



All Roads Lead To Earls (To All The Earls I've Loved Before #2)

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Category: Historical

Description: The treacherous roads of North Wales may shatter a carriage, but they can also forge an unlikely destiny.

When a near-fatal accident leaves Patrick Belconnen, Earl of Tullamore, stranded, he finds unexpected sanctuary at Rosstrevor Hall. There, his path collides with Miss Hannah Jones, a humble lady's companion whose quiet grace and hidden fire intrigue him more than any London debutante. The attraction between them is immediate and utterly forbidden—a connection that defies all social convention.

They are two people from different worlds, thrown together by chance in a place where matchmaking is the local pastime. But when a public scandal binds their fates together, honor demands a proposal he never intended to make. Hannah wants a love match, not a marriage of convenience, and Patrick believes love is a weakness an earl cannot afford. Can they overcome pride, duty, and the rigid rules of society to find their way to each other?

This sweet romance is a delightful two-hour read, and reunites us with characters from *Marriage, She Wrote* and *Miss Remington's Steely Resolve*.

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Chapter One

Bangor, North Wales

YOUR Committee have confined their inquiry to the state of the Road from London to Holyhead, and make it the subject of a separate Report, in consequence of the late period of the Session; and of the urgent necessity of some immediate effort to repair and improve that part of it which runs through North Wales.

The whole of this part of the Road is in the worst possible condition; it is exceedingly narrow (in some places but scarcely wide enough to admit two carriages to pass); and "it is carried unnecessarily over many hills, the ascents and descents of which are often one foot in height to fourteen in length, one in ten, one in eight, and even one in seven. "

Besides, many parts of it are very dangerous to travellers; for where it is the most narrow and most steep, and the most interrupted by sharp turns, it passes along the side of precipices many hundred feet high, and without any other protection to carriages than small walls built of loose stones, or very low and narrow banks of earth.

According to the Estimate of Mr. Fulton, who was recently employed by the Lords Commissioners of His Majesty's Treasury to survey this Road, it appears that the sum necessary to put it into repair (without making any improvement by deviations from the present line, or lowering any of the hills) is ? 46,540.

18s. 7d. ; a circumstance which most forcibly explains how excessively bad the

present condition of this Road must be.

Hannah Jones, lady's companion to the Marchioness of Caernarfonshire, could have fainted at the enormous sum her employer had just read aloud in the breakfast room at Rosstrevor House.

The forty-six thousand pound part had barely entered her brain when her head turned fuzzy with the rest of it. She reached for her tea and sipped, hoping it might help things make sense.

It was excellent tea, but it didn't help.

Sitting at the table, Amelia Rosstrevor, Marchioness of Caernarfonshire (and Hanna's esteemed employer), put the report she'd just read down on the table. Then she too reached for a cup of tea.

There were a great many people who had come to grief along that awful road. It was in a shocking state, and it did need repair. But the price? Would it bankrupt the government?

The marchioness turned to her husband, sitting opposite the table and repeated the details: "Forty-six thousand, five hundred and forty pounds, eighteen shillings and seven pence."

The Marquess of Caernarfonshire let out a low whistle at the amount. His mouth soon canted with mischief. "Wherever will they get the eighteen shillings and seven pence?"

Amelia shook her head with mirth, then reached for some toast.

Hannah adored her employer and her husband, who were loving toward each other

and caring toward their staff. Considering her low beginnings in life, Hannah had done exceptionally well for herself to become a lady's companion.

She spent her time making amiable conversation and sewing, when her ladyship required her company.

When not required (her ladyship was so enamored of her husband, she wasn't required for that much company) Hannah was at liberty to visit with the Alwyns and their fascinating pair of spring bucks, who lived on the estate.

The Alwyns' rare animals and their four-legged babies drew a steady stream of visitors from far and wide.

Now the roads would be repaired, and a bridge built across the Menai Strait as well. The region would be heaving with people soon enough.

It was an idyllic life, all things considered. Being surrounded by people deeply in love with each other - even the animals had birthed another calf, or foal, or whatever they were called - made her spinsterhood all the more painful.

Hannah couldn't help feeling, at the age of four and twenty, a pang of jealousy that she might have missed her chance at something similar.

The marchioness declared, "When the road is in better condition, I daresay we'll have even more visitors." She turned to her mother-in-law, also sitting at the breakfast table, playing with baby Rhodri, the heir to the marquise. "Lady Mary, I imagine that news excites you?"

Lady Mary, the dowager marchioness, was too busy babbling to her grandson to pay them any attention.

Another pang gripped Hannah. She sternly reminded herself she could have done so much worse in life, and she should not take her current situation for granted.

Yet still, the yearning persisted. Especially when she was in the same room as young Rhodri. He was an angel, filled with smiles and giggles.

The Dowager then dipped a thin slice of toast into her runny boiled egg and held it up to the pudgy babe for a taste. His eyes grew round as his tongue dabbed against the bright yellow yolk. Most of it ended up on Rhodri's chin, but some went down the right way.

Lady Rosstrevor asked her husband, "Do you think they'll begin work on the road soon?"

"They'll have to," he replied, "How else is everyone supposed to get from Dublin to London in one piece?"

Lady Mary kept up her baby-talk and helped the young heir join in the conversation. "They're also going to build a big bridge all the way over the Menai Strait! We'll be able to see it from the garden!"

The Marquess chuckled, "I don't think it will be quite that big, mother. Though I am intrigued to see what Telford comes up with."

"It will no doubt be grand if the road leading to it costs forty-six thousand pounds," she replied. Then her voice rose an octave and said repeated the amount to young Rhodri. "Did you know numbers went up that high? Of course you did, because you're so clever! More egg?"

One of the footmen came in with a tray of letters on a salver. He placed the tray beside the master of the house on the table.

Once the servant was out of the room, David slid the tray of letters across to Amelia and she sorted through them. She soon had two letters for herself and her husband, and six for the dowager.

“Your enterprise is coming along rather well, Lady Mary,” Amelia noted.

Hannah heartily approved of the enterprise, as they called it. From time to time, the men far outnumbered the women, and she and some of the staff were able to join in, to ‘balance the table’.

“It was your idea,” Lady Mary said. “I’d be more than happy with your assistance any time you feel like stepping back in,” she said with a pointed look.

“I’m rather enjoying my leisure,” Amelia confessed.

“As you should,” Mary said, standing up with young Rhodri and delivering the babe into his father’s arms. “If this is how busy I am now,” she said, taking up her pile of correspondence, “Imagine what life will be like once the road works really begin!”

She wasn’t complaining at all. Hannah could tell by the smile in her face and the twinkle in her eyes, that she was already plotting the most wonderful match-making adventures to ever take place in this quiet little part of north Wales.

Who knew, perhaps Hannah might one day find herself matched with a caring tradesman, or even an engineer!

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Chapter Two

Homesickness sapped the strength of Patrick Belconnen, the Earl of Tullamore, as his driver navigated the shockingly bad roads through the north of Wales.

Each bruising bump grew bigger with every worsening mile.

The countryside itself was beautiful, in direct contrast to the quality of the roads.

The land fell away precipitously at one point.

He pulled the curtains shut and leaned hard the other way, praying a little more that they'd make it around the bend alive.

Every pot hole on one side of the carriage matched with a bump on the other. Just as things developed a rhythm, they would break with a series of ruts and rapid shudders. It would be a wonder if he wasn't twisted like wet, knotty string by the time they reached Bangor.

Bangor was his next destination, but after that, he and the driver had a perilous boat journey across the Menai Strait and a day's travel before he reached Holyhead on the other side of Anglesey Island.

There, they'd take a steam packet from Holyhead to Dublin.

He'd send on a letter to his family - the carriage shuddered as the left wheel dropped into rut - from Dublin and, if fortune smiled upon him, he'd be home the day after.

Crack.

That did not sound safe.

John Coachman slowed the horses down. They'd be lucky to make Bangor at all at this rate. The days were so short and the sun had sunk low already, it must be almost four in the afternoon.

The carriage stopped, then the timbers creaked ominously as the driver stepped down. Patrick began to pray for his safety in earnest. It groaned some more and he could have sworn the coachman was unhitching the horses. A knock at the door quickly followed, so he opened it.

The driver stood there with his hand stretched out to him, face pale as milk. "Take my hand immediately sir, the carriage is about to collapse."

Taking him at his word, Patrick grabbed his hand as a whooshing sound filled his ears.

The carriage tipped and swayed backwards just as he stepped out. Suddenly there wasn't a step to put his foot on any more. The driver grabbed him bodily and set him down onto the ground.

Patrick turned in time to see the carriage tumble sideways as the axle broke and a wheel shattered.

The shock quite drew his breath away, and nearly loosened his bowels at the same time.

"I'm in your debt, good man," Patrick eventually said when his senses returned from the fright.

The horses, as he'd guessed, were not attached to the carriage, so they were unharmed. Again, thanks to his coachman's quick thinking. Carriages could be replaced, horses were so much more valuable.

"There's an Inn up ahead, I hope that means we've reached Bangor," Patrick said.

With no option but to leave the carriage where it fell, they each took hold of a horse and walked into the small town. They found an inn and handed over the horses to a stable hand. The sign above the door said, "Llandygai," but was it the name of the town or the establishment itself?

Finding the innkeeper, they exchanged details of their ordeal, and learned that Bangor was only another two miles down the road.

The innkeeper was devastated that he had no private rooms, "for a man of such quality," but then quickly added, "The Rosstrevors are at the Big House in Bangor, they'd be delighted to offer assistance. I'll get you a fresh horse."

Exhausted but relieved, Patrick arrived at a grand country seat, well-lit with torchlights along the driveway to guide him to the main door at the portico.

The Marquess was in attendance and quickly understood his predicament.

With a few words, he set his staff to securing him a room and filling a bath.

"Was just reading about the how bad the road is the other day," the Marquess said as he guided Patrick to a retiring room with a roaring fire and comfortable chairs.

How utterly heavenly!

A footman arrived with an offer of whisky and he gladly accepted. "I can tell you

from first-hand experience,” Patrick said, “that road is in shocking condition. If not for the quick actions of my coachman, I’d have lost my life this very day.”

Patrick’s aching bones melted into the comfortable furniture. If he wasn’t careful, he’d fall asleep in this very spot.

“Agreed,” his host said, “Work will start soon, of that I’ve no doubt.”

The Dowager Marchioness came in to, “inform his lordship that his bath is ready.”

That was fast, Patrick thought, quickly followed by another thought; why wasn’t a footman telling him this?

The answer to that became readily apparent as the dowager asked him a terribly impertinent question, artfully disguised as politeness.

“Will the Countess Tullamore be joining us soon? I shall prepare rooms for her.”

He nodded at hearing the question, then tilted his head in a little suspicion. “I am a bachelor, my good lady. No countess as yet, though it pains my mother so.”

“In that case, you must join us for a dinner party this evening.”

“You do not need to entertain on my account,” he said. A hot bath awaited him, he was looking forward to a long soak, followed by a good night’s rest.

They reached the base of the stairs. The dowager was intent on leading him to his rooms instead of handing him over to staff.

Oh well, if this was how people did things in north Wales, he wasn’t going to argue.

“Dinner will be at seven, so plenty of time. It’s more a supper, really, nothing formal.”

“My lady, you needn’t trouble yourself, honestly. I’d be more than happy to take a light repast in my rooms.”

“We are at cross purposes,” the dowager said with a gentle smile, “Although you are more than welcome to attend. This is not a dinner in your honor, although I would be delighted to organize such an event if you are to stay for the week. This is one of our regular diversions we have every two weeks or so. What with so many people new to the area, on account of the road and bridge planning, it’s an entertainment to have ladies and gentlemen attend.”

