loathed him and no one would work for him except the desperate.

Marcus had never been that bad, surely?

Grimacing, he recalled Widow Brockbank whom he'd instructed to vacate her tenant cottage within a month.

They all sat upon non-cushioned chairs, Charlotte opposite, while a soup was brought forth. White and thin with floating...

"Well," cried the young Mr Slater, joyfully raising his glass. "Here's to Christmas. I'm so glad to attend an event where I can become better acquainted with my new neighbours. Anyone fond of fishing?"

Lord Grimslee's lip rippled. "This isn't about Christmas," he hissed. "Or being neighbourly. And certainly not fishing. It's about business. Shawdale is undoubtedly here to discuss the deal he's negotiating with my cousin. The vicar wishes a contribution to church roof repairs – it's no, by the way. And you are here because you have a five thousand a year income and want to know where to invest it."

"Actually," Marcus found himself saying with glass in hand, "I agree with you, Mr Slater. Here's to meeting new neighbours. Welcome to the Lakes. I hope you may call upon me soon? We could talk of investment, if you wish to?"

"Oh, oh, yes."

"Good. And I... I used to pass a pleasant afternoon fishing. Haven't been in years but I'm sure all the equipment is somewhere. We could try the Rothay River."

"I would enjoy that." Mr Slater smiled. "And this inheritance is all rather...daunting, to tell you the truth."

"I also inherited when young and made more than a few mistakes..." He glanced up

to Charlotte's soft smile. Mr Slater reminded Marcus of himself all those years ago – young and trusting – and Grimslee would doubtless hoodwink the chap into investing too deeply.

Charlotte's foot reached out to his under the table. He was sure she meant it as a simple gesture of understanding but it caused every muscle to tense in unrelenting desire and want.

“And the church roof doesn't need repairs,” stated the vicar. “Our congregation raised enough last year.”

“And I'm not here for business,” mumbled Sir Edward Spratt, peering at his empty bowl. “Just the food... Although, is this wine watered down, Grimslee? Hey, butler fellow, hie to my coach, will you, and you'll find six bottles of Chablis in the box seat.” He pursed his mouth. “I never travel unprepared.”

Charlotte giggled, the vicar grinned and Mr Slater's young lips wobbled.

Grimslee glowered.

Second course arrived.

Marcus watched as Charlotte sliced into the scraggy meat with gusto, savoured the meagre three carrots as though they were sugared bonbons and sipped Sir Edward Spratt's wine with a pleasurable sigh.

The candlelight made her skin glow, her hair a soft auburn with strands of fire, and young Slater looked enamoured.

Who could blame him?

She lit any room she stepped into with her joyful nature. She laughed even when matters were dire, kept that smile, that warm flame lit within.

And he envied it.

No longer was he the carefree boy.

The one Charlotte had known and been fond of.

He knew he was a curmudgeon on occasion, dare he say dull with his ledgers. But he also knew he would have to continue to be so, to work all hours for the sake of everyone. Had learned the hard way that the estate did not run itself.

He'd changed. So much.

Overmuch.

Her red-tipped lashes flitted up, eyes catching his.

Every muscle tensed once more.

But Marcus forced his own eyes away.

"Well, that wasn't quite so bad as I'd feared." Charlotte tugged her cloak close.

"No."

"In fact, one could almost call it joyful."

"Yes."

“Mr Slater is an asset to the town.”

“Indubitably.”

Oh, good grief.

During dinner, Marcus had been most talkative with the guests, but for some reason, a gloom had descended upon him.

After their farewells had been bid and they'd clambered into the carriage, he'd proceeded to huddle in the corner, tip his hat low and pretend to sleep.

Doubtless he was still haunted by the past.

Perhaps the young Mr Slater had reminded Marcus of himself as a trusting young man? Or...or had Grimslee bestowed a vision of where a focus on guineas alone could lead? She had to confess that had been her original intention but now it pained her.

A sigh escaped, for all she wished was for Marcus to be content. To forgive himself for his youthful folly, allow himself to feel proud of what he had since achieved and start to...live life again.

The carriage rumbled on and in through the wrought-iron gates of the Shawdale estate but as it did so, she snatched his walking cane from the seat and clattered the ceiling. “Stop, please, George. We'll walk from here.”

“It's freezing, Charlotte,” the duke muttered beneath his hat. “Don't be absurd.”

“Stay, if you wish, but I want to walk and enjoy the night. Like we used to.” So after unhooking the lantern from the corner, she opened the door and descended the icy



steps that George had unfastened.

It was freezing, but also still and beautiful. She startled but then smiled as an owl flew from a nearby tree, no doubt taking umbrage at her light.

“Drive on, George,” she heard Marcus state but she did not turn.

The door slammed and she watched the carriage trundle on past her towards the house.

How foolish to hope Marcus would—

“Come on then,” a rumble of duke groused, “before I freeze my ballocks off.” Boots tramped to her side. “Hand me the lantern and you’d best hold on to me or you’ll go ars— er...skirts over.”

With a small smile, she hooked an arm through his and glanced up to him, yet his expression was hidden in the weak light.

“Thank you, Marcus.”

For a while, they walked the path to the house without words, and she revelled in the deep quiet that enveloped them. No other mammals scurried and ’twas as if they were the sole two people alive. Their breaths misted and swirled as Jack Frost silently went about his nightly business, anointing the land with his slumbrous but wondrous rime.

The mausoleum of the Shawdale lineage lay just beyond the trees but she sensed no restlessness amongst its inhabitants. Indeed, his mother and all those interred there would rest soundly knowing the estate was in Marcus’ safe hands. “Remember when we buried the stable dog in the mausoleum?”

A ducal grunt.

“You cried.”

“I did not.”

She smiled. “I knew not how to cheer you. You were morose for days.”

“I adored that dog. And you were there at my side. Always there for me. That was all I needed. But...”

“Hmm?”

“How do you stay so...cheerful, Charlotte?” He paused. “You never seem afeared by life’s twists and turns.”

She blinked.

Was he cracked in the head?

“I...I am afeared more times than I can say, Marcus. Being a governess is not easy. Interviews still daunt me. And first days with new pupils. Sitting at dinner tables where I know no one, am not one of them. Overhearing a scathing aside. And one girl bit me.” She shivered. “But I will not be cowed because I’ve also had generous kind employers and adorable pupils whom I’ve not wanted to leave. It is all...part of life, the good and the bad. I suppose it’s just that I prefer to hold onto the good, ’tis all.”

A breath gusted white. “You are a better person than me, Charlotte.”

Yes, he was cracked in the head.

“Marcus, I have no doubt whatsoever that you will pay off your last debts, honouring your vow and the memory of your mother, and go on to bring the estate to full prosperity. Mr Slater wants your advice. Dinah adores you. Don’t be a numbskull.”

They came to the steps of the house and he paused to stare down at her.

His head stooped.

Charlotte stilled.

