



Black and Silver (Unlucky in Love #4)

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Category: Historical

Description: When a goth beauty and a sunny silver fox find themselves waylaid on a road trip with only one bed, anything could happen.

Lady Minerva Llewellyn has always been fascinated by death and the darker side of life, and when her parents attempt to force her into a marriage she does not want, she turns to the depths of her imagination to hatch a plot to fake her own death so she can escape to Sweden to begin a new life.

There's only one problem...Lord Lawrence Godwin.

Lawrence is a brilliant artist with a sunny disposition...and the Curse of Godwin Castle hanging over his head. When he offers to escort Minnie from London to Wales, he has no idea what sort of mayhem is in store. He likes Minnie immediately, and they get along brilliantly, but that only makes Lawrence want to hide his silly little secret from her even more.

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One

LONDON – NOVEMBER, 1816

Nobody understood the beautiful symmetry of a perfect skull the way Lady Minerva Llewellyn did. That was, perhaps, what was wrong with the world in these shallow, unimaginative times. More value was seen in lace and frippery than in the solid bone and haunting memory of a life that had been well and truly lived, and in the remnants that had been left behind. A skull was an echo of someone's entire life story that could be held in one's hands.

Minnie contemplated all these things and more as she stood before her bed in her room at the Oxford Society Club, holding Clarence, the skull she'd acquired twenty years ago, when she'd been in attendance at Oxford University. Clarence had been such a stalwart companion through the years, and Minnie wondered whether she should take him with her in her bid to escape the world of lace and frippery to flee into a new life.

"On the one hand, Clarence," she addressed the skull, "you would take up a great deal of space in my valise, and I may need to run to evade pursuers at some point."

She frowned at Clarence, already plotting how she might leap from a carriage or dart between wagons in traffic to avoid being seen as she dodged the forces of evil that pursued her. A bulky traveling bag would not help with her flight at all.

"On the other," she continued, tilting her head, "you do not weigh much at all, and therefore, you would not add encumbrance."

Minnie smiled and set Clarence atop the pile of her clothing and other belongings in her traveling bag, which lay open on the bed.

“And then there is the simple fact that I could not bear to part with you,” she said, leaning down and kissing Clarence’s frontal bone. “You and I have been through too much for this to be our final parting.”

She reached to the side for a pile of her underthings that she’d taken from the wardrobe and folded earlier, lovingly nestling them around Clarence’s bulbous form.

As she did, a knock sounded at her door. Minnie tensed on instinct, then let out a breath, pressing a hand to her stomach. Owen could not have found her there at the club. Even if he had discovered her exact location, which was not particularly difficult to do, even for someone of Owen’s astoundingly unimpressive intellect, men were not permitted at the Oxford Society Club.

“Come in?” Minnie called over her shoulder, anxious nonetheless. It did not matter whether Owen was forbidden entry into the club or not, if anyone who shouldn’t have discovered her plan, they might dissuade her from it.

The door opened, and the club’s butler, Regina, stepped into the room with a bright smile.

“Good morning, Lady Minerva,” she said, carrying the coat she held to Minnie. “Your traveling coat has been cleaned and repaired.

Minnie breathed out a huge sigh of relief. If she could trust anyone in the world, other than her dearest friends, Muriel, Bernadette, and Kat, then she could trust Regina Vickers.

“Thank you, Genie,” she said, taking the thick, black wool coat from Regina’s arms

and slipping right into it. “This will come in quite handy, since it is bound to be cold where I am headed.”

“The Kingdom of Wales?” Regina asked, a clever sparkle to her eyes, as if she knew more than she was letting on.

“Yes, that’s it precisely,” Minnie said. “The Kingdom of Wales .”

Regina’s mouth twitched as she glanced past Minnie to the collection of items that were yet to be packed lying atop her bed. “I was unaware that the currency of choice for the Kingdom of Wales was the Swedish riksdaler.”

Minnie whipped back to the bed, biting her lip at the small pile of coins she’d accidentally left out. They were a dead giveaway to her true plans for the next few weeks.

“I do not know what you mean,” she fumbled, attempting to save face and keep her plans secret a little longer. “I’m heading home to Wales for the Christmas holidays, and to spread the word to our fellow sisters there that the Mercian Plan has been introduced to Joint Parliament for discussion, and that it is only a matter of time before Britannia is united under Mercian law. Lord Lawrence Godwin is escorting me home himself.”

Everything had been arranged the day before at the opening of Joint Parliament. Her friend Kat, Lady Katherine Balmor, soon to be Lady Katherine Godwin, as soon as she married Waldorf Godwin, had achieved a major victory in convincing the First Minister, Lord Walsingham, to bring the topic forward for debate. It was the first step in achieving the unity of Britannia under Mercian law, which was deeply favorable toward women and would prevent them from becoming subjects to their husbands in their own home.