That explained why the driveway to Rosstrevor Hall was so well lit when he’d arrived! “Oh! Thank goodness,” he said, as they reached the landing and she guided him towards a suite of room. “I’m really not one for formal dinner parties, you see.”

The dowager tilted her head in thought. Then she grinned a little wickedly. “Perhaps that’s why there is no countess, and your mother is in such pains?”

“Touché!”

He was beginning to enjoy the company of this playful woman. She and his mother would get along famously.

“Here are your rooms, pull the bell when you’re ready and a footman will bring you to dinner.”

She really wanted him at the table rather than eating in his rooms. Oh well, when in Wales .

Hannah Jones had been ‘at liberty’ most of the day as the marquess and his lovely wife had taken to their rooms barely an hour ago and were not to be disturbed. With little to occupy her time, she helped the maids as they placed beeswax candles into the polished silver holders.

The dowager marchioness approached with an approving smile and a glint in her eyes. “There you are,” she said with a knowing grin. “I take it my daughter-in-law doesn’t require you?”

Hannah blushed deeply in confirmation that the marchioness was enjoying private time with her husband. She bobbed a curtsey and said with an air of hope, “Are we lopsided for dinner again?”

The dowager did enjoy creating regular events for the newcomers to the region. A great many of the men were unmarried, and Lady Mary had taken that as an opportunity.

“You read my mind,” the lady handed over a small pot of lotion. “This will remove the smell of the silver polish from your hands.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Hannah took the pot and inhaled the lemon scent.

Excitement bubbled within and she followed Lady Mary to her dressing rooms. They were at the opposite wing of the house to where her son resided.

A selection of the dowager’s dresses were set aside for these occasions.

Hannah arrived at Lady Mary’s dressing room to find two other maids, Sarah and Anne, already helping each other into borrowed finery.

“Three of us needed tonight?” Sarah asked as Hannah and Lady Mary walked in.

“Yes, we have an unexpected guest staying the night, and I have extended an invitation for him to join us. However, he may choose to take his meal in his rooms.” She muttered something under her breath about him being a bachelor as she rummaged through her dresses and selected an emerald ensemble.

“This will match beautifully with your eyes, Hannah dear.”

It was made of layers of rich material, magnificently bunched around the shoulders in matching puffs. The design was tighter just under her bust and fell in great drifts of flowing green shades to the floor.

“Now, my dears, let us go through the rules,” Lady Mary suggested:

“Smile,” Anne said, “and be sweet.”

Lady Mary nodded.

Sarah added; “Talk as little as possible.”

Another nod from Lady Mary.

Hannah remembered the third rule, “Be polite. They are here to interact with eligible ladies, not staff.”

“That’s right,” Lady Mary said. “And if the topic we do not talk about arises anyway?”

All three said in a chorus, “Tell them the truth, that we have no fortune. When the ladies retire, we may return to our rooms.”

Lady Mary clapped her hands. “Excellent!”

Hannah beamed at how well she'd learned this particular set of instructions. "I did hear a whisper that we have an actual earl under the roof tonight."

Anne's brown eyes rounded with surprise. "An earl?"

"Yes," Hannah confirmed.

In a flash, Anne snatched up a silk scarf and wadded it between her chemise and her stays to push her breasts higher.

"You do make me laugh," Hannah said as adjusted the puffs on her shoulders.

"Well?" Anne's eye were agog. "Is it true, Lady Mary?"

The lady eventually nodded.

Hannah tried hard not to swoon.

Lady Mary added, "He may not have much fortune himself. He arrived alone on a horse. His carriage was damaged on the road."

Hannah spoke rapidly, "If he has no carriage, the repair might take so long he might be stuck here for several nights!"

Sarah and Anne squealed in excitement, then Anne reached for a second scarf and began stuffing it into her stays.

"Now, now," Lady Mary rubbed her temple, as if to ward off potential pain. "Very best behavior, please, girls."

Sarah tied the laces at Hanna's back and then patted her shoulder. "All done. Would

you mind fixing my hair? You're so good at it."

"Of course!"

The three shared the lemon hand balm and primped and preened a little longer. Then Lady Mary clicked her tongue and directed them to the receiving room, where they sat quietly waiting for the evening's guests to arrive.

The dowager's instructions echoed in Hannah's head:

Smile, be sweet, talk as little as possible.

You are here to balance out the sexes at the dinner table.

The gentlemen are here to interact with eligible ladies, not staff.

If they make a mistake and engage in conversation with you, be polite.

If the topic arises, tell them the truth, that you have no fortune.

Later, when the ladies retire, you may return to your rooms.

This would be Hannah's fourth dinner. She'd been exceptionally sweet and smiled at the gentlemen and other ladies at each of the previous three.

None of the gentlemen had initiated conversations of any great import with her.

The eligible ladies who had come for dinner had more or less ignored her.

Hannah had taken no offence at all, as her role on these evenings was to be more or less invisible.

She believed tonight would be no different.

Or at least, it should have been no different, until the most handsome man she'd ever seen stepped into the room and stole the very air from her lungs!

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Chapter Three

An earl never gaped, open-mouthed, at a lady.

And an earl most definitely never drooled either, yet Patrick Belconnen had to sternly remind himself he was the Earl of Tullamore and he should close his mouth promptly and tamp down the hunger roaring through his blood at the sight of this delectable woman.

He must have knocked his head too hard when the carriage had jolted so many times on that infernal road. How else to explain his appalling lapse in manners?

He had to rectify things quickly, before this charming lady formed a poor opinion of him. Feet moving automatically in her direction before his brain was fully engaged, he tried to think of something flattering and disarming before he made a flummery of himself.

“My dear Miss Jones, how delightful to see you here,” was his opening gambit.

Of course he knew it wasn't her name - unless by some miracle it was - but they could spend the next few minutes laughing at how he'd mistaken her for someone else.

It was a technique he'd seen other gentlemen use and tonight he thought he'd test its efficacy.

(Although how there could be anyone else with her particular features he did not

think possible.

Her chestnut hair neatly piled onto her head with a few ringlets teasing her slender neck, her skin that glowed with health and hinted at something from warmer climes, her eyes that were the color of peridots...)

She was supposed to correct his misapprehension. Instead, she mutely stared at him, plump mouth slightly open and eyes round like pennies. She was supposed to reply about now. He waited through another couple of fraught breaths for her correction, which would surely come.

Any second now...

Oh dear.

Things grew awkward as they looked at each other in mute panic.

“Err,” he muttered something incomprehensible to himself and cleared his throat.

Lady Mary Rosstrevor appeared by his side and said, “Lord Belconnen, this is Miss Jones, Miss Jones, the Earl of Tullamore.”

Reality slapped him inside his head harder than a plank of wood. Her name really was Jones. No wonder she appeared so stricken at his clumsy introduction. What a prime goose he’d been to pick such a common surname.

Especially for Wales!

She bobbed a quick curtsy and said, with a layer of a delightful Welsh accent, “Delighted to meet you, My Lord.”

He really must have banged his head.

“The delight is all mine,” he said, and meant it. “I must explain - nay, apologize - for my presumption in our acquaintance.”

“No need,” she said, and gifted him with a shy smile.

She looked as if she was about to say something but then seemed to change her mind. Patrick was not ready to move away just yet. He wanted to keep her talking, to discover all he could about her.

“What part of Wales are you from?” There, that should be innocuous enough.

“Oh, around here,” she replied. “Caernarfonshire is my home.”

Patrick hoped a smile would keep her chatting, but for some reason, it wasn’t working. Often, when he asked somebody to talk about themselves, it was hard to get them to stop.

Then it struck him, perhaps she was shy? He’d heard that some people could be shy, although he’d never been afflicted with that impediment himself.

In which case, he’d happily do the talking for both of them. “You may have picked up from my accent, that I am not from these parts,” he said, adding what he hoped was an encouraging grin.

She nodded and ducked her head a little. When she looked up at him from under her lashes his heart crashed into his ribs.

If he could get a painter to capture her expression, he’d hang it on his bedchamber wall.

The sensible advice Lady Mary had drummed into her evaporated like summer fog as Hannah found herself under the gaze of an earl.

A real-life earl! Here, at Rosstrevor Hall.

He was talking with her, asking her questions, and it was all she could do not to throw herself into his arms, which would no doubt be warm and strong and everything she needed in a pair of arms.

But she mustn't talk about herself, because that would not do.

He definitely wasn't Welsh, and he didn't sound at all English, so she figured he was most likely Irish and on his way to Dublin as he'd been on that ghastly road.

The road! Yes, she could talk to him about the road. "You've had a difficult journey, I hear?"

"I have at that," he said, nodding his head and making a curl of black hair drift over his left eye.

Her hand moved imperceptibly and she had to slap it to her thigh to stop from guiding the dark lock back into place.

He fixed it promptly, although in the next breath it dipped forward again, obscuring her view of his delightfully dark brown eyes.

"A hazard to life and limb it was," he appeared to be warming to his theme. "I prayed mightily for salvation. If not for the quick actions of my coachman, I'd have perished in a ravine, never to be seen of again."

A hand covered her mouth in shock, before she asked, "I hope your horses were

unharmmed?"

"That they were, also thanks to John Coachman. And thank you for your concern for the animals' welfare."

Another awkward silence curled Hannah's tummy. "Is he here with you, the coachman?" He deserved recognition for his gallant actions.

That brought a quick flash of – was it annoyance – across his face, as if the earl wasn't interested in talking about anyone else. "He is staying at the coaching inn at the next town along, and will rejoin me when he has obtained fresh transport.

Hannah hoped that would take several days for that to manifest, which would mean the earl would simply have to stay with the Rosstrevors for that time.

Lady Mary announced dinner was served. Then, as the highest-ranking woman in attendance, she claimed the arm of the earl. (The Marquess and Marchioness had not appeared at all.)

Together, the earl and Lady Mary walked into the dining hall first, followed by several other guests who had quickly worked out their various rankings.

It impressed Hannah the way people who barely knew each other could quickly designate the order of rank for engineers, returned officers and government officials.

Hannah remained waiting until nearly everyone else had entered.

Then she walked in ahead of Sarah and Anne.

Quietly and without fuss, they took their assigned seats in between various gentleman from the roads committee who were part of the advance team conducting the

necessary land surveys.

Any chance for Hannah to continue conversations with the earl was lost now, as there were far too many people sitting between them. It didn't stop her from looking his way every now and then. He, in turn, would happen to cast his eyes her way and she'd quickly duck her head.

Throughout the evening, the gentlemen either side of her spoke of their work in a strange kind of code. The 'adverse camber' of the turns and the 'inclines of four to one' or some. It made sense to them, at least.

Conveniently, Lady Mary's advice came back clearly to her now.

She recalled there was no need for her to talk at all if she didn't want to, as she was not there to catch the eye of any of them.

She and the two maids were here to make up the numbers and allow any of the other young ladies from the district the chance to converse, should they be able to keep up.

Casting a look about the table, the rest of the ladies were doing their best to appear interested in the promised feats of engineering.

Gradually, as the men's voices rose and the conversation consisted entirely of the road and the proposed bridge - and Telford designing it - the rest of the ladies around the table made slow blinks.

One tried to hide a yawn as she took a spoonful of syllabub.

The woman opposite saw her struggle and hid her expression of boredom behind a napkin.

Blessedly, Lady Mary indicated the evening had reached the time where the women might like to withdraw.

Chairs scraped on the floor with speed as the gentlemen rose from their seats.

Anne and Sarah were closest to the door, so they were the first to leave the dining room.

Being on the other side of the table, Hannah had to walk around and not rush away, despite her legs wanting to take her far from the incomprehensible conversations.

She cast a quick glance toward the earl before leaving and blushed to find him looking at her with an appreciative smile.