Dared not move.

Would he—

Cold lips brushed her cheek, soft but fleet.

“Thank you, Charlotte.” He smiled but she sensed it held a sadness. “I will likely still visit Carlisle on Christmas Eve.”

She glanced up as something soft and crystalline drifted, another feathered her cheek in a cold caress.

Snow.

“I understand.”

He drew back, countenance shadowed. “We must not tarry. The weather is worsening.”

Charlotte nodded, clutched his arm and ascended the steps.

Marcus considered her perennially cheerful and full of laughter yet...

She'd not told him of the nights she'd cried over him when he'd returned from London, her girlish yearning for the boy he'd been and her own shattered heart.

And she'd not tell him of her love for him now.

For the man he was today with his strength in adversity and his wry humour, for his protectiveness of Dinah and his unwavering honour.

Marcus was a peer of the realm with all the responsibilities it brought. He could choose any debutante he wished as his duchess. One with a dowry that would ensure the future prosperity of the estate and all those who depended upon it. Depended upon him.

She was just a governess.

Their time had passed.

He considered her a friend.

The butler opened the door but once inside, she did not linger and with a nod of goodnight hastened up the staircase.

While outside in the bleak night, the owl screeched poignant and alone.

### CHAPTER NINE

“Young ladies can, now and then, give you their opinions.”

Private Education: A Practical Plan for the Studies of Young Ladies.

Elizabeth Appleton. 1815.

'T was the day before Christmas Eve and Marcus had packed the majority of his bags.

He was leaving on the morrow.

No doubt at all.

Best for all concerned.

The snow last night had been considerable but nothing a ducal carriage couldn't overcome, and the townsmen were even now clearing the roads for the mail stagecoach as they did every year. Life and business would not cease for either snow or Christmas.

Stood before his study desk, he gathered documents together but today couldn't seem to garner any enthusiasm for this canal construction project that would see half the countryside dug up.

So, with folders in hand, he stalked to the window, stared to the peaks painted in

white.

“Cousin Marcus?”

He swivelled to his ward hovering in the open doorway. “Yes, Dinah?”

“Did you have a nice evening at Lord Grimslee’s last night? Miss Webster has been most...quiet.”

Marcus pulled at his too-tight cravat. “It was delightful.”

She curved an eyebrow, just like her father used to. “Hmm.” Then twirled her skirts. “Will I see you tomorrow before you leave?”

“For certain.” He’d given permission for Dinah to stay with her friend Lucy for a night, which had seemed to involve her packing for a fortnight. “Where is Miss Webster? Sorting your clothes?”

“Gone walking.”

“What!” He swung back to the window. “It’s bitter out today. And there are perilous drifts of snow.”

“She said she might head up into the fells.”

Marcus strode to the desk and slung the folders down. “Which fells?”

“Erm...east-ish?”

“That bench on Wansfell overlooking town, no doubt.” And he tramped past his ward and into the hall. “Greatcoat,” he ordered. “Boots and scarf. Dinah, until tomorrow.”

She turned and smiled limpidly. “Yes, Cousin Marcus.”

Muttering to himself, he shoved on his outerwear.

Just wait until he caught up with that Miss Charlotte Webster.

“Dinah?”

“Yes, Miss.”

“Do you know where the duke is going?”

From the schoolroom window, Charlotte watched with increasing trepidation as the figure of Marcus stomped off in an easterly direction, fists clenched and greatcoat flapping.

“He seemed a little...upset, Miss Webster.” Dinah joined her to peer out the window also. “Said he was going walking in the fells.”

“What! It’s bitter out today. And there are perilous drifts of snow.”

“I know, Miss.” Dinah sighed deeply. “He appeared most... What was the word you taught me. Perturbed? Yes, perturbed. He also said not to expect him back till late.”

Charlotte slung Miss Appleton’s book to the desk. “Which fells?”

“Er... With a bench overlooking town.”

“Wansfell, no doubt. I’d best follow and ensure he’s safe.”

“A fine idea, Miss Webster. I shall sit here and read until the coach is ready to take

me to Lucy's."

"Yes. Mr Goldsmith's Grammar of Geography."

Her rosebud lips pursed. "Oh." Nose scrunched. "But I'm still working on my appraisal of Pride and Prejudice and how to include more romance. And an epilogue."

Charlotte raised a brow but the girl batted those ridiculously long lashes and there was no time for debate. "I shall see you on the morrow, then. We will have a fine Christmas together. Mrs Mossop is baking for a feast of five hundred."

"Cousin Marcus might still stay."

Charlotte forced her lips to curve and kneeled by the young girl, clutching her small hand. "It... It is possible but we must not be disappointed if he leaves. It has to be his choice."

"I suppose," Dinah replied, before a fierce hug was exchanged.

Charlotte then rose to her feet, crossed to the wall hook for her cloak and then replaced her sturdy boots. "Until tomorrow, dearest." And she hastened from the schoolroom.

Just wait until she caught up with that Duke of Shawdale.

Marcus cursed low as the bench he and Charlotte used to sit upon many years ago was occupied by a slender middle-aged gentleman. A notebook lay in his lap, pencil poised.

Once outside, Marcus had realised the snow was not so deep for the most part, and



the sun had decided to make an appearance, turning the landscape to a glistening creation of ice and wonder.

Not one trace had been found of Charlotte, not a single boot print in the snow, and he concluded she'd likely returned home, that they'd somehow missed one another.

But just in case...

“Sir? Forgive me. But could I ask you? Have you seen a lady up here? Auburn hair?”

The chap peered up. Long nosed and dark haired, he looked vaguely familiar. “Not I. Solely has nature revealed herself to me this day.”

Marcus smiled. “And 'tis at its best, there is no doubt.”

In accord with his words, Marcus turned and lifted his eyes to take in the vast landscape before them – the fells swaddled in snow, Ambleside nestled within its embrace, the glittering lakes like a cracked shifting mirror to the sky above.

He breathed – crisp and clean.

This land was in his very soul and blood, a part of himself he'd forgotten in the urgent need to refill the estate coffers and regain the Shawdale pride. And how he'd missed the sheer pleasure of stomping along deserted paths, admiring the beauty of nature. It filled one with such a sense of harmony and yet...complete insignificance also.

The fells would be here for all time.

But his time here was short.

And if he worked himself into an early grave, he would miss this essence of life – the beauty, hope and...love.

Marcus twisted. “May I?” And at the gentleman’s nod, he sat on the bench, removing his beaver hat and gloves. “I’d forgotten how...beautiful this can be.”

“Glad to see a younger man who enjoys it,” grumbled the fellow aside him. “Too many wish to cover our countryside with industry. I know progress is essential but I fear a way of life is disappearing.”

Marcus winced and peered at the gent’s notebook. “Are you a writer, Sir?”