And that was a topic of particular importance to Minnie, as the fate of becoming a subject to a husband she could not like in a home that would feel like a prison to her if she did not take matters into her own hands was closer than any of her friends thought.

Regina seemed to read her thoughts and crossed her arms, arching one eyebrow, as if she did not believe a word Minnie had just said.

“Forgive me for overstepping my place, Lady Minerva, but I know you to be too clever and too determined by far to simply return to Wales, whether to rally for the cause or not, when the center of activity is in London at present,” she said. “And besides,” she added as Minnie scrambled to think of what to say, “You’ve packed nearly everything of import in your room, as if you’ve no intention of returning to it.”

Again, Regina arched one eyebrow. The woman was incredibly sharp and alarmingly bold, which was, perhaps, why she made such an excellent butler for the club.

Minnie gave up whatever intention she’d had of keeping secrets. She blew out a breath and said, “Alright, I will confess. I have no intention of returning to the Kingdom of Wales.”

“I thought not,” Regina said, eyeing the pile of riksdaler again.

Minnie delayed a few seconds more by buttoning her coat and stepping to her dressing table to fetch her black velvet bonnet and her reticule. There was no use delaying forever, though, particularly since Regina stood between her and the door.

“If you must know,” she said, attempting to sound confident, and perhaps a bit put out, when what she actually felt was excitement and terror over her plan, “I am indeed about to leave the country, the entire island. I...I plan to debark for the Kingdom of Sweden, where I shall take up a new name and a new life, nevermore to

return to these hostile shores.”

She took a step toward the door, more than ready to attend to her final errand before departing.

Regina shifted to block her way. “There’s more to it, my lady. I can tell. Is there something else you might like to tell me? Something that would enable me to assist your flight?”

Again, Minnie bit her lip and debated how much she wished to share. Not even her three dear friends knew what she was planning. If they did, they would surely attempt to convince her not to take the particular course of action she had planned.

“Alright,” Minnie sighed. “But you cannot tell a soul.”

“My lady, you know I am the soul of discretion,” Regina said, as stiff and powerful as any male butler. Perhaps more so.

Minnie peeked to Clarence, whose eye sockets were just visible above the edge of her valise, surrounded by frilly underthings, then glanced back to Regina.

“My parents have arranged a marriage for me,” she said, speaking as though the fact were a humiliation. To Minnie, at her age of nearly forty, it absolutely was. “I have evaded their marital plots for what I thought was long enough for me to be considered an eccentric, unmarriageable spinster, but then a friend of my father’s somehow produced a son who was widowed a few years ago, one Lord Owen Scurloch, and it was agreed by everyone but me that the two of us should wed to affirm some sort of ridiculous land pact or commercial deal, or whatever those men deem more important than a woman’s autonomy.”

“This is precisely why the Mercian Plan must succeed,” Regina sighed, looking much

more sympathetic.

“Yes, well, there’s more to the story,” Minnie told her with a wary side-eye, fetching her gloves from her dressing table and putting them on. “The wedding nearly took place last month.”

“Did it?” Regina asked, surprised and clearly drawn in by the story.

“It did,” Minnie said gravely. “In fact, I may have fled the church on the morning of the wedding and bundled myself straight off to London.”

Regina looked impressed. “You escaped your unwanted fiancé at the altar ?”

“Yes,” Minnie said, desperate to run her errand and moving toward the door again. This time, Regina stepped aside and accompanied her out into the hallway as Minnie continued with, “I managed to make it to London and the safety of the club, as you know, but unless I take drastic action, I will have no option but to hide forever within the walls of the Oxford Society Club. And while that is amenable to some of our dear, unfortunate sisters, it is not the life I want.”

Indeed, the Oxford Society Club was the permanent home and self-imposed prison of at least two younger women who knew that if they left the shelter of the club’s walls and were caught on the street by various family members, who stalked the streets outside as if they would lay siege, they would be abducted back to their own kingdoms and forced into marriages they did not want.

Unless Britannia was united under Mercian law.

“And so you plan to flee to Sweden to be free?” Regina asked.

Minnie sent her a sidelong look as they descended the stairs to the ground floor. “I

plan to do more than that,” she whispered.

They reached the front hall, and she turned this way and that, making certain no one was near enough to overhear her. Then she leaned closer to Regina.

“I plan to feign my tragic demise,” she whispered, feeling a thrill in her gut as she spoke the words.

Regina pulled back and stared at her with wide eyes. Then she glanced up and down Minnie’s black-clad form and smiled.