Odd that he should still smile at her, knowing how very far beneath his class she was, based on where she was sitting.

Before the doors finished closing behind them, they heard the gentlemen's voices raised in conversation. Somebody mentioned the extraordinary price of the works. They'd clearly been waiting for the women to leave before discussing the truly unsuitable topic of money.

Lady Mary indicated that Hannah, Sarah and Anne were free to retire for the evening.

The two maids bobbed their thanks and headed to Lady Mary's suite, so they could change into their regular clothing. Hannah held back a little and said, "Thank you, Lady Mary, it was a delightful meal, and I am so honored I was able to meet an earl."

"Until tonight, I'd never met one either," Lady Mary confessed. "Why don't you join the rest of the ladies and tell us a little about him?"

Warmth spread up her neck and face. She had rather hoped to rush to her rooms and spend all evening dreaming of the lush lord with the beautiful wavy hair. Then again, spending time talking about him with other ladies came a close second best. She didn't want to appear too eager, however.

“Oh, but I couldn't possibly. I hardly know him from Adam as we were not talking for any deal of time.”

“It was more than some of the other ladies achieved,” the dowager acknowledged.

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Hannah did not have to be asked again. Lady Mary wanted her in the room with the rest of the gentlewomen, and as Lady Mary was the mother-in-law of her employer, she could hardly refuse either.

In the receiving room, the women sat on an array of comfortable chairs and were already sipping tea a footman had brought in on a wheeled tray.

“I’ll have a sherry,” Lady Mary said to the tall lad, who nodded and soon returned with her tippie of choice on a salver.

The moment they were truly alone without any servants, all eyes turned to Hannah and one of the visiting ladies asked, “Tell all about the earl!”

“Yes, please do!” another begged.

“He’s so handsome!” a third woman fluttered a fan at her neck to cool herself.

Hannah wanted to please them, so she recounted their brief interview the best she could. “His eyes are the most delightfully deep brown,” she began.

Several women sighed and one dramatically leaned back on the chaise longue as if swooning.

More questions soon followed, and she did her best, but often she had to shrug and admit she didn’t know. However, “If Lady Mary hosts more dinners while he is still here, I’m sure there will be a chance to find out.”

He had not said that much to her, and she even less back to him, but she found that what he had said in that short time provided more than enough detail for the ladies to appreciate.

“Where is the Earldom of Tullamore located, exactly?” another begged.

Before long they were asking her several things at once and Hannah became terribly confused. She looked to Lady Mary for advice, and the dowager benignly nodded for her to go on.

“Tullamore is in Ireland. His lordship was on his way to Holyhead to sail to Dublin,” she answered.

A round of comments about how beautiful Ireland was soon followed.

When Hannah described the way a lock of his hair fell over one dark eye, one of the ladies, Miss Gideon, made a soft groan.

This set off gales of laughter at Miss Gideon’s expense.

Hannah felt sorry for the lady and immediately said, “It was all I could do to stand upright and remember to breathe myself, he is so terribly arresting.”

“Am I just?” A man’s voice said from a side door.

Hannah burned with deep shame. Every lady in the room gasped and turned to see the Earl of Tullamore standing there, big as life, with a wicked grin on his face.

If the ground could open up and swallow her whole at this moment, she would be exceptionally grateful.

Lady Mary stood up, “I see you have forgotten the directions to your rooms. Allow me to redirect you.”

He really shouldn't overstep his welcome, but there was something of the renegade in Patrick Belconnen that he struggled to contain.

The charming young lady he'd made blush earlier had been so far down the other end of the table he'd had no time to learn anything more about her. Naturally, he wanted to know more.

Because he was in an unfamiliar abode, and because he was an earl and very much used to getting his own way without question, he felt at complete liberty to wander into whichever room he chose.

He chose the room where he could hear feminine voices, and the blush she delivered his way was even better than her earlier rendition.

His hostess said something about him walking into the wrong room, but he'd completely ignored her. He was in exactly the correct room at the precisely correct moment. “I'm sure absolutely everything Miss Jones has told you about my person is completely true,” he announced to the room.

As one, the ladies tittered and fluttered their eyes and hid smiles behind fans. Meanwhile, Miss Jones had blushed splendidly, but then she turned a little pale, which was the opposite of what he'd wanted to happen.

Oh dear, she appeared to be about to faint.

Rushing forward, he reached her just in time as she swooned for real into his arms. He was ready for this. There was nothing of her, she'd be as light as a feath-

She fell heavily against him, a complete deadweight. He hadn't braced properly, lost his footing and the two of them crashed onto the floor in a crumpled heap.

Squeals and gasps of alarm filled the room.

Temporarily winded, he couldn't breathe for a moment. Drat it all, he was supposed to catch her in his arms and be there when she opened her beautiful eyes. Then the game would begin!

He took longer to regain his composure than she. Like a startled rabbit, she leapt away. "I'm so terribly sorry, my lord, please forgive me."

"Noth-" the words would not come out, as his chest refused to refill.

Lady Mary stepped forward, "Have you broken anything?"

"Pride," he squeaked out.

"Miss Jones," Lady Mary said, "Help me get his lordship back on his feet."

Bless her, she gifted him with a modest blush as she took his hand in hers and Lady Mary took the other. With a quick movement, he was vertical again and breathing more easily by the second.

He did his best to hold Miss Jones's hand for as long as he could, but she withdrew it and clamped it safely in her other.

Lady Mary spoke again, "Are you injured?"

He dearly wanted to be, because it would give him the excuse to extend his stay with the Rosstrevors.

Alas, Miss Jones had such a fretful expression on her face he couldn't in good conscience add to her distress.

The invisible rascalion sitting on his shoulder told him to stop teasing the poor lass and leave her be.

His guardian angel, on the other shoulder, was weeping.

"I am hearty and whole, my lady. And it does appear I am in the wrong room. Kindly guide me to the suite you've so generously provided in my time of need."

Once he'd been reintroduced to his suite of rooms, he bid Lady Mary goodnight and settled in to the bed, which was far more comfortable than he'd expected. Good beds were hard to find, and he was sorely tempted to offer to purchase it and take it home for himself.

Ahh, but that would require a good-sized cart and more horses, and his own carriage. The previous one lay in pieces, somewhere down a steep incline on the London to Holyhead road.

Oddly, he no longer worried about that carriage. He would purchase a new one, and it would not take long. However, he hoped it also would not happen too quickly. It meant he could spend more time with the charming Miss Jones.

He drifted off to sleep with a smile on his face.

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Chapter Four

The next morning, Hannah was again not required as a companion for the Marquess of Caernarfonshire and she found herself at liberty once more.

The sun, too, had apparently decided it was not required either.

She loved taking in the ever-changing moods of the Menai Strait, but after walking for about an hour, the ground had become wet and slippery.

She should head back inside and read a book by the fire, which would be warm and comfortable.

How odd that her lot in life was to be a companion to someone who honestly didn't need one.

At least, not for the foreseeable future.

Visiting the spring bucks would be the distraction she needed, and at this time of day there would not be too many visitors. Mrs. Alwyn greeted her with a smile and a hot cup of tea. More importantly, she offered a little company as well.

"I hear there was an earl at the dinner," Mrs. Alwyn said.

Gossip certainly travelled quickly. Heat infused Hannah's neck and face at the memory. "Indeed, and you must have heard that I made an uttermost fool of myself in front of his lordship."

“Not in the slightest. He should not have walked in to the retiring room,” Mrs. Alwyn consoled. Goodness, she’d certainly heard a great deal!

Mrs. Alwyn went on, “At the very least he should have made himself known instead of eavesdropping .”

The emphasis she placed on the last word gave Hannah pause. Her stomach sank. “Don’t tell me he’s in here?”

Mrs. Alwyn laughed, “No, dear, but my husband is never far away and I’d hate him to feel left out.”

“Don’t mind me,” a male voice said from one of the far stalls.

Hannah laughed at how carefree the Alwyns were with each other. It was something to aspire to. Everyone else at Rosstrevor Hall appeared to have a well-defined role, while she was at something of a loose end.

Mrs. Alwyn leaned in and whispered, “The maids are saying how handsome he is.”

Hannah nodded. “Palm-bitingly so.”

Mrs. Alwyn giggled, “I bet he knows it too.”

They shared an appreciation for a fine-looking gentleman. It was lovely to have Mrs. Alwyn to talk to, she wasn’t much older than Hannah and always made her feel welcome. Perhaps because she was a relatively new arrival to these parts herself?

Hannah said, “If I get the chance to speak to his lordship, I shall set him -”

The stable doors creaked open.

Mrs. Alwyn set her tea aside and stood up. Hannah did the same, assuming the new arrival would be the Marquis checking in on their unusual livestock. If he was out and about, the Marchioness might need her companion to return.

It was the earl. Of course it was! Standing there in the open doorway. As if ordained by the heavens, the sun broke through the gloom and lit his face with a warm glow.

“Your lordship,” Hannah made a quick curtsy, and Mrs. Alwyn followed. Hannah made quick introductions, stunned that her brain operated at all in his presence.

“You’ve come to see the spring bucks?” Mrs. Alwyn asked, although the lack of rising tone at the end of the sentence made it far more of a statement than a question.

“Are they real?” He asked.

“They most certainly are,” Mrs. Alwyn replied as she guided the earl to the stalls where he could gaze upon them. “There are four now.”

Hannah fidgeted, not sure whether to leave or stay.

The earl was so lovely to look upon, nobody could blame her for remaining transfixed to her seat.

Also, nobody had come to retrieve her, so it wasn’t as if she were needed anywhere.

The biggest reason to stay, though, was to speak with the earl, and apologize for her lapse in manners the previous evening.

That opportunity presented itself sooner than she had time to compose the right words in her head. When he smiled at her, the few words she’d had ran off in flight.

“Confess,” she managed.

That earned her a single raised brow of confusion.

Fair enough. It didn’t make any sense to her either, and she’d been the one to say it. “Terribly sorry for speaking about you last night, while you were not there to defend yourself.”

That earned a half smile, as if he were rather enjoying himself. “Did you say anything that wasn’t true?”

Suddenly Mr. and Mrs. Alwyn were no longer in sight. How had they slipped away so quietly?

It was just the two of them and the spring bucks. Which were adorable, especially the babe of the group.

“Ahh,” Hannah had to remind herself of his question. Had she said anything about him that wasn’t true? “I don’t think so.” She’d bragged of his fine qualities, of course, because her audience seemed to want that from her.

“Then there’s no need for an apology of any sort.” The man was confidence personified.

“I still feel dreadful for my part,” she insisted. “I was at the dinner under false pretenses.”

“Oh?”

She had his full attention now, and became just as skittish as the spring bucks. “There were too many gentlemen at the table, I was merely there to balance the sexes. I

should not have engaged in conversation with you.”

“But it was I who engaged you,” he said. “In fact, it also speaks of a caring hostess that she should make sure to have equilibrium at the dinner table.”

“These are not merely dinners, my lord. The dowager marchioness organizes them as match-making enterprises. When the numbers are out of balance, we, that is, I and another maid, sometimes step in to fill the seats. There are so many more eligible gentlemen in the region, thanks to the investigations into the roads and the planned bridge across the Menai. It’s important you know which ladies at the dinner were truly eligible, and which were like me, with nothing to our names.

That’s what I need to apologize for; for potentially leading you on when I should have remained in the background. ”

Thoroughly out of breath, she quickly refilled her lungs.

His lips quirked in amusement. “The dowager invited me to dinner in the hopes I’d form an attachment with one of the ladies? Considering I’d arrived unannounced only a few hours earlier, the lady moves fast.”

“It would have been intolerably rude not to invite you to dinner,” Hannah countered.