“I am. Although on a day such as this, the glory of nature overwhelms me and I find my pencil has stilled.” He turned. “And you are seeking a lady up here, yes? A...friend, perhaps?”

“Er. No. Yes.” He shook his head. “But a fool’s errand as I fear...”

“Hmm?”

“It’s naught.”

“I have known much loss and much love, thus far in life, and never is it naught.” The gent nudged Marcus’ shoulder with his own. “Why not tell me what you fear? Doubt you’ll see me again.”

Marcus debated, drumming his fingers on his hat brim. The gentleman appeared not to know him, and perhaps it would be good to talk to a stranger.

“I...” Marcus breathed deep. “I...I am in love with this lady I seek with all that I am. Yesterday, today and tomorrow. But I fear she does not feel the same. I fear she loved

the young man I was, when we grew up together. I fear she cannot love what I am now. I fear she considers me a...friend."

A man of business might say those fears were absurd. That his most pressing fear ought to be that of bankruptcy. Or falling prey to swindlers once more. Perhaps he should fear losing out on the canal deal.

Yet at this moment, all of those paled in comparison with the fear that Charlotte would never love him.

"What are fears, eh?" the gent declared. "But voices airy? Whispering harm where harm is not—"

"I suppose you're—"

"Don't interrupt. I dislike it when people interrupt." He cleared his throat. "What are fears? But voices airy? Whispering harm where harm is not and deluding the wary till the fatal bolt is shot."

Marcus smiled. "Never a truer word said, Sir."

"I know. I wrote it the other day. Although I think it needs some work. But what I'm trying to express is that we should not lose precious time imagining fears that may or not be valid, or they will drive us to Bedlam. You say you love this lady?"

"Yes," he said simply. And Marcus closed his eyes. Always. He saw her in his mind's eye – lips smiling, green eyes laughing.

"Well then," said the gentleman, "you'd best tell her as it appears she is stomping up the path towards us with rather a perturbed expression."

Marcus' eyes snapped open and he scrambled to his feet as Charlotte was indeed stomping the fell towards them, seemingly in a fit of pique, fists balled, head down and muttering.

His companion rose to his boots and slapped him on the back. "Remember this – serene will be our days, and bright and happy will our nature be, when love is an unerring light..."

Marcus nodded, felt the gentleman's emotive words fill his soul. "You are a man of true poetry, Sir."

"Some say so." He plopped his hat upon his head. "Good tidings, Your Grace, and a merry Christmas to you."

Marcus frowned.

"Good day, Mr Wordsworth," hailed Charlotte.

"And to you, Miss Webster!" he hailed in return. "Do sit and admire it for a while." And along with a jovial whistle, the esteemed poet Mr Wordsworth ambled off down the path.

With a groan, Marcus bowed to Charlotte. "I failed to recognise him."

Auburn eyebrows raised in incredulity. "Where have you been, Marcus?"

He swallowed, let his eyes wander Charlotte's features – her ruddy nose and red lips.

"Adrift for some while." Without you. "Come, sit with me."

### CHAPTER TEN

“Poetry is a speaking picture... It at once refines the heart and elevates the soul.”

Private Education: A Practical Plan for the Studies of Young Ladies.

Elizabeth Appleton. 1815.

Charlotte complied, the bench dry beneath the morning sun.

In years past, they'd sat here many a time to witness the seasons shift – spring in lush green finery, summer in looser hues, autumn in a coat of copper. And winter with her bequeathment of lucent snow, roofs white and fields swaddled tight.

Winter brought the harsh bite of cold yet also the beauty of sprinkled stardust.

“Why are you here, Marcus?” she asked as he lowered himself to the bench also. “Should you not be packing?”

“I was searching for you, Charlotte.” He fidgeted with the band on his beaver hat, eyes cast low. “I worried you might come to harm in this snow. I couldn't believe you'd walked out in such weather.”

“Me?” She frowned. “But I was searching for you. I was worried that...”

She narrowed her eyes, recalled Dinah's batting lashes.

The little so-and-so.

Yet she could not be angry: the scene of Ambleside below was one of splendour and furthermore, Marcus was sat at her side.

Yet he abruptly stood. Breathed deep. "I must..."

"You must go?"

"No, no..." He paced in front of the bench, boots crunching the snow, footprints etched in all directions.

Back and forth.

Forth and back.

"Are you well, Marcus?"

He paused, breathed deep again. Opened his mouth. Closed it. Continued to pace. "I'm just going to say it," he mumbled.

"Say what?"

Marcus straightened his shoulders. Paused. "I... Are you warm enough?"

"Yes."

"Good." He pinched his brow. "I... How did you know I was here?"

"Dinah."

“But she told me that... Ah.” He paced once more. “Well, I... You see, Charlotte, I—”

“Marcus.” She peeled off her worn gloves and crossed her arms. “Have you had too many glasses of Mrs Mossop’s mulled wine?”

“‘Don’t interrupt,’ as Wordsworth would say.” He threw his hat to the bench. Heaved another breath. “Charlotte, I’m not going anywhere.”

“Well, no. You just keep pacing back and forth.”

“I don’t mean...” He peered to the sky. “Oh, for hell’s sake, I’m just going to say it and be damned.” His fists clenched and unclenched. “I mean, Charlotte, I am not going anywhere without you . Not this Christmas. Not ever.”

“Wh...”

“I... I love you, Charlotte. I’ve always loved you. I know you were fond of the boy I was but he is gone, and I just hope...I hope the affection you feel for me as a friend may grow in time. I hope it’s not too late for me to find a better equilibrium. With life. With the estate. That you might help me do that and come to love me as I am. That you might give me that hope.”

Charlotte closed her eyes, tears pricking like nettles. Maybe she was still asleep? Dreaming? If so, it was a cruel dream.

“Say something, Charlotte,” he demanded. “Even if to put me out of my misery.”

She opened her eyes, words lost.

Marcus’ gaze was a meld of gold and green. And she was lost in them also.

His jaw gritted. “I wanted to give you the world eight years ago but all I had were the clothes on my back and a debt-ridden dukedom. I am still in debt, but now I will not give you up, Charlotte, unless...unless you tell me there is no hope.”

She rose to her feet. Brought her bare hand to his arm. The wool of his coat was cold, flecks of snow dotting it like pearls. It was no dream.

“Eight years ago,” she whispered, “I wanted naught but you.” She watched her hand travel to his cheek. “And eight years later, I still want naught but you.” A tear fell. “Of course, I love you, Marcus. I always have. I love the man, the duke, the boy, my friend. The man who makes my heart sing. And I always will.”

He looked a little taken aback for a moment but then smiled, eyes fierce yet vulnerable, and his throat bobbed. “Charlotte... Are you sure? I still fear I may... Hell, that I may let you down as I did when we were young. Fail you.”

“I love you, Marcus. In failure and success. In magnificent victory and ignominious catastrophe. For love is not love if it solely endures in triumph. In fact, it is the support through failure that makes it love. You could never fail me . Only yourself. And then I would seek to lift you up.”