“Nevertheless, she extended the invitation my way, and then ... you were in the receiving room, right where I’d see you.”

“That was pure happenstance. You were never meant to form an attachment with me, which is why I must set you to rights, that I have no fortune. I must admit, I was astounded when you already knew my family name. Had you asked after me already?”

His elegant brow creased, and his mouth curled once again in amusement. “I was having fun and assumed you would correct me, never for a moment knowing I happened upon the correct address.”

Well, that made sense. And Jones was a common surname in Wales.

“But I must also set you to rights,” he said, “I have not formed any kind of attachment, it that is what you are implying.”

Her stomach dropped with shock, but she clamped on a smile and lied, “I’m so relieved.”

A hitched laugh escaped him and that mesmerizing brow creased in earnest. “Wait. Did you think me capable of losing my senses after a mere evening of conversation?”

Now he was insulting her, and Hannah swallowed hard. “It’s been known to happen.”

A deep laugh erupted from him, and it was definitely not indicating that they were sharing a joke. He was laughing directly at her expense, and she cared not for it.

He hands clenched into little fists of impotence. She’d like to slap that smug look off his face. How dare he laugh at her heartfelt apology, as if she wasn’t good enough to deliver it.

“You clearly don’t know what you’re missing,” she said. With a short step she closed the distance between them, wrapped her arms around his shoulders and kissed him directly on the mouth.

Jolts of unmet need surged through her system. Beneath her hands, his body stilled as her hands began to play with the lush curls at the nape of his neck. She pressed a little more and coaxed his lips apart. A second later, his arms came around her body and he

returned the kiss with equal passion.

Excellent.

She pulled back just as things began to heat between them. His eyes were unfocused.

“Just you wait,” she said. “You will fall in love with me.”

He grinned and shook his head, “I’m an earl. I don’t do love.”

Hands on her hips, she stepped back out of his reach and declared, “You will by the time I’m through with you.”

What a delightfully charming minx this Miss Jones was turning out to be. At first he’d considered her rather lovely to look upon and was happy to look upon her.

Now she had fire of spirit, something far more favorable. What a welcome diversion she would be!

“You are challenging me to form an attachment in your favor?”

“Take it however you like,” she said with a defiant jut of her chin.

Goodness, it was almost worth the loss of his carriage to find himself sparring with this woman.

“I will take it as a challenge,” he readily accepted.

Her eyes flared with interest and she did not retreat. If anything, she stepped a little closer, taunting him to deliver a kiss back to her on her pert, ripe lips. Damned if his body wasn’t reacting against his better judgement. His mouth turned dry, his breath

caught a little.

Neither retreated, as they stood there facing each other, locked in a daring challenge to see who might back off first. There was nobody else around, except for the spring bucks. His hosts had made themselves scarce.

“If I did form an attachment, emphasis on if , you must know that you could only ever become my mistress.”

She grinned with confidence and slowly shook her head. “Don’t insult us both, my lord.”

What spirit! It was misplaced, obviously, because he was an earl and she was ... well, he wasn’t really sure what she was, but she wasn’t his social equal and that’s what everyone said mattered in this world.

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All the same, he would rather like another kiss, and she was offering herself up to him so magnificently.

Slowly, deliberately, he leaned in, giving her every opportunity to pull away.

She did not. Did his lips descend on hers or did she close the distance?

It was hard to tell, all that mattered was the sensation of her delightfully warm lips on his.

Where they belonged. He could get very used to this.

Not that he would form an attachment at all. There was no chance of that happening, not from a mere two kisses, even if he could feel the power of them all the way down to his boots.

The stable doors opened and light from outside poured in.

She would jump back out of a sense of propriety ...

yet she didn't! Had she not heard the door?

Somebody cleared their throat, and she still didn't pull back?

How terribly brazen! His brain slowly processed that she must be challenging him again – or perhaps she'd set him up?

He had to be the one to pull away, and when he did, he saw Lady Mary standing there in the doorway, pretending to use a brush to wipe her boot and very obviously not looking in their direction.

Any moment now she would make a wild gasp and declare he'd compromised Miss Jones. An all too familiar trap.

For her part, Miss Jones smiled and offered him a wink, before turning to respond to whoever had caused them to stop kissing.

"Lady Mary, the spring bucks are in fine health today," Miss Jones said with a steady voice, as if nothing had happened at all and her entire world hadn't been turned upside down with an incendiary kiss, as his so clearly had.

"Miss Jones, how convenient to find you here," Lady Mary acknowledged her presence. Then she curtsied toward Patrick and asked after his health.

Patrick had to clear his thickened throat before he could reply that he was well, and very much enchanted with the spring bucks. "I don't suppose I could order a pair for my estate in Ireland?"

Lady Mary beamed at him, "Let's arrange a meeting with the Alwyns, they're the owners of the fine beasts. I daresay they'd be willing to negotiate, my lord."

"Most diplomatic of you, Lady Mary," he replied and couldn't help grinning. He hoped she'd heard his double meaning, in that she'd also been very diplomatic upon walking in on him kissing a young lass, and she hadn't made a scene.

Then Lady Mary said, "I must ask for the return of Miss Jones; my daughter-in-law requires her."

Patrick bade Miss Jones farewell with a curt bow, and his kissing partner made a quick curtsy and exited. He expected Lady Mary to follow her out, but the dowager remained in the stables. "I do hope your lordship slept well last eve?"

"Indeed, an excellent night's sleep, and in good comfort. I thank you. I might be inclined to make an offer for the bed itself, the most comfortable I've had in years."

"If you are able to stay a few more nights, would you agree to Rosstrevor Hall hosting a ball in your honor?"

She wanted him to stay longer? "That would be delightful," he readily agreed.

"I should like to invite some eligible ladies from the region, if that would provide entertainment, my lord?"

"I completely understand, my good woman," Patrick grinned. "You have an enterprise to continue and an unmarried earl has fallen into your lap, so to speak. However, I make no promises whatsoever about forming any attachments with any eligible ladies."

"I am greatly relieved to hear that," her expression matched her words, and she appeared genuine. "I wanted to speak with you about a certain young woman."

"Could you possibly be referring to Miss Jones?" No reason to dance about the point, best get straight to it.

"Yes, the very same. Please, I request you do your utmost not to form any attachments to that particular young woman. If you have, I must ask you desist immediately."

Patrick swallowed. Was the doddering old dearie assuming he was the one who'd

formed an attachment with Miss Jones and not the other way around?

Even if he had formed a tendresse, how dare she tell him Miss Jones was off limits. He was an earl; nobody was off limits to him. Unless ... good heavens, she wasn't promised to a duke, was she? That did rather alter things.

"I assure you there is no intention or attachment," he began. Lady Mary delivered a slow nod. "At least not on my part. You might want to deliver Miss Jones the same advice."

"I thank you," Lady Mary said with a curtsy to indicate she was about to leave. "She is needed here most sincerely, and is highly valued by my daughter-in-law for her company."

By the time his coachman arrived in the afternoon, Patrick had had several hours to heat himself into a stew about what other people were thinking and saying about him.

Attachments? Pshaw ! He would dance with every eligible lady who attended the forthcoming ball.

A saucy thought took hold; he'd dance with the scullery maids if he could find them!

It did not bother Patrick one jot that his carriage was unrecoverable. His coachman seemed ready for anger or disappointment that they would not be able to resume their travels.

Instead of being upset, Patrick merely shrugged. "I'm sure you've recovered my belongings from what's left of the carriage?"

"Naturally, sir."

“Then all shall be well. Neither of us were harmed, nor the horses. Everything else can be replaced.”

“Very good, sir. If you are keen to travel and make up the lost time, we can take the ferry from Bangor early tomorrow morning and catch the Post Coach from the other side to Holyhead?”

“Well you see, the matron here is throwing a ball in my honor. Would be dashed rude of me to change my mind.”

“Oh. You’ve already accepted?” The man’s face fell.

“ ’Fraid so.” Oh dear, just because he was having a jolly time of it did not mean his coachman had the same frame of mind. The man had a family waiting for him back home.

“I tell you what, my good man, I shall give you leave to return to Ireland. You may send a letter on ahead once you get to Dublin’s shores to alert Belconnen Hall that I shall be delayed.”

“You are too kind. But if you need me to remain, I shall.”

“Nonsense. You’re a coachman without a coach.

May as well head home to your family who will be delighted to see you after all this time.

” Saints knew his own remaining kin barely cared for him.

A cold hardness settled in his belly at what awaited his return.

“Tell you what, if you can wait a half hour while I write, you shall be at liberty the very minute I hand it over to you.”

“Much obliged, sir,” John Coachman nodded and touched the front edge of his hat.

Their movements settled, Patrick made sure to keep to his promise and write a short letter.

In fourteen minutes he’d signed his name at the end.

It took barely two minutes to sand so the ink didn’t run, then he folded the paper, wrote the address on the clean side and sealed the edges closed with a dollop of wax.

He wasn’t wearing his ring, so he merely blew on the wax and pressed his index finger into the cooling wax. Good enough.

Barely three minutes after that, the back of John Coachman and the horse he rode in on vanished down the drive.

Now he could get back to his high dudgeon of Lady Mary thinking she could tell him who he was allowed to form attachments with.

Or was it upon? He’d mull over the grammar of that in due time.

The real issue was, Lady Mary was in no position to decide upon whom he should or could place his affections.

He chuckled to himself at how mistaken the dowager was. There mere thought that he, an earl, would form an attachment with the penniless Miss Jones was eminently laughable.

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Chapter Five

A nother day, another walk along the waters as Hannah found herself at liberty once again.

It was a strange kind of life, she thought, a companion to a marchioness who really didn't need her that often.

She sometimes filled a seat at a dinner table where she wasn't required to do much, and say even less.

She was something of a warm body to be positioned when and where required. The rest of the time, she had to find ways to fill her time.

A shuffling noise from the ground stole her attention. There in the weeds sat a hedgehog. The little darling looked cold and a bit lost. Should she cuddle the small beastie?

Being a hedgehog, he or she would be prickly. Hannah didn't even have her gloves to protect her.

"Hullo," a voice called out nearby.

Standing up, who should be walking toward her than the earl. He lifted up his hat in greeting.

"Good afternoon, my lord," she said with a bobbed curtsy. She couldn't go too far

down, the ground was drenched with overnight rain and her skirts would get soaked.

“How are you this fine day?” He asked, with a smile that made her tummy do strange flips.

“My lord, I am well. I have just become acquainted with this gentle creature,” she said, indicating the hedgehog.

She expected him to ignore it, because it was a small thing of no importance.

The earl looked down, while his voice rose in pitch with delight. “He’s so sweet!”

Her heart melted a little at how soft the earl behaved toward the little animal.

“I always feel lucky when I see these creatures,” he said, admiring their spiky new friend. “But why isn’t he running away from us?”

“I believe he might be cold,” Hannah offered.

“He might be at that.” At which point the earl took his hat off and sat it before the hedgehog. Then with his gloved hand, he encouraged the animal to climb in. He only yelped a couple of times as the spikes pressed through his gloves.

How endearing to see this man behave so kindly.

Realization dawned on her. He was kind to lowly creatures. Is that what why he was behaving so kindly to her, because she was so low?

“What do you propose to do with him now?” Hannah asked as the earl lifted up his hat, heavier now there was a hedgehog in it.

“Err,” he looked about. They were closer to the stables than the kitchens. “Let’s head to the stables, it will be dry in there at least.”

Hannah grinned at the earl’s demeanor. “There might be some food in there. Oh, but my lord, I don’t know what hedgehogs eat.”

“Grubs or grass, possibly?” He offered with a shrug.