“Char—”

She pulled him close and kissed him.

His lips were warm and she now knew his heart was the same; it had merely been wrapped in ice in an attempt to protect everyone, including himself.

Broad cold hands cupped her cheeks, the kiss fervent and forever.

He drew back, but only to touch her forehead with his own. “That boy loved the girl



you were, but this man loves the woman you are yet more.”

“I feared you considered me no more than a friend,” she whispered.

He shook his head. “And I had the same fear.”

And then, right there, on the snow, he kneeled.

“M-Marcus?”

“Friends, yes, always, but also lovers and confidants. I want it all.” He clasped her hand, eyes steady and clear as he stared up at her. “Charlotte, will you marry me? Be my duchess? Let us not wait. For time is so fleet, I’ve learned.”

A duchess would doubtless conduct herself with decorum and restraint but at this moment, Charlotte was still a governess, so she flung herself into his arms, knees hitting the trampled snow.

“Yes, yes and yes,” she cried. “I love you so, Marcus. Always.”

He kissed her, fierce and tender, within the fells and lakes that had reared them, shaped them, words of love exchanged, breaths cold but hearts warm, the years they’d been apart melting like snow on the high fells come spring.

“I love you, my Charlotte,” Marcus whispered. “Past, present and... Eternity.”

The fells hushed, silent, waiting for Christmas Eve on the morrow, the last day of advent.

And no one was going anywhere.

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

“We may hear people say. I wonder how she learned such a thing. Probably from one of those books.”

Private Education: A Practical Plan for the Studies of Young Ladies.

Elizabeth Appleton. 1815.

C lank.

Thump.

Thud.

Charlotte peered to the ceiling and frowned.

What was that noise?

Shaking her head, she endeavoured to read her book, but...

Thump.

She placed her book to the sofa and sipped her wine instead.

Today had been one of utter joy – walking the fells with Marcus to discuss their future. Sitting by the fire and sharing kisses.

Some two hours ago, after a dinner of laughter and memories, Marcus had given his apologies and said he had some matters to attend to in his secondary study. Charlotte had kissed the apology from his lips. After all, he was a duke and had to—

Thud.

But what was he doing? Digging a canal to Carlisle himself?

Placing her glass of wine to the side table, she rose, wandered from the library and up the stairs.

A grunt.

Thump.

“Bloody hell!”

Crash.

With a frown, she wandered down the corridor.

Marcus’ bedchamber door lay open and...

A leather chair was gliding across the room, ostensibly of its own volition. Charlotte blinked, peered closer and then saw muscled forearms gripping its sides.

Halting at the threshold, she swallowed. “Erm...”

He placed the chair down with a thud.

And stole her breath.

For Marcus wore no waistcoat or cravat, merely open shirt, breeches and boots. The déshabillé displayed his physique – slender but muscular, imposing and magnificent – but...

“What are you doing?”

“Ah...” A smile crossed his lips before he strode over and nestled his stubbled cheek into her neck.

Charlotte allowed just one whimper to escape her.

“You look beautiful,” he murmured, “with your hair down. Like a fire sprite. And to answer your question, I’m making my bedchamber a bedchamber again. One study is quite enough for any man. And furthermore, I’ve decided to never again work after dinner.”

“If you had to, I woul–”

“No. No more.”

She beamed before peering into the room.

A footman must have helped him as the desk had now been replaced by the original bed, its drapery and linens the colour of autumn. A new rug had been lain and all the papers had been cleared away. The walls held portraits instead of maps.

“Come see, Charlotte.”

“Your Grace!” She gave a tut. “A governess should never...enter a duke’s bedchamber.”

“You’re no governess now. You’re a soon-to-be duchess.”

And since he had the right of it, Charlotte sauntered in and then closed the door behind her.

Marcus cleared his throat.

With a saucy quirk of lip, Charlotte wandered the room, noting a small portrait of herself at seventeen that she’d never known existed, the somewhat subdued vase of festive holly upon the mantelpiece and a few history books of the Lake District on the chest of drawers.

“It’s charming,” she said. “Especially the bed. It must be like sleeping in an autumnal forest canopy.” She ambled over to it and sat. “Very firm. Sit by me, Marcus.”

“Charlotte...”

She stretched and fell back, knew her skirts had hoicked above her ankles.

“I...” She heard Marcus clear his throat again. “I had no intention of... But you are making it exceedingly difficult, Charlotte.”

“Am I?” She leaned up and fluttered her lashes.

Marcus had approached the bed and was watching her with hooded eyes, neck bare, and a button had gone astray on his shirt, displaying dark hair. She leisurely rose to her feet and with one hand, caressed his linen-clad chest, heard the hitch of his breath. She watched her own fingers trail his bared throat and cup his stubbled cheek.

Time was so fleet, as he’d said.

So she leaned forward. “I love you, Marcus. Forever. Come what may.”

If she’d known what those words would unleash, perchance she would have...said them before.

Marcus growled and put a firm hand to her nape, crushing her lips. His other palm cupped her rump, pulling her so close, and she moaned as she felt her body sink into his muscle.

Kisses roamed her throat, sleeves falling to his demand, teeth grazing and tongue laving.

And then her view upended as she was tumbled backwards upon the bed, Marcus looming over her, chest rising and plunging in ragged bursts of breath.

“If you wish to greet dawn unravished, Charlotte,” he rasped, “then you have this one moment to leave the room.”

She reached out a hand and trailed it down his chest, stomach and to where his breeches betrayed his arousal. He caught her fingers.

“This one moment,” he repeated through gritted teeth.

“At this moment, Marcus, all I want is you.” She allowed her eyes to wander his face, chest and lower. “I want you so much it hu—”

Words were smothered with his lips, passionate and intoxicating.

Her bodice was tugged down, laces unknotted, stays unfastened and flung aside, but Charlotte was aware she was no buxom girl and she sought to cover—

“No,” he snarled. “Hell, you’re so beautiful.” And his mouth trailed to her breasts, her bashfulness dissipating beneath his ardent touch.

Skirts and petticoats were likewise discarded but the unfairness of her state of undress brought her to her senses, and she yanked at his shirt, tearing it from the band of his breeches.

“Too much damn material,” she groused, but Marcus laughed and tore the thing over his head.

Oh.

His chest was beautiful – a classical statue at a museum that she’d once stared at far too long – and she pressed her palms upon him, fingers spread in possession.

A grunt emanated before he twisted, discarding boots and breeches with curses and clonks.

And then he was there, above her, hands sliding down her body with such reverence that breath failed her.

“Please,” she whispered, and his hands sunk betwixt her legs, palm grinding and fingers pressing as he kissed her throat, stubble abrading and heightening her every sense.

Fever.

A fever coursed within her that wove and writhed, and just as it soared, his hand was replaced by...something more demanding.

Insistent.

Persistent.

She cried out as he thrust.

“Charlotte...” Her name was growled, eyes fierce and impassioned.

It felt both strange and wondrous.

She shifted; he groaned.

And then he lifted on forearms, stared into her eyes and thrust again.

Her breath hitched.

He did it again.

Her leg curled around his waist.

And again and again and again and she was lost. To his eyes lit green, to his panted growls and thrusting possession.

That fever scorched once more as he claimed her. So many years of waiting and wanting.

It was too much to bear and as his lips crashed upon hers, pleasure seized her, igniting her, unfettered and endless.

As Charlotte's body tightened around him, Marcus abandoned whatever remnants of self-control remained, her wild hair gushing like dark fire upon his bed, writhing and seeking.



To take it all in this moment.

And hell, she did, hips cleaving, fingers at his nape, nails scratching his back as his spine arched, and his own pleasure – brutal and sudden – rent him asunder.

He shoved his head to the lee of her neck and shoulder, shuddering and loving and never ever leaving.

Not this Christmas. Not the next. Or any other they were blessed with.

His hips jerked, not wishing it to end...

But breaths slackened, heartbeats slowed and his body slumped, energy spent – for now. He savoured the intense closeness, her damp silken skin, but aware of his weight, he shifted, bringing his beloved with him, to lie upon his chest.

Silence held sway for a while but it was a good silence. One of bone-deep contentment and satisfaction.

With a gentle sigh, Charlotte languidly moved and opened her eyes, leaf green, bright and joyful.

“And that’s why,” she whispered, a wicked curve pulling at her rosy lips. “A governess should never enter a duke’s bedchamber.”

He laughed, the carefree laugh of his youth, and gripped her tight. “You, my duchess, can enter our bedchamber any time you wish.”

### CHAPTER TWELVE

“What will signify all the learning in the world, if you are wanting in generosity, in kindness, in good nature?”

Private Education: A Practical Plan for the Studies of Young Ladies.

Elizabeth Appleton. 1815.

Christmas Day.

The bells rang loud as the gleeful congregation around him gushed from St Anne’s Church like the Stock Ghyll beck after the autumn rains, babbling and dashing, joyous and eager.

Overnight, further snow had cloaked the town and now lads hurled snowballs, girls shrieked with delight, and ladies tottered with muffs the size of Herdwick Hogget sheep.

Christmas.

And Marcus was here with them all, feeling jubilant and at ease, with an excited Dinah on one arm and his beloved Charlotte upon the other.

There could, he knew, be no doubt amongst the townsfolk as to his intentions towards her and many had nudged one another or wagged an eyebrow.

With a wink, Mr Wordsworth doffed his hat and Marcus returned a sheepish smile.

Their stroll followed the flock down the lane into town, and they breathed in the chill air, absorbing the anticipation of the day.

Rather a racket was ensuing outside Ambleside Bakery, and they turned their heads to observe Kitty and Fred embracing to whoops and cries from an assemblage of well-wishers.

Marcus merely raised a brow. “Bit raucous for Christmas Day, no?”

“I heard in church from their neighbour Mrs Whidley,” said Charlotte, “that Fred discovered a purse full of guineas beneath their door this morning.”

“Really?” said Marcus with eyes wide. “Do you think old Grimslee has seen the error of his ways?”

Dinah sniggered.

“No.” Charlotte swatted his arm. “I think the spirit of Christmas has been engaging in dawn visits to local tenants as I also heard that Widow Brockbank has been offered work in the stillroom of Shawdale Manor which means she may remain rent-free in her cottage.”

“Has she?” Marcus widened his eyes further. “I wouldn’t know. Though I was led to believe Widow Brockbank has a formidable pride and would not stay in the cottage rent-free without paying some dues.”

Charlotte tutted. “Next you’ll be kissing the foreheads of babes.”

He leaned down, lips close. “Oh no,” he murmured. “The sole person I shall be

kissing is you, Charlotte. Who has brought such warmth and joy back into my life.”

“Oh, such romance.” Dinah broke her hold to clasp her hands together and sigh. “You told me, Miss Webster, that a governess’ life was just lessons. That she never attended grand dinners or glamorous balls or had time for romance. Now my novel can include them all.”

His beloved laughed and how it filled his soul.

And Marcus made a new vow to replace the one he’d made as a young man on his knees that misty dawn in London.

A vow that every Christmas would be thus – a time for merriment, feasting, thankfulness and love.

With Charlotte by his side.

Quite content, Marmaduke sat by the fireside, warming his toes.

It had been quite a day.

Just this afternoon, the thoughtful young duke next door had invited him to this manor house, taken him to his study and asked him for permission to marry Charlotte.

He’d had to ponder a while as his sister, Mary, had been here only yesterday, but the duke had shown him a miniature of Charlotte from when she’d been a tot and, of course, he remembered her.

Lovely girl.

And without a shadow of a doubt, she should wed him. After all, Charlotte had

always been besotted with that boy next door.

Marmaduke himself would also move into this manor house which had caused him some consternation as he disliked change, but then the duke had reminded him of the rose garden. He could look for Martha whenever he wished. And young Miss Dinah Lovecott had said she would help him.

Smiling, he waggled his stockinged toes in the warmth from the flames and—

“Uncle Marmaduke?”

He peered up into bright joyous eyes. “Yes, Mary?”

“I had a thought last night. So...” A wicker basket was placed in his lap. “Merry Christmas, Uncle.”

“What on earth is this?” For the basket had a will of its own as it waggled and wiggled. He flung open the lid and saw...

“Martha!” And he brought forth the mewling black kitten. “Where did you find her?”

She kneeled at his side. “This is Martha then, Uncle?” she whispered.

“Well, of course.” The little kitten squirmed in his arms but appeared to like his woollen blanket best. “Rescued her from a river in India and brought her back with me. Always hid amongst the rose bushes in the maharaja’s palace.”

“Oh, Uncle.” And he was enveloped in a fearsome hug.

He returned her embrace, and in that moment, a brume lifted and all was clarity. This was Charlotte. Who worked so hard for them all.

“Thank you, my niece,” he murmured, “for all that you do for me.”

She swiped her cheek of a tear and nodded before turning to his nurse, Hannah, and presenting her with a gift also.

Marmaduke cuddled and cosseted the kitten who purred and kneaded the blanket on his lap with her paws, marking time. A time that he now knew never moved constant and true. It wound and weaved, sometimes ending up right back where you started.

“Hmm,” he said as the kitten clawed her way up his scarf to sniff his cheek. “If you had a collar like in India, you wouldn’t get lost again. And I have one...somewhere...” With one hand, he felt around in his jacket pockets and at last found the pouch that had been there for so long.

Waiting for Martha.

The kitten sniffed at it while Marmaduke’s fumbling thumbs loosened the ribbon bow and upended the pouch.

A collar tumbled out, a plethora of sparkles set within the leather shimmering in the firelight.