That incredibly touchable loose lock of hair was back over his eye. Her hand twitched at the urge to put it back in place. Instead, she curled her hands and kept them tightly to herself.

They reached the stables which were marginally warmer than the outdoors, but far drier, except for one small area where the roof leaked melodically into a bucket.

The Alwyns were doting over the spring bucks, as usual. The animals regularly drew a crowd, and today there were several people here to gaze upon the shy exotic creatures.

The earl approached Mr. Alwyn and showed him the contents of his hat. Mr. Alwyn’s face beamed with pleasure. “My good man, I have signs of woodworm in the posts. I hope the little critter is hungry. And if you find any more, bring them over at once.”

Mr. Alwyn took the earl’s hat and climbed up the ladder to the straw-filled upper floor. He gently lowered the hat, shaking it a little to encourage the hedgehog out.

Mr. Alwyn handed the hat back to the earl, where he batted it against his leg to remove any dirt that might still be in there, before placing it on his head.

A beautiful curl from his forehead stuck out below the hat, warming Hannah right through at the sight of it.

For the next hour, she and the earl spent a charmingly wonderful time searching for more hedgehogs. They didn't find any, but any time with the earl was time well spent.

The skies threatened rain once more. Patrick had to concede there were no more hedgehogs to be found.

Had he made something of a goose of himself in the eyes of this young lady?

Well, so be it. He adored hedgehogs, who were so small and harmless.

They also kept the bug problems in check.

Odd to see one about at this time of year, though.

They should be hibernating. Perhaps a fox had found his burrow?

He would check with the Alwyns tomorrow and see if Snuffles had made it.

Oh dear, he'd given it a name already! That could only lead to heartbreak. How many animals had he rescued as a child and tried to save?

"We should probably go back into the warm," Miss Jones suggested. Mist gathered her hair into delightful ringlets.

"Yes, let's," he agreed. "Will you, ah, be attending the dances?"

She tilted her head in that shy way she had and said, "If the numbers are unbalanced."

"That is why you were at the dinner the other evening?"

She blushed so delightfully he knew it to be true. “Lady Mary feels badly if there are too many gentlemen and not enough ladies at events, so I often score a late invitation.”

“Ah! A fiddler’s bidding, then?”

She giggled into her closed hand, “Something like that.”

“If you have a card, I should like to reserve a dance.”

They were closer to the doors leading back into Rosstrevor Hall. Soon they might not be able to speak so freely, because there would be far more people about.

“My Lord, it would be unseemly for you to claim a dance with me, considering my low station and lack of fortune.”

Relief flooded through Patrick. “It’s a mere dance, it’s not like I’m forming an attachment.”

Chapter Six

The evening of the ball arrived. With it came a squally wind and torrential rain. A pang of homesickness caught Patrick by surprise as the weather reminded him of childhood winters in Tullamore.

Instead of people announcing themselves with style and grace, they dashed from the portico and into the ballroom, where footmen offered cups of hot spiced wine from crowded trays.

This type of wine usually wasn't served until Christmastide, but perhaps this was a local custom to celebrate ...

he wracked his brains ... St Clement's Day?

No matter the actual date, the wine delivered the desired effect; warming him from within and spreading good cheer on this miserable evening.

As more guests arrived, the press of bodies created greater warmth inside. People's cheeks and foreheads glowed pink with the effects of the wine.

As the guest of honor, Patrick stood beside Lady Mary as she made introductions. The highest ranked were gentlemen's daughters. Their mama's eyes were out on stalks at the prospect of making an incredible match. Lady Mary would most likely be delighted to claim the match for her enterprise.

Tonight promised to be most diverting.

On the other side of the room, he caught sight of Miss Jones, chatting with a small coterie of ladies of her own age.

They were dressed beautifully. She wore a delightful emerald green again, which matched some of the stitching on his waistcoat.

He suspected that had to be Lady Mary's doing, rather than simple coincidence.

When the music began he found himself dancing with a country miss, who was a good deal shorter than he. It was easy to scan the room over the top of her head and keep track of Miss Jones, who, drat her to the devil, was smiling and having fun as she danced with another gentleman.

Any moment now she will look my way, and see how much I am not bothered in the slightest that she is dancing with another .

How strange, he thought, that she didn't look his way. Not even a flicker of recognition.

The music ended and he returned his dance partner to her mama.

His next partner was all too eager to take her turn.

This one was delightful as well, although she was the same height as he.

Looking elsewhere for Miss Jones became more difficult.

She danced well and asked him about the weather, a safe topic of discussion.

Later, if he'd been asked to describe her, he would have failed miserably.

In fact, if he'd been asked to describe any of the ladies he'd danced with, he would not have been able to identify their most basic attributes.

Hair color? No clue. Dress details? A blur of muslin and ribbons.

He'd kept looking across the room where each time his eyes landed on a delightful Welsh Miss having so much fun he may as well not be in the room at all.

How dare she not be jealous of the many ladies he'd been dancing with?

What a charmingly lovely evening! Hannah was thoroughly enjoying the ball.

She danced with a well-to-do sheep farmer from Penrhyn, an engineer from London who was here for the roads, the son of the publican from Llandygai and several men in various fields of commerce from Bangor itself.

To a man, they were excited about the construction of the bridge and the road repairs, and how it would enhance trade and prosperity for the area.

Their enthusiasm for the changes and improvements coming their way proved infectious.

Until now, she'd thought discussions of bridges and roads had been dull, but she couldn't help becoming caught up in their interest. More people coming to the area meant they would require more goods and services.

She did her best to keep track of it all, promising to inform Lady Mary of the opportunities ahead to expand her dinner enterprises.

The sight of the Alwyns dancing nearby reminded her of another business opportunity. "I'm sure there will be even more people visiting the spring bucks as

well.”

“Indeed, they will draw a crowd from hither and yon,” her dance partner said. They were progressing in a country dance at this point, and were able to converse freely while the leading couple progressed down the line.

Such a whirl of an evening, Hannah should have been tired, but instead she accepted more dances from more gentlemen. The next was a quadrille and the frequent change of partners meant fewer opportunities for conversations.

Her heart tripped extra time when Lord Tullamore hove into view.

He looked splendid and full of health, his eyes sparkling with mischief.

She had about three seconds to acknowledge him before the steps demanded they return to their places.

She couldn't think of what to say, so all she could do was deliver a small smile and then be on her way.

The Marquess and his wife joined the dancers for a gentle waltz.

Hannah remained attentive to the Marchioness, to see whether she might be required for any companion duties.

The two danced so beautifully together, the warmest smiles upon their faces.

A pang of jealousy caught Hannah unawares as she recognized the obvious love between the couple.

It was so natural, so warm and reciprocated.

A marriage of equals that was so deeply rare.

It didn't sit well with her that she'd boasted to the earl that she'd make him fall in love with her.

It was clear to her that love wasn't something you could demand of a person.

It had to be natural; occur at its own pace.

As soon as she had the chance, she'd apologize to the earl for her past behavior.

It had been lovely to kiss him, and she wasn't sorry for that at all.

She only caught brief glimpses of him for the last few dances, which were slower, with less exacting steps as the evening finished. She would leave him be, there would be time to find him tomorrow and hopefully explain herself properly. He'd have a good laugh at her expense, and she'd deserve it.

As the footmen opened the doors to allow guests to leave, a gale blew directly in, bringing with it a flurry of dead leaves, drenching rain and even a tree branch.

With haste, the footmen ushered guests back inside and closed the doors.

It looked like the end of the world outside!

"Dearest guests," Lady Mary announced. "It is far too dangerous for many of you to return home. We shall arrange lodgings and refreshments for all until the storm blows itself out."

The musicians appeared to be packing up, but stopped themselves with this announcement. In mere moments, a maid appeared with a tray of small cups, which

the musicians accepted.

Probably spiced wine.

As if nothing untoward was happening outside at all, the party resumed with a lively tune.

Hannah had been on her feet all evening and sought out a quiet place to rest for a while.

There was a room off to the side of the hall.

The candles had burned themselves out and it was dark and unoccupied.

She left the door open so that light from the hall could shine in.

There were several comfortable chairs so she sat herself in one, and rested her feet on another, giggling to herself at the luxury of it all.

She couldn't stay in here for too much longer, she'd be needed to help settle guests who were unable to return home. But just for now, she gave herself permission to rest.

A few minutes later, the light at the doorway dimmed and who should walk in but the Earl of Tullamore.

"My lord," she said, pulling her feet off the chair.

"Don't get up," he said, "I'm looking for somewhere to hide."

"Hiding, my lord?"

“From pursuit. Eager-eyed ingénues and their mamas, to be precise.”

Hannah felt sorry for him, but only a little. “You could retreat to your rooms?”

“Ah, it was already occupied.”

Hannah slapped her hand over her mouth to stop from laughing.

His voice was low and frustrated. “If you’ve quite recovered.”

She nodded, understanding his dilemma. The very reason he was at Rosstrevor Hall was his lack of a carriage. Even if the storm outside abated, he was unable to leave. “I am glad you’re not out on the London road in this weather,” she offered by way of consolation.

“Not sure what’s more dangerous; the road or the desperate young ladies and their mamas.”

“Do not disparage my countrywomen. You’re the most exciting thing to happen in these parts of late, and they are so starved for fun.”

“They are trying to ensnare me into betrothal, by fair means or foul.”

Hannah had an idea. As much as her feet hurt, the best place for the Earl would be out in the open, as close to Lady Mary as possible.

“You are hardly safe in this darkened room with me, in that case,” she reminded him.

Lady Mary is still in the ballroom and ...

” she looked through the gap in the door, “The footmen are serving another round of

spiced wine. Come and warm yourself in the midst of company, and your reputation shall remain unblemished.”

Nobody would be able to accuse him of anything if he were out in the open. Darkened rooms with no chaperone, on the other hand, were another matter.

“Also, it behooves me to apologize for teasing you most unfairly while you were visiting the spring bucks.”

He stood up and muttered something about how he knew she couldn’t have been serious. “I did not believe you were the sort to play the long game.”

She had no idea what that meant, but he rose at the same time she did and they were about to head out the door.

He first – so that all eyes would follow him as he sought out Lady Mary.

When everyone was distracted, she’d leave too.

Or she might remain and put her feet back up. That was also an option.

This well-thought-out plan had one small flaw. Other people. Namely, a young lady who slipped into the room before he could leave. The lady blinked as her eyes adjusted to the darkness, then she made a soft, “Oh” of surprise as she took in the sight of the earl.

It was Miss Gideon, from the dinner!

The earl stepped back to create more distance. Miss Gideon’s eyes were only on his lordship, she hadn’t even noticed that Hannah was still here. The lady thought she was quite alone in a room with an earl.

How far would she take this?

Quietly, Hannah slipped behind the chair so she could observe but not interfere. There was hardly any cause for her to be quiet, as the young lady began to gasp theatrically and overly loudly. “Oh my Lord! No I couldn’t possibly!”

Hannah rolled her eyes, knowing exactly where this was headed.

The young lady then turned to the open doorway so her voice would carry outwards. “This is so very improper!” she said.

Mentally, Hannah counted backwards from five. When she reached two, the lady’s Mama pulled the door open even wider and stood there on the threshold. Her hand flew to her chest in shock and indignation. “My daughter alone with the Earl of Tullamore! Compromised!”

Chapter Seven

Tutting and gasping filled Hannah's ears. The lady's mama was putting on the most spectacular performance, she might as well take up a career on the stage!

A great many things happened at once, as suddenly there were people blocking the doorway, which also blocked the light. However, her ears did not fail her, and she heard everything as she stepped closer to her side of the doorway.

The earl's predicament was laid out for all to hear and see, as the sweet young lady latched on to her mama and loudly wailed about what was to become of her.