“Well, damn me,” he muttered. “That’s where I put those blasted diamonds.”

He peered over his shoulder to tell Charlotte about them but she was now sat upon the sofa, softly smiling at that thoughtful duke from next door, their hands gripped tight together.

Marmaduke didn’t think she’d have much need of them now.

So with a frown, he swivelled.

Mrs Munro was admiring her gift of a new woollen cloak. His nurse was such a cheerful woman who'd only ever treated him kindly. She worked all hours without complaint and hadn't minded that the roof leaked in her bedchamber.

"Mrs Munro?" he enquired. "Have I ever asked you if you like cats?"

"I adore them, Mr Wainwright." Her rotund face lit with a smile. "I have one named Boots, and since I lost my Mr Munro, he keeps me such company."

"Well, I think Puss in Boots deserves a little present too, do you not think?" And he placed the diamond-studded collar into her lap. "Merry Christmas, Mrs Munro."

She gasped and stuttered but Marmaduke winked at her and then returned his gaze to the fire, waggled his toes and reached for a glass of the young duke's exceedingly fine claret.

He snuggled Martha in his scarf and within the flames watched time itself leap and curl. Past Christmases melded and scattered as memories rearranged themselves, but in their midst, some of life's finest moments held fast and forever...

A couple in love, whispering to one another.

A young vibrant girl with dreams and life ahead of her.

A cheerful woman with naught but kindness in her heart.

An infant kitten mewling in wonder at the world.

He raised his glass.

"Merry Christmas," he whispered, "to one and all."

### EPILOGUE

“Adieu. Be good, be lovely on earth.”

Private Education: A Practical Plan for the Studies of Young Ladies.

Elizabeth Appleton. 1815.

Some said that winter was a harsh season of barren skies, bare fields and eerie stillness but Charlotte could not agree.

All was merely at rest.

Watchful rooks perched peacefully on the devoid branches and the far fields merely slumbered beneath their blanket of white.

The view from this bench tucked into the fellside was endless: of mountains weaving in slopes and slumps, the lakes stamped with the reflected clouds, Ambleside nestled below, and to the fore, the ducal manor house with its stern slate roof and gardens painted in festive snow.

And from where a jovial hubbub and plumes of smoke also rose – neither devoid nor at slumber.

Charlotte’s nose twitched at the luscious scents of roasted hog, chestnuts and hot festive spiced bread.



For to celebrate Christmas this year, she and Marcus had decided to host a Midwinter Fair – not solely to commemorate Saint Thomas' Day with the giving of alms for the worst of winter to come but also their nigh one year of marriage.

One year of laughter and devotion. One year of learning and loving.

Tugging her red cloak tight, Charlotte unfolded and re-read the note upon her lap and smiled.

The bench on Scarcliffe, hour of eleven?

In the past year, Marcus' ducal responsibilities and his many business interests had continued to keep him as busy as a squirrel in autumn, and her own duties as duchess had been plentiful indeed.

On many a morn, she had awoken at first light to find merely her husband's imprint upon the pillow and the scent of leather.

But then, sometime in the day, she had begun to find notes...

The waterfall, noon?

In the rose garden, a half after one?

And they would meet, come rain or shine, and shed their obligations for a half hour or so. They would walk the fells together or admire the scenery or simply recall that life was fleet and that friends, love and nature should be treasured.

She heard his boots first – tramping the snow along the path – and twisted on the bench. His head was lowered and... Was he muttering about pigs?

“Marcus?”

Those hazel eyes, bright and clear, flicked up, lips curving. “You’re early, my love.”

“I delegated,” she replied rather smugly. “Dinah is selling gingerbread, the Cadwaladers are making the punch and Uncle Marmaduke is in charge of the puppet show.”

For so many guests had joined them to celebrate – her friends, Amelia and Hugh Cadwalader from London, were staying a sennight. Lord Woodford, the gentleman Marcus had duelled with all those years ago but who’d then given Marcus so much guidance, was lodging nearby and the young Mr Slater had become a regular visitor to them.

“I delegated also.” And with a hearty gust of cold-white breath, he sat upon the bench, his hand covering hers. “Although Luke knows more than me about roasting hogs anyhow.”

“But you are the host. And it is your hog.”

“Not anymore. ’Tis for everyone. Three hogs in fact.” His smile broadened. “And you were correct. Fred and Kitty have returned for Christmas. They’ve opened a bakery with the money, you know, in Saltfleet on the coast of Lincolnshire.”

“The sea air must be of benefit then as Fred looks much for the better.”

“As do you, my love. How are you feeling? Has the sickness abated?”

Charlotte’s lips twitched: she’d told Marcus the joyous news of a babe-to-be only last month and he now asked after her welfare at least a hundred times a day, filling her with such contentment and care.

“Yes, it has. And I quite fancy some roast hog. In fact the whole hog.”

His hand clenched hers, and for some moments, they were silent, just watching the bustling scene far below, duties dissipating for a brief while.

From the manor grounds, laughter and shouts of the Midwinter Fair twined and echoed up the valley sides: vendors bearing hot apples and stall owners hawking their winter wares: pickles, jams and salted goods that would keep through the long months to come. A patch of snow by the rose garden had been flattened to play bowls while children laid out hopscotch squares with charcoal from the fires. Somewhere, a fiddler struck up a wassail tune.

A contented sigh left Charlotte.

Who would have thought a year ago, at her interview for the governess position, that she would become a duchess – certainly it couldn’t happen very often to a governess.

She turned her head to find Marcus watching her instead of the fair, his eyes glowing with gladness.

“So tell me once more, my duchess,” he murmured, “ why should I employ you as governess?”

She laughed as their thoughts had obviously been akin.

“Because we were meant to be. Because it was Christmas when the unimaginable can become real. Because it couldn’t have been any other way.”

“A perfect answer.”

And Marcus kissed her.

Not a breath of chill wind disturbed the lovers, the clouds motionless as though bolted to the heavens, while the snow-laden fields and fells continued to slumber in rest, cosseting all who inhabited this land – love's dreamers and doubters, the troubled and the jubilant, the young and the old, the past, present and future – in peace and joy at Christmastide.

The End

### CHAPTER ONE

“...the profession of a private governess is an honourable and genteel one.”

Private Education: A Practical Plan for the Studies of Young Ladies.

Elizabeth Appleton. 1815.

Hawkins Boxing Academy. Outskirts of Piccadilly. May 1816.

“So tell me, Miss Griffin, why should I employ you as governess?”

Oh botheration.

And Matilda fidgeted in the unyielding chair.

The interview had been progressing quite satisfactorily until now. They'd greeted one another in a cordial manner, lamented the bitter spring weather and Mr Hawkins, her prospective employer and owner of this famed Boxing Academy, had shown her to his somewhat masculine study.