"It's clear that the earl must marry my daughter. That is the only way," Mrs. Gideon said, relishing her new role as the mother of a countess.

The earl tried to clear the air, "My Lady, I did not so much as approach your daughter."

"But you were in a darkened room with no chaperone!" the mama exclaimed. "Lady Mary, surely you understand this visitor has scandalized my daughter's reputation and the good name of Caernarfonshire into the bargain."

Lady Mary suggested, "I'm sure this can all be easily explained and sorted in good time with no harm done, Mrs. Gideon.

" It was an attempt to soften the mood somewhat, even though everyone in attendance was as quiet as church mice, listening and most likely watching the

emotional storm.

It matched the energy of the literal storm outside as it howled about Rosstrevor Hall.

Mrs. Gideon huffed a few times and then declared, “The damage is already done, Lady Mary. My poor Rhiannon is compromised.”

The Earl tried again. “Mrs. Gideon, we have not yet been introduced, but I assure you, I was taking solace in the withdrawing room and was quite alone, and then a short while later your daughter followed me in.”

That brought many more gasps, as he’d literally accused Miss Gideon of falsehood.

“That is not ... that cannot be ...” Mrs. Gideon started. “Rhiannon is innocent!”

As much as Hannah was enjoying the pantomime, she had to reveal herself and explain the deep misunderstanding.

She stepped out of the retiring room and into the midst of the drama. “Hello, I believe I can help sort this situation and bring it to a satisfactory conclusion.”

Mrs. Gideon shrieked, “Where did you come from?”

Lady Mary’s face shone with relief. “Let us all move to the kitchens where we can discuss this.”

“No, we’re not going anywhere,” Mrs. Gideon protested, holding Rhiannon closer to her. “This demands witnesses.”

All eyes turned to Hannah and she took a steadying breath. “Miss Gideon was not alone, nor was she compromised, as I was in the room the whole time, even before

the earl entered. I can confirm he believed he was alone in the room and Miss Gideon entered soon after.”

“No,” Mrs. Gideon shook her head. “You weren’t in there, I would have seen y-” she slapped her hand over her mouth.

The jig was up. As Hannah had suspected, the entire scene was indeed a ruse to ensnare the earl.

Lady Mary turned to their enormous audience and delivered a magnificent line. “That concludes our one-act play, please thank our wonderful cast for entertaining us at short notice on such a stormy night!”

There was silence for a moment, until the crowd erupted into cheers. Mrs. Gideon and her daughter extracted themselves from each other and stepped forward to make a curtsy, as if taking a curtain call.

The earl’s shoulders slumped in relief. His eyes found Hannah’s and he made a short bow to thank her. Playing along, she took his hand and they faced the audience, both of them making a bow to their adoring audience.

Lady Mary then turned her back on the crowd and said to the four ‘actors’, “Kitchen, five minutes.”

Five minutes later, they were safely and privately in the kitchen with the doors firmly closed to outsiders.

Lady Mary took control and did the talking.

“Mrs. Gideon, I do apologize for besmirching your reputation by associating you with the stage, but it had to be done, or risk further scandal. You can either be known as an

incredible actress and the shame that comes with it, or a liar. Your choice.”

It wasn't much of a choice, but as the story they'd tell others in the future was that they put on an impromptu diversion for the sake of keeping houseguests entertained during a terrible storm, that seemed like the best option. Hannah had to give it to Lady Mary for her fast wit.

But also, the story of this entertainment would travel far and wide and might even assist her match-making enterprise. Scandal could have seriously hampered that.

The Gideons departed the kitchens.

Hannah made to leave, but Lady Mary called her back, and she told the earl to remain as well. “We still have the issue of you two,” she said.

“Nothing happened,” they both said over the top of each other.

“I know that, but what actually happened?”

The earl looked to Hannah, and she to him. Hannah spoke. “I sought rest. As you had not yet billeted us to our rooms for the evening, I thought I'd find somewhere quiet to take a rest. I know I should have been looking after the marchioness, but she and -”

Lady Mary held up her palm to interrupt. “The fact is, you were in the room, Lord Tullamore either followed you in or entered soon after. Then Miss Gideon entered soon after the earl. The way I see it, Tullamore, you've compromised Miss Jones.”

The earl made a sharp swallow. “I most sincerely regret not examining the room more certainly before entering. I had no idea it was occupied. I was in the wrong.”

Lady Mary's voice became stern. “You compromised my daughter-in-law's

companion by your actions. The path forward leads only one way.”

“No,” Hannah interrupted. “Please, Lady Mary, it was an honest mistake and nothing at all took place. He had barely walked in when Miss Gideon appeared, and she didn’t even see me either.

That’s proof that Lord Tullamore did not realize I was there.

He did not compromise me at all, and, if anything, my presence prevented a far greater scandal. ”

“This is true,” Lady Mary said. “But whether people believe we put on a performance or what they saw was real, you have admitted you were alone in a room with a man.” She turned to the earl.

“What say you, Tullamore, would you make an honest woman of Miss Jones to remove any possible stain on her reputation?”

He gulped and said, “I offer for Miss Jones in marriage, in all good faith.”

Hannah thought she might pass out.

If it was a choice between Miss Gideon or Miss Jones, at least Patrick knew the Jones lady a little better and she did kiss rather beautifully.

He’d been an idiot to walk into a room without checking if it was occupied first. That was on him.

Was he not already wary of the matchmaking mamas?

And he’d gone and blundered into an occupied room without checking.

His brains had clearly deserted him, and he truly should have known better than to have fun with Miss Jones and think he could walk away with no consequences.

He'd become far too used to being an earl with all the freedoms that entailed, and behaving far too freely with young ladies in London and Dublin.

The cold dread in his stomach grew with the silence in the kitchen.

Lady Mary looked sternly his way, "You are genuinely offering?"

"I am," he confirmed, wanting to cast up his last drink. "As much as I would like to blame the spiced wine, I have none to blame but myself."

He had ruined everything, but he started to believe that perhaps this would be the making of him. He would do the right thing and be a respectable man.

"I relieve his lordship from his promise," Miss Jones declared.

What ? Patrick and Lady Mary swiveled their heads her way. He was being so gallant, so honorable, and she was letting him off the hook?

Miss Jones's face was pink and her eyes glistened with unshed tears.

"You can't even look at me when you propose, I cannot imagine things would improve from such a bad start.

We both know nothing happened in that room.

Yes, you are an earl and I am but a lady's humble companion.

If we wed, people would discover my origins and assume a far greater scandal had

taken place for you to offer for my hand. It is unpalatable in the extreme .”

He had to crunch his forehead to believe the words she was saying. “You’re refusing because you’re worried about the stain on your reputation?” The words, “who do you think you are?” were ready to fly out, but the glare from Lady Mary kept them in.

She was right to glare at him, it was not an honorable thing to even think.

Lady Mary inserted herself into the conversation.

“I’m glad you refused, Hannah, you’re far too valuable to Amelia and I would miss you terribly.

Now, let us shake hands like friends and see if the storm outside has blown itself out, otherwise we might need to billet people out with the spring bucks. ”

Patrick was still coming to terms with what had just happened. He’d made a completely respectable offer for the lady, now that everyone in attendance knew she had been in a room on her own when he’d walked in . . . and yet she hadn’t latched onto the chance to become a countess.

Perhaps there was something deeply wrong with her.

And Lady Mary was delighted into the bargain. How was it that the companion for her daughter-in-law was worth so much when she could so easily be replaced by any young girl from the nearest town?

Furthermore, if they wed, the Countess of Tullamore would outrank them all!

A footman accompanied him to his rooms where, thankfully, no women were present. That unexpected occurrence was why he’d fled downstairs and found a quiet room to

begin with. He didn't mind that there were four gentlemen making temporary cots in the dressing room next door.

His mind fairly buzzed with insult and confusion as sleep evaded him.

Miss Hannah Jones, the same woman who had kissed him in the stables and declared she would make him fall in love with her, had played her hand perfectly and drawn an offer of marriage from him.

Only to turn him down immediately!

The storm continued outside, rattling the windows with heavy rain and gusts of wind. His own mind was a storm of confusion. He'd made his first proposal and been rebuffed.

What in heavens name was wrong with her to refuse him?

Chapter Eight

Through the night, Hannah stayed cozy and warm beside Sarah and Anne despite the heavens doing their best to freeze and shake the world. The maids rose early to tidy and restart the fireplaces to warm the house. Warm was ambitious; the fires barely held off the chill in the air.

Breathing steam as she climbed out of her warm bed, Hannah dressed quickly, putting on her second chemise in an attempt to keep warm. Had an earl, an actual real living earl offered for her hand last night?

A smile spread over her lips.

Yes, he had.

Had she, a plain miss from northern Wales, then refused that earl?

A heavy sigh escaped, sending another plume of steam into the air.

Yes, she had.

If he'd been properly interested, it would have been another matter entirely. But he couldn't have been truly wanting to marry her, not after only a scant few days' acquaintance. Even with a scandal thrown into the bargain, his words rang hollow.

How much of a fast fool would she have been to accept him?

Marrying into the nobility was a fairy tale ending that simply didn't happen to country girls like Hannah.

She'd been ridiculous when she'd kissed him in the stables and declared she'd make him fall in love with her.

That had been a rush of blood to her head that had pushed common sense aside.

She simply wanted to know what it might be like to be kissed, and as he was a visitor and would be leaving soon, she'd given in to temptation.

Her declaration that she'd make him fall in love with her had been ridiculous.

A desperate attempt on her part to save face, and she was ever so grateful that encounter had not had any witnesses.

She'd never live it down if the Alwyns had seen them!

As she finished dressing and headed to the kitchens, she thought about how grateful she was to have made a mistake in private.

The poor earl - yes, she was beginning to feel sorry for him - had made a mistake in front of an audience.

In a way, Hannah was glad she'd been there to vouch for him, and prevent him from having to marry Miss Gideon.

That must be why he'd later proposed; misguided gratitude that she'd got him out of a seemingly impossible situation with so many witnesses.

She grabbed a plate of breakfast and asked the cook if she could take anything up to

the Marchioness.

“Her ladyship is already up and about, you’ll find her in the withdrawing room,” Cook said.

Quickly, Hannah finished her toast and made her way to her mistress. All the while her thoughts strayed to the earl. He had been upset that she’d refused him last night. Upset probably wasn’t the right description, though. Shocked would be closer to the mark. Shocked that anyone had said no to him.

Lady Amelia smiled as Hannah took her seat and picked up her abandoned needlework. “I hear you will be travelling soon to Ireland.”

Oh no, not the marchioness as well? “That was a misunderstanding, my lady.”

Lady Amelia put down her own needlework and raised a brow towards Hannah.

Hannah battled on. “We sorted it out soon afterwards. No harm done, no reputations damaged in the slightest.”

Still Lady Amelia did not let up. “What of your heart?”

Hannah creased her brow in confusion. “My heart is calm and relieved that the situation is resolved. As is the weather. Many of last night’s visitors are making their way home now, now that the storm has died down.”

“You don’t need to change the subject with me, dear Hannah. Now tell me, as a friend, are you really happy here?”

“My lady, please, I am so grateful to have this position.”

“Hmm. Grateful . That doesn’t really answer my question. I know it’s not fair to always be at my beck and call, especially as ... well, I don’t truly have that much call for you as my dear husband does take up so much of my time.”

At that, the marchioness colored a little.

Hannah ducked her head, completely understanding Lady Amelia’s meaning. “I do adore living in Rosstrevor Hall, and I do have the very kindest, most generous employers a lady could ever want.”

“But you do not yet have love.”

“My Lady, please do not think me unsatisfied in any way.”