Chestnut panelling smothered the walls from floor to ceiling, a few drawings of sturdy ruffians in pugilistic stance embellishing its manliness. A battered chaise of dun leather sat in the corner whilst the desk gleamed with fresh wax.

Matilda's lips parted to answer, but for once words failed her, so instead she contemplated a bird fluffing its wings upon the windowsill outside and ardently

wished she could swap places.

Although perhaps not with a scrawny sparrow but rather a brightly coloured Bird of Paradise. To be far away on the tropical Molucca Islands and not shivering in this rugged study, being interviewed by a man who'd once been a prizefighter.

Males of the species could be so savage.

His cough prompted for attention and she returned her gaze to Mr Hawkins.

"It appears," he said, flicking her application letter and hoisting an eyebrow, "that you have no previous experience."

Matilda crossed her arms.

How hard could it be? Although Mr Hawkins may be factually correct, she had thrice read *Private Education: A Practical Plan for the Studies of Young Ladies* .

The somewhat crisp author, a Miss Elizabeth Appleton, had been hired by the 9<sup>th</sup> Earl of Leven no less, so she must have known what she was writing about.

Mr Hawkins set to scrutinising her application letter once more...and Matilda set to scrutinising Mr Hawkins.

Dark hair the colour of chocolate, ruthlessly trimmed and without curl; a light linear scar to his right eyebrow; a firm chin which could never hide its burgeoning stubble; sultry olive-toned skin; and a classical nose that looked to have been forcibly inclined to the left.

A decidedly handsome man, the crooked appendage adding a certain *je ne sais quoi* .

Then there were those...muscles.

Even clothed, they were noticeable – which was curious because as a rule, Matilda would not notice at all. Muscle and brawn, in her humble opinion, were uninspiring, belonging to men of paltry intellect.

Yet these were inspiring. Never had she studied real ones before, and she longed to prod and measure. Purely for anatomical endeavour, of course. How would they feel when–

“Ahem.”

Double botheration...

She'd been caught inspecting that broad chest encased by a pale-gold waistcoat with pleasing feather motifs, its oval collar and glimpse of brass buttons drawing one's eye. Whatever his former vocation and current profession, Mr Hawkins dressed with exquisite distinction: a midnight-blue coat stretched along extensive shoulders, and tight pantaloons sculpted a callipygian figure.

A widower, she'd read as a part of her preparations for this interview, with some three decades to his name, Mr Seth Hawkins had apparently set the prizefighting world alight before opening his Academy.

He thrust the letter aside, clasped his substantial hands and sighed deeply. “Do you have any experience whatsoever?”

Well, no. Hence her rare silence.

In that now shunned application letter, she'd penned with keen verbosity her knowledge of geography, history, astronomy and so forth, hoping to bamboozle the man with protracted explanation and incomprehensible words – she was good at that.

Perchance she ought to fib about her past experience: state she'd educated a younger

brother who'd gone on to discover a cure for boils, or imply her references had gone astray on her return voyage from India, having educated a Maharaja's daughter.

Matilda sighed and slid her spectacles up the bridge of her nose.

A close confidante, Miss Evelyn Pearce, had told some blistering fibs recently in order to escape dire circumstance, which had resulted in her being abducted by the richest duke of all England.

So perhaps being circumspect with the truth did have its benefits.

Sparkling hazel eyes gazed at her in query across the desk, his fingers shifting to splay upon the leather inlay.

Robust knuckles and calloused skin.

Matilda shivered.

However, those broad knuckles did not belong to a rich duke.

They belonged to a muscled beast of a man whose wits had most likely been knocked out in some prizefighting field in Somerset.

Seth briefly shuttered his gaze and concluded that this fifth candidate for interview had been at the gin, her wits most likely washed out into some rank gutter of a London alley.

Shame, as she had appeared promising upon arrival. Flower meadows had teased his nostrils as she'd marched to his study, a striped yellow dress with a pelisse of velvet, also yellow, encasing a most comely figure.

Neat of demeanour, Miss Griffin had sat with grace, neck straight, spine not daring to



brush the back of the chair. Black tendrils of hair curled from a hat more suited to promenading in Mayfair, and behind gold-rimmed glasses, eyes the colour of his favoured brandy had dissected him.

Yet a simple question had rendered her mute except for strange mutterings and a scrunched brow. She fidgeted, foot tamping and fingers tapping, obviously agitated by her breakfast tippie of blue ruin.

How difficult could it be to find a governess?

Bloody difficult, as it so happened. More onerous than brawling with Jumpin' Jack Scroggins, whose trotters had never remained in one place.

"I repeat, Miss Griffin..." Because he felt he had to try one last time. "Why should I employ you?"

The previous four applicants had reduced him to this desperation.

A Miss Rippleton had cursed better than he, Miss Broadhurst had divulged her conviction that the world was flat in response to his geography question, and Miss Frost had...issues with his daughter's upbringing. The last, a Miss Murphy, who'd seen him beat Rugged Rick in 1811, had offered additional services.

"I-I..."

His eyes flicked up at the stutter, caught on her sumptuous bosom, upped to exquisite ripe lips that parted, pursed, and then fell silent.

Damnation.

Wearily, Seth rose to his feet. "Perhaps we should conclude this interview, Miss Griffin, as I do not believe—"

“I need to hide, you see, Mr Hawkins.”

Seth reclaimed his seat. That was the most intriguing answer he’d heard thus far, but for now, he merely cocked a brow.

That ripe lip was bitten once more. “Only until my birthday in August.”

He folded his arms but kept the brow aloft, thoughts sifting – her absurd answer, those eyes which shimmered as though lit from behind by candlelight, her heaving chest and that impeccable accent proclaiming her a lady of the haut monde .

“Please continue to enlighten me, Miss Griffin.”

“I suppose there is little point in untruthful perfidy...” And she peered to the left, then to the right.

Seth did the same – window overlooking Green Park to one side, empty shelves to the other.

What a curious female.

The gentry were a rum lot and he ought to be used to their idiosyncrasies by now, but every so often one still flummoxed him.

“Until I attain twenty-one years in August,” she confessed, leaning near, “my guardian cousin dictates my life, but lately his behaviour has become most...unreasonable.”

Perchance this guardian had threatened to cut her clothing allowance or curtail her coiffure appointments? “I suppose you wish me to deal with him?”

Most visitors to his door wanted no more than the prowess of the famous pugilist.

The last woman he'd courted had, it turned out, only wished him to threaten her brother, who'd cut her pin money to five guineas a week. She had believed Seth would be quite content to pummel the fellow and hence exhibit his valour.

"Goodness, no." Miss Griffin's small nose creased in repugnance. "I do not require your brawn or any such uncouthness. I believe the mind to be mightier."

All well and good, but she'd never been thumped by Gaslight Gary, whose fists had certainly been mightier than his mind.

Yet he had to acknowledge that a prizefighter sans brains did tend to meet St Peter somewhat prematurely.

Gaslight Gary had in fact accidentally shot himself while demonstrating how his friend had accidentally shot himself.

Irish Tom had expired after volunteering for the Astley's Amphitheatre knife thrower.

And Big Bill had been found dead in his bed with three doxies and four empty gin bottles – cause of death unknown.

Hence Seth had retired and opened a boxing academy.

"Pray continue then."

With a rustle, Miss Griffin straightened her pelisse. "Whilst...snooping in my cousin's study, I discovered he had contracts for me to marry a debauched libertine of advanced years, all without my knowledge or consent." Her shoulders hunched. "I am...fearful of what action my guardian may take in order to seek my compliance."

Her gaze dipped, spectacles sliding, and now he noted the cobweb of shadows beneath her fine eyes, the tremble to her fingers which she swiftly suppressed.

But even so...

“Miss Griffin, I cannot appoint you as governess for my daughter simply because you wish to hide—”

“I merely seek employment until August when I am no longer beneath his control, and then I can access the money my parents left me and forge ahead as a proper governess. I agree my lack of experience is...contestable, but I am well versed in all subjects.” A slender hand reached across the desk in entreaty. “In addition, I can teach the full breadth of a lady’s accomplishments – fork placements, quilling tea caddies and how to back from a room without tripping over one’s train.”

Clenching his fists, Seth faltered, yet this indecision had naught to do with misplaced cutlery and all to do with the yellow colouration upon her delicate wrist, revealed as the sleeve had pulled up. A couple of weeks old, to be sure, but he knew a bruise from a harsh grip when he saw one.

A damsel in distress.

Damn.

In silence, he rose from his seat to pace in front of the smouldering fire – always thinking better on his feet. Never had he been one for rushed decisions, and this petite female had trouble written all over her charming cheekbones.

If he hired her and this possessive guardian emerged, a wealth of upset could descend upon the club he’d spent so long building up.

Nevertheless, he could not deny that a lady such as Miss Griffin would be the perfect influence to give his daughter choices in life. Feminine company, exquisite manners and a wide scope of knowledge were required, and from this application letter and her obvious haute monde upbringing, Miss Griffin encompassed all.

And besides, there was no one else.

Wide eyes beseeched, and his thoughts turned to what might happen if he refused. Seth could not bear to imagine this dainty lady cowed into submission by some callous guardian and thus married to a degenerate with more diseases than a London rat.

Surely any strife this runaway bride might bring to his club could be dismissed with an innocent shrug or a cod of blunt. The fact he'd a swathe of influential patrons also detracted any nuisances.

"You pledge you are able to teach a wide range of subjects?"

She nodded frantically, spectacles sliding once more. "My parents were both bibliophiles so I had a wealth of matter to read as a child." She peered around his bookless study and returned a benevolent smile. "I could bring some with me."

Clearly Miss Griffin thought him a witless dolt, but he was in no hurry to change that opinion. She would take pity on his daughter, having to live with such a brutish ignoramus, and impart all the accumulated education in that noggin of hers.

"I will employ you as governess for a one-month trial."

Liquid cinnamon eyes gleamed up at him and he cursed his own soft heart.

If honesty was to be their byword, then he'd not merely employed her for those reasons alone, but for her sensitive wrists, gaze of purity and the wildflower scent which bloomed around her.

"When could you begin?"

"Would Thursday be too soon?"

“Of next week?”

“No, the morrow.” She fiddled with her pelisse cuff. “My guardian is in the country, you see, so I’ve only the servants to evade.”

Devil take him – evading servants? Whatever next? “Please tell me your name is not false and that you’re not the daughter of some duke.”

“How dare you, Mr Hawkins.” She gracefully sniffed. “My name is my own. And the Duke of Aberdare is a mere half-cousin thrice removed. I’ve never even met him. He resides in Wales.”

Bloody hell. “And your guardian, this cousin... A nobleman also?”

“Merely a viscount.”

It could be worse; he was sure it could be worse.

“The salary is seven guineas a month with chambers next to the schoolroom included. As you are obviously a gentlewoman, I have both a housekeeper-cum-cook and a maid who could chaperone should the need arise.”

“Oh.” She removed her glasses and polished them on her striped dress. He’d been mistaken – her eyes flashed the colour of tawny sherry, tantalising and sharp all at once. “That will not be necessary, for if I am to embark upon the career of governess, I will have to learn to do without such chaperone shenanigans. I believe a working life has much freedom.”

Poor innocent.

“Indeed,” he murmured instead. “My daughter Chloe has been previously tutored, but only by myself and the vicar’s wife. Do you require any additional books?”

She replaced her glasses and smiled, causing a dimple to wink enticingly.

Heaven help him.

“For a girl of three and ten, I daresay the first abridgement of Mrs Trimmer’s Ancient History would be useful. Molineux’s Introduction to the Globes, of course, Mr Goldsmith’s Grammar of Geography is a must, and Salzmann’s Elements of Morality ...without the translator’s preface.”

Heaven help his daughter.

“‘Knowledge is the wing wherewith we fly to heaven’,” he muttered, holding out a hand to aid her rise.

Incredulous lips pursed. Suspicious eyes narrowed.

Seth grinned as he drew the study door wide. “Must have read that on some discarded theatre print, Miss Griffin, as I have little time for literature. On the morrow, I shall introduce you to my daughter. Good day.”

With a regal nod more suited to a duke’s half-cousin thrice removed than a lowly governess, she marched ahead of him and twisted left for the hallway.

Some years past, he’d gutted this old-fashioned, three-storey townhouse to create both a boxing academy and home for himself and daughter, hence the old back door to the garden now functioned as the family’s main entrance – the colonnaded facade at the front of the house on Arlington Street serving as the Academy’s impressive threshold.

She paused at the door, presumably awaiting his non-existent butler, which told him much of her current abode and circumstance, so he opened it himself.

A blush lit her cheeks, eyes flitting and fingers fluttering.

“You must think me naive, Mr Hawkins, a privileged lady seeking a new life with little knowledge or experience, but I have to take my future into my own hands, you see, before it is wrested from me.” She tightened the ribbons on her bonnet to continue her soliloquy. “Thus far, I have been shielded from life. Sheltered by the love of my parents or guarded by Cousin Astwood for my marriageability value. Curbed by my birth and gender. Now I shall endeavour to make my own choices, with all its forthcoming perils and blessings.”

Miss Griffin appeared like a fledgling bird, so eager for freedom that she’d dare a boxing academy for her refuge.

“On the contrary, Miss Griffin, I think you brave,” he murmured, sketching a bow.

The blush heightened and she scurried down the three steps which led to the garden.

An awaiting maid rose from the bench beneath his willow tree and together the females bustled down the path. As a cloud shifted and one single ray of sunlight beamed forth, the maid swiftly opened a pink parasol and hoisted it aloft to protect her mistress’s delicate skin.

Seth pinched his forehead.

What had he done?