“There is nothing wrong with falling in love,” Lady Amelia said as she resumed her needlework, “In fact, I highly recommend it.”

Again, she colored a little, and Hannah thought she might giggle. “It doesn’t really matter about my feelings, whatever they may be. I have not yet sorted them. They are like abandoned skeins of tangled thread.”

Lady Amelia gave a knowing smile and said, “Added into that tangle, we do not yet know what the earl’s feelings are. Lady Mary informs me he that last night he offered for you, in all honesty and sincerity. And what’s more, you turned him down without even giving it a day’s consideration.”

“My lady, I did not turn him down, as such, but I did relieve him of his obligation to offer. I am sure it was made in haste and possibly as a way to preserve his reputation after the scene we made in front of everyone.”

Lady Amelia giggled for real now, “Lady Mary was rather clever to pretend that it

was an impromptu play, rather than a very real attempt to ensnare the earl into compromising Miss Gideon. I believe I should speak to Lord Tullamore and discover his intentions.”

“Please don’t,” Hannah begged. “Please just let this wash over and pretend it never happened.”

Amelia placed her stitching down on her lap, “Well, you see, now I believe you are protesting too much. I believe he has quite turned your head, and I believe your heart as well.”

Hannah did her best to focus on her stitches, and for a little while, it even worked.

Then Lady Amelia delivered her coup de grace. “I also heard about what happened in the stables.”

Hannah dropped it all in her lap and covered her face. “How?” she cried from behind her hands. “There was nobody else around.”

“Oh my dear, I was only jesting you. I did not realize something had happened in the stables! But from your reaction, something must have. Tell me all!”

Sunk. Hannah was utterly sunk!

Patrick hadn’t talked to anyone overnight, but he could tell by the way the guests turned quiet as he walked in for breakfast the next morning that they must have been talking about him. Being center stage in an emotional drama would do that.

Piling toast on his plate, he added a slice of bacon and made his way to the table. He rather enjoyed the informality of breakfasts at house parties. Everyone mingled in no real order, so he could rub shoulders with anyone.

He was particularly grateful to see the Alwyns already at the table, so he took a seat beside them with a warm greeting.

Mrs. Alwyn smiled and asked if he'd had a restful sleep.

"Not a worry in the world," he lied cheerfully, in the hope that others would hear him. "How are the spring bucks this morning?"

Mr. Alwyn shook his head with concern. "The cold does not well suit them, but they bore up well through the night."

"Any damage?" He asked. A pang of shame suddenly hit him that he had not made an enquiry of that kind to the Rosstrevors.

"The stable roof held, at least," Mr. Alwyn said, "but it was a close-run thing. We'll put a team together soon to assess the grounds."

"I hope the packet didn't set sail to Dublin last night," Mrs. Alwyn said.

Cold dread drained Patrick's blood. He could so easily have been on that ship, had his carriage not earlier failed on the road. Had the loss been a blessing in disguise?

Oh dear, another thought soon followed. Had his coachman been on board? He would not thank him for such a rough crossing. Perhaps his coachman had not made it that far, or had turned around? He could only hope.

Mrs. Alwyn must have noticed his discomfort and added, "I'm sure they didn't. They're ever so good at reading the weather."

"That they are," her husband confirmed.

It struck Patrick that perhaps his journey, as fearsome as it had been thus far, would have been a great deal worse had he continued as scheduled.

He had been praying a great deal as the carriage had jugged and bounced on that terrible road.

Was Rosstrevor Hall the answer to his prayers, and he hadn't acknowledged it?

And if Providence had brought Rosstrevor Hall into his life, had Providence put Miss Jones before him as well?

He needed to find her.

Later in the morning, he found Miss Jones walking beside Lady Amelia in the kitchen garden. The sun was making a valiant effort to break through the clouds. Lady Amelia was overseeing the gardeners as they repaired the vegetables frames that had blown over.

With unspoken acknowledgement, Lady Amelia became engrossed in conversation with the staff, allowing Miss Jones to fall back a little and talk with Patrick. They had an audience, of course, but they were judiciously ignoring them.

"Miss Jones, I cannot help but wonder if you were a little hasty in rejecting my offer last evening."

"Indeed?" Miss Jones's brows reached upwards. "I would have thought my response provided you a good deal of relief."

"I thought that too," he admitted too freely. He wanted to speak freely with her, because there was no point wasting time. There was a reason they had been thrown together. "Today I cannot help ... wondering ... if I should offer again?"

“In the hope of a different response, my lord?”

“Yes.

“No,” she replied, and it was far too quick a response for Patrick’s liking.

“Why ever not?” He shot back. It was in haste, and he rather wished he could slow his mind in order to find the kinds of words that would have her responding positively.

She grimaced a little, which was a bad sign. “My lord, let us speak plainly?”

“By all means.”

“I spoke in haste,” she said.

Excellent, this was resolving better than he had hoped.

She lowered her voice and angled her head a little closer as she spoke. “When I said I’d make you fall in love with me.”

It brought back magnificent memories of kissing in the stables.

But wait ... “That was several days ago ... I thought you were referring to your response just now, or last night, which I believe was far too hasty.”

“Hasty or not, my response won’t change, my lord.”

“Am I foolish to think it ever will?”

They had walked a few paces away and were pretending to examine the bed of leeks

growing nearby.

From her section of the garden, Lady Amelia turned to acknowledge where they were and that they were still within the bounds of propriety.

Satisfied, she turned her back on them and resumed her own conversation.

Not sure how much time they had to speak freely, Patrick reached for her hand. He knew realistically he could not feel the heat between them, as they were both wearing thick gloves, but the fact she'd allowed him this intimacy sent a spark of warmth through his system.

"You truly have no interest in being my countess?" How was he making such a hash of this? He really had thought that when the moment came and he proposed to a woman, she would fall over herself to accept.

"Well, I do. It is a lovely and very tempting offer. But I don't believe you are making it from your heart. I know a woman of my station has no place making those kinds of demands on a man of your position, but I must be truthful to myself. If I may unburden myself further, my lord?"

"Be my guest," he said with little enthusiasm.

It seemed to cheer her, though. "I believe I am jealous of what others have. I see Lady Amelia so blissfully happy in life. The Alwyns are also an excellent demonstration of a love match, and it is only natural that I would yearn for that. Does that make any sense?"

"I understand," he admitted. He hadn't seen that much of the Alwyns, but they presented as a happy couple, comfortable in each other's company.

His hosts, he hadn't seen much of, but the Hall ran smoothly, so he could only assume the Caernarfonshires had the same disposition.

He could understand why someone living alongside those families would want the same for themselves one day.

“But one thing I don't understand. If that is the case, and I take you at your word that it's not, why are you not taking the chance for that same level of happiness with me?”

She sighed a little forlornly and he knew he wasn't ready for the answer.

“Because you do not know yourself, my lord, and you did not mean it when you offered for me.”

It crushed him.

Because he had meant it, he really had!

She'd done it now. She could see the hope fade from his eyes.

Now it was her turn to rush in with hasty words to salve his wounded soul.

“My lord, we have only known each other scarce few days. I bragged that I would make you fall in love with me, but it was false courage. I needed to save face after making a fool of myself, so I said the first words that came to my head. They made me feel a little better in the moment. Later, I knew how untrue they were. Nobody can force anyone to fall in love with anyone else.”

He looked at her blankly.

“I find you terribly attractive, and the thought of becoming a countess is thrilling. But we are not suited. You are a nobleman, I am a lady’s companion. When you return to Ireland, you will meet a proper lady of your station who will know how to run an earl’s household.”

His chest heaved in a breath and let it slowly out. “I did not believe rejection would sting so. I am not used to it.”

Hannah clamped her mouth shut. He was hurting already, no need to remind him that, as an earl, hardly anyone ever said no to him. He could probably count the occurrences on one hand.

“I thank you for your honesty, in explaining your motivations,” he said at last. “You are wrong, though, as to mine. I do know myself. I find it extraordinary that you presume to know my feelings better than I.”

Chapter Nine

Guilt took hold in Hannah. “That was not my intention,” she said. Cursing herself, she wished she could take the words back. She’d not only upset him with her rejection; she’d hurt him on a personal level.

“Do you really not care for me?” he asked.

“I care a great deal for you.” It was unfiltered honesty and the guilt began to lift.

“You are an honorable man and that is an excellent quality, but this has become somewhat silly and gotten out of hand. We both said things to save face. I’m sorry your words had to be so public.

Once you return to Ireland you will agree that this was a harmless flirtation that was only the result of propinquity. ”

“You’re that sure of my feelings, are you?”

She blinked with confusion.

“Well, I shan’t labor the point,” he said. “I thank you for your audience and bid you good day.”

An ache she had trouble naming took hold as she made a curtsy and he bowed over her hand.

She tried to further explain herself. “I believe it is important that we at least be honest with our feelings.”

“Agreed,” he said, then delivered a parting blow. “You also deserve to be honest with yourself about where your feelings lie.”

With that, he walked away with his head high, as if he’d won a hand in speculation, rather than stomping on her heart.

On the other side of the garden, Lady Amelia raised a brow, as if to ask if she needed company. Hannah shook her head and walked to a seat by the south-facing wall.

She’d heard the common adage that time healed all wounds, but this would take forever. It would be so convenient if time could speed up so that she didn’t feel so wretched.

Of course, marriage to Tullamore would not be a hardship at all.

It might even be tolerable. She laughed at herself, calling him Tolerable Tullamore.

His estates were sure to be lovely. There would be staff, she’d learn how to run the estate in a way that would please him.

But it would be a forlorn and lonely life without the love marriage required to thrive.

The Alwyns demonstrated this, as did Lady Amelia and her husband. Lady Amelia herself had not been born into nobility, so it wasn’t as if Hannah would be the first commoner to marry above her station.

Yet in good conscience, Hannah could not have accepted his proposal.

He'd made it in haste, to protect her honor.

He barely knew her. Their awkward conversation just now further proved her assessment – yes, he was honorable, and that was a lovely quality.

But he'd made no mention at all that he held her in any kind of esteem.

Marriage without love would be as cold and miserable as the approaching Welsh winter.

She longed for the joy of companionship and the love that would grow from that. How could they be companions if they were unable to esteem each other, much less develop that esteem into love?

It truly was a horrible mess, and, as reality dawned on her, this was one of her own making.

Lady Amelia's footsteps sounded on the gravel between the garden beds. Hannah dashed her hands over her cheeks to dry the tears that had suddenly appeared.

"Oh my dear," Amelia said, holding her arms out for an embrace. "I was hoping for a better outcome."

"As was I," Hannah admitted, leaning in to her employer's kind arms.

"It takes some of them a little longer than others to see sense. Give it time."

"I know," she said, "But time takes too long."

"It does at that."

Several days later, his mood as dark as the clouds hanging low in the sky above, Patrick's new coachman drove him the final miles to the town of Holyhead.

He didn't need the coachman to remind him of how miserable he was, but this man found the perfect times to make observations about his sullen demeanor.

People often said misery loves company, but as far as Patrick was concerned, he was grateful for the solitude. His was a selfish misery that grew more robust with each passing mile.

Soon, he would be on the boat. In a day, he'd be in Dublin.

Good.

He never wanted to step foot in north Wales again so long as he lived.

The coachman stopped for a moment and pulled up the horses. What now, a highwayman? Well, he had nothing worth stealing so the ruffian could go begging.

A knock sounded at the door. It was the coachman. "Sir, please come and drive this last mile with me," he said in a lilting accent "The scenery is something to behold."

Patrick huffed, furious that this proud local was trying to cheer him.

Knowing his luck, the moment he sat beside the driver, the rains would fall and he could really lean into his discontent.

As he climbed up, he cast a look about. The landscape had rocky outcrops, stretches of green and some dense thickets marking the edges of fields and properties.

The ocean beyond had white foam capping the waves.

Every now and then a strong gust of wind whipped at his face, bending the shrubs on the side of the road.

The road itself was muddy and potholed, like much of the earlier road.

“Sir, I know it’s not my place to speak,” the coachman said.

“Go on then, that’s why you got me out here.”

“I will apologize in advance for talking out of turn, but I must speak my mind.”

“Get it over with, then.” The sooner this was over, the sooner he could get back into the carriage and wallow in his sour mood.

“When I first met my wife, she turned me down.”

He refused to take the bait. He knew exactly what this was about. But how dare this man who barely knew him make such assumptions?

Then it hit him, word must have already spread that he’d been turned down.

The coachman waited a good while for the reply that did not come, and eventually shrugged.

“I’ll do the talking for the both of us then.

I offered her, and she turned me down. And it there were a great many people who knew about it and by day’s end it felt like everyone in Caernarfonshire knew all about my business. ”

Grumpily, Patrick pulled his collars up against the wind but did not reply.

“But what nobody knew,” the coachman continued undeterred, “not even my future wife, was how I felt about her . Because I was too thick between the ears to notice that I hadn’t told her. I knew she was the only one for me, but I never said naught and she didn’t read my mind neither.”

Patrick grunted, barely following along.

The coachman said, “I’ve heard the talk, I know there’s gossip about you offering for Hannah Jones.

And you’re embarrassed that everyone knows you offered and she turned you down.

But did you tell her what was in your heart at all?

Because from everything I’ve heard, it seems as if you missed that step, and it’s an important one. ”

“I should have you flogged.”

“You can flog me but it won’t change facts. There’s a turning circle coming up, and it’s the last one before we get to the port.”

The carriage was on the downhill run at this point, and the top of the Holyhead lighthouse came into view.

Patrick clamped his jaw shut.

The coachman clearly didn’t value his life, as he kept on talking. “I take it from your silence that you didn’t tell her how you felt.”

With a huff, Patrick said, “I didn’t think I had to.”

“Well sir, you might well be an earl, but you’re the biggest fool I’ve ever met. If you didn’t tell her how you felt, how was she supposed to know?”

“Because I’m an earl!”

He was sure the coachman called him an idiot under his breath.

In stony silence they approached the turning area, which was full of mud and rocks and looked like the worst place to try and turn a carriage around.

“Last chance,” the driver said.

“Get off,” Patrick said.

“Scuse me sir?”

“You’re done here. Take this letter with you, and deliver it to the boat.”

“May I grab my carpet bag from the back?”

“Be my guest,” Patrick ground out.

He waited in the cooling wind for the coachman to get his things and then come back to stand near the horses. He said farewell to each and then asked, “Is there anything else you’ll be needing me for?”

“We are quite done,” Patrick said.

The coachman waved and turned around, walking down the road toward the port.

It took perhaps half an hour for the driver to vanish from view. It took another second

more for reality to land with a thud onto Patrick's soul.

He could flog himself for being so incredibly dim.

When Lady Mary had 'warned him off' Miss Jones by telling him not to form an attachment, it wasn't because the lady was trying to play games with his head, or that she did not think Miss Jones was good enough for him.

Which is what he had thought at the time.

No, it was because Miss Jones was so valuable and important to Rosstrevor Hall. A tonne of bricks could not have landed harder on him as he finally understood he wasn't good enough for her!

He urged the horses on and headed toward the port, where he hoped to catch sight of his driver. He found him and apologised profusely, then gave the man an extra crown to show how sorry he was.

The sun was low on the horizon as the driver climbed back into his seat and Patrick sat beside him, their backs to the town of Holyhead.

With a flick of his wrists and a smile on his face, the driver urged the horses forward. "It will be nightfall before we reach the crossing," the driver said. "Nobody will take you across in the dark, it will be too dangerous.

Patrick ran his hand across his brow in frustration. The coachman was absolutely correct. He'd have to wait to cross in the morning, but at least he was now heading in the right direction.

He'd been such a dolt. What a prize fool he'd made of himself, but that he could live with. If he'd ruined his chances with Miss Jones, he doubted he could.

As soon as he saw her, he would tell her how he felt. He didn't even know himself how he truly felt about her, because those words hadn't come yet. He'd sleep on it tonight and hope the proper words would arrive in the morning.

Even though he didn't have the words, the feelings were there, and those feelings were showing him that he couldn't imagine spending the rest of his life without Miss Jones in it.

Once he told her, the decision on whether to reciprocate those feelings would be hers to make.

If she rejected him again, he'd simply have to live with his idiocy. But at least she would know. And so would he.

Why had it taken him so long to realize this?

Chapter Ten

Hannah had to keep reminding herself that she'd done the right thing.

It wasn't fair to try and entrap an earl.

This is what she'd initially set out to do, and it had been wrong.

The dare she'd made that he would fall in love with her?

It felt exciting and thrilling at the time, but that had been wrong as well.

She'd done the right thing in setting him free. If he had actual feelings for her, instead of obligations, he would have told her. He truly had been trying to do the right thing. She was glad she'd done the right thing as well and set him free of his obligations.

So, why did doing the right thing feel so damnably awful?

The Alwyns offered sympathy and a place to sit quietly, brushing the spring bucks like they were small horses, as they stood huddled together in the stables.

She had to mind the horns of the adults, as they scared her a little.

Mrs. Alwyn was grateful to have her help.

"Lloyd has told me I'm not to climb in there like I used to. "

Hannah creased her brows in confusion.

Mrs. Alwyn rubbed her belly and the penny dropped.

“Congratulations!” she managed through a dry throat. Jealousy did odd things at times, never at convenient ones. “I am happy for you, that’s so lovely.” She would have a private cry later, when there was nobody around.

“We weren’t sure until recently, and we’ve only told their lordships so far.”

Hannah nodded in understanding. She finished her duties in the stables and headed out for a walk as soon as she was able to. A long walk along the Menai to clear her head and wallow in her sorrows and missed opportunities.

But I did the right thing , she wailed to herself.

The sky only had the strength for mist today.

It swirled about, coating her sleeves in tiny pearls of damp.

It matched her confused mood, not doing anything of substance.

The waters rushed by as the tides fought each other from the north and the south.

The sooner they built a bridge over the dangerous crossing, the better.

Fog obscured the path ahead. Hannah tried not to read too much meaning into it, because fog was a usual thing at this time of year.

Before long she reached the farm lets on the edges of Bangor. A man began walking up the road toward her. It looked like Lord Tullamore, but that’s because he filled her

thoughts so much every male figure reminded her of him.

She missed her next step and nearly fell. She reached for a fence post to steady herself.

It was Lord Tullamore!

He mustn't have made the crossing yet, which sent her heart soaring.

At that moment he looked up, and he too stilled.

It took forever yet only half a second as she took in the sight of him.

He had the harder part of it, facing the uphill walk.

Making sure it really was him, she followed her heart and walked closer, her pulse staggering.

There was a chance he was simply walking around Bangor because the unfavorable tides had delayed the crossings.

"I'm sorry," she said, as she ran to him. At the same time he sped towards her, his face an expression of hope. "I'm so glad you haven't left yet."

"I came back," he said, his eyelashes clumped and damp from the mist.

Her heart almost couldn't take it. Words would not form properly. He'd come back?

"I never told you my feelings, and that was my failing," he said before she could come up with anything sensible. At this rate she never would, as all sense fled and she simply gazed into his beautiful face.

He was here, right before her.

“I truly don’t know myself,” he continued. “I am sure though that I cannot live the rest of my life without you in it. I do sincerely hope that is the definition of love, as I have never felt it before.”

“I feel the same way. I kept hoping the feeling would pass, but it would not.”

“It’s rather awful,” he said with something of a laugh.

“Isn’t it just?” Hannah readily agreed. A lock of hair spilled over his eye and this time she lifted her hand to his face and tucked it back. Her heart swelled. “It was making me disagreeable with everyone and I wanted to break things.”

“I ordered the driver to leave me be.”

“I messed everything up,” she confessed. “Wait, you sent the coachman on ahead from Bangor?”

“Not quite. We got as far as Holyhead and I sent him off, then I turned the horses around and came back. Made the crossing back to Bangor first thing this morning before the tides took hold.”

Thank goodness he’d made it safely to this side of the strait.

“I made a mess of things,” she confessed.

He held her face ever so gently and kissed her. Warmth spread through her whole body at the tenderness of it.

When he pulled back, he said, “I believe I messed up more, at least give me that.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Call me Patrick.”

She leaned in and kissed him. The mist swirling about them could not dampen their enthusiasm. It was a magnificent kiss full of promise and love. Of finding their true companion for the rest of their lives.

They laughed at their shared ability to make such a mess of things.

After a while standing together in the mist, Hannah said, “Please call me Hannah, any time you like.”

“Hannah, my love,” he said, his words sending heat through her body, “Tell me, whom do I need to speak to for your hand?”

“Probably Lord Caernarfonshire?”

They walked back slowly to Rosstrevor Hall, stopping to exchange several kisses along the way. Their dawdling pace gave the mist ample time to gather on their clothes, eventually soaking through to the point where they were bedraggled.

“Will Lady Amelia be upset to lose her companion?”

“Possibly, although I wasn’t required most of the time. She gave me far too much liberty.”

The kitchens at Rosstrevor Hall were welcoming and warm, as they dried themselves near the ovens.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am

The morning was frosty, but Patrick's fast-beating heart kept him warm.

As he'd predicted, the Dowager and Patrick's mother, who had arrived in time from Ireland, rubbed along mischievously.

He knew they would happily conspire to make more matches in the years to come.

If mother stayed busy, she wouldn't have time to interfere in his or his new bride's life. A good outcome all round.

Well, they could have their fun, he was delighted to be making his own match. He even pretended to himself that he'd achieved this without anybody else's interference whatsoever.

The sight of his bride walking down the aisle on Lord Caernarfonshire's arm brought a lump to his throat and a tear to his eye. He didn't care if he sniffled a little from emotion; this moment was so joyful he wanted to leap toward her.

Thankfully Mr. Alwyn was by his side, holding him steady so they could get through the ceremony without incident.

Hannah walked dreamily up the aisle. Sarah and Anne walked ahead, sprinkling the floor with primroses, herbs and even a little holly. Not many plants flowered at this time of year, but Hannah had refused to wait until Spring.

The ceremony passed in a blur of happiness and love as Patrick pressed the Tullamore bridal ring onto her finger. There was no miracle sun to burst through the

church windows, but light shone from her husband's face all the same.

Their first married kiss was soft and sweet, and over far too quickly. They were being mindful of their audience. It would be a privilege to continue their relationship without one.

Lady Mary put on a magnificent wedding breakfast for them, and then her husband had another surprise waiting as they were about to depart.

It was his carriage, repaired from its encounter with that dangerous road.

"I'm surprised it was worth repairing," Hannah gasped. There were so many new sections to it, it reminded her of 'grandfather's favorite ax that had four new handles and two new heads'.

Patrick delivered her another quick kiss. "It will remind me of the terrible accident that led me to my greatest happiness."

They boarded the carriage, which was filled with extra blankets and hot stones for their feet. They waved out the window until Rosstrevor Hall vanished behind them.

"My goodness," Hannah said with a sigh, "Alone at last!"

Patrick snuggled closer and wrapped them both in a blanket. "Whatever shall we do?"

"We could talk about our feelings?" Hannah teased. "But I don't think you want to talk, though?"

"You do read me very well." He chuckled. "And I shall tell you my feelings. I feel very fortunate, and I feel very much in love."

He kissed her with tenderness and care, love and passion. She kissed him back with

all her heart.

“I feel that too,” she said