“If anyone can accomplish that mad task, it will be you, my lady,” she said.

Minnie wasn’t certain she approved of the way Regina beamed as if they were about to attend a drama. “You mustn’t tell anyone,” she hissed. “Although I will tell my dearest friends. Eventually. Once I am established in Stockholm.”

“Do you propose to meet your tragic end on this journey to Wales?” Regina asked quietly.

“Yes,” Minnie whispered. “I’ve arranged passage on a fishing vessel in Bristol that will take me to Ireland. From there, I will assume a new name and identity and travel on to Stockholm.”

“Does Lord Lawrence know about this plot, my lady?” Regina asked.

Minnie pinched her face in frustration for a moment. Lord Lawrence was the vehicle to aid her in reaching Bristol, but he did not know that she had no intention of traveling to Wales at all.

“He will not know until the last possible moment,” she said, marching on toward the

outside door. "If fortune favors me, he will not have to know at all."

"It is always better to let your coconspirator in on any plots you wish to hatch," Regina counselled, opening the door for Minnie and letting in a blast of frosty air as she did.

"I suppose I shall have to tell him something at some point," Minnie said with a sigh. "But with any luck, I will not."

"Very good, my lady," Regina said with a perfectly stiff bow.

Minnie sent her a final, cautious smile, then stepped out into the cold, November morning.

Really, she knew her plan was a bit of a mad one. Chances were that she would not be able to add the additional, magnificent detail of feigning her own death in order to escape. She desperately hoped that all would unfold according to plan, though. Despite the excitement of beginning a new life in a new country, she thrilled at the idea of her family mourning her, of them holding a funeral for her. Perhaps she could even visit her own gravestone one day. Her family would certainly spring for a fine, elaborate headstone in the family plot, even if her body would never be found.

That would be the tricky bit, she thought to herself as she marched along the crowded street toward the seamstress she had entrusted with the construction of a particular gown she would need once the wheels of her plan had been set into motion. The idea was that she would find an appropriate body of water near a cliff or ledge of some sort when they had almost reached Bristol. She would tell Lord Lawrence that she wished to go for a solitary walk in the dark. It would be even better if the weather were foul and the winds fierce on that particular night. She would venture out alone and never return, and in the morning, nothing but her inky, black dress and her bonnet would be found.

Which was why she needed a dress of an entirely different sort. She had commissioned a discreet seamstress to construct a simple, blue gown for her in the Swedish style. She would conceal that gown under her regular clothing when she went out for her walk. Once she located the perfect cliff, she would remove her black gown and reveal the blue, Swedish one. As soon as the evidence was hurled off the cliff and into the ocean, she would run for the docks of Bristol, board the boat she'd arranged passage on, and?—

Minnie caught her breath at the sight of a man stepping behind a corner at the end of the street ahead of her. He was gone as soon as she'd spotted him, but she knew Lord Owen Scurloch when she saw him.

At least, she thought she did. London was devilishly crowded, now that Joint Parliament had begun. The streets were so crowded that some of the lesser folk were being compelled to walk in the mucky streets rather than on the cleaner sidewalks. Owen was tall and broad, but with a quick glance, Minnie saw half a dozen other tall, broad men.

She picked up her pace, hurrying to the corner Owen had disappeared around, then cautiously glancing down that side street as she crossed it.

There was no one resembling Owen's description at all within sight down that street. The traffic was thick with people dressed in the slight variation of costume of all the kingdoms of the New Heptarchy, but not a one of them looked remotely Welsh, let alone like Owen.

"I'm imagining things," Minnie sighed and walked on, shaking her head.

She could not blame herself, really. She had legitimate cause to worry, as her parents had sent a letter addressed to her at the Oxford Society Club, where they knew she stayed in London, saying that if she was in London, she needed to return home

immediately to face the altar or she would be fetched. She had not replied, so her parents could have no certainty that she was even in London. But if they had sent Owen to check....

Minnie put those thoughts out of her mind and hurried on to the seamstress. She was fortunate in that her commissioned gown was completed and already wrapped in brown paper and ready to go. She paid handsomely for not only the gown, but for the silence of everyone in the shop, then clutched her parcel tightly and headed out to return to the club.

Before she was halfway there, the creeping sensation that she was being observed, and perhaps followed, grabbed hold of her. It made her tense and clumsy, and she nearly crashed into one of the errand boys rushing about with deliveries more times than she could count. The way she kept continually glancing down side streets and looking over her shoulder caused more trouble than it brought relief.

It all seemed worthwhile when she spotted what she knew in her heart was Owen's tall, broad form stepping into a pub across the street from her. Her rational mind tried to tell her that if Owen was in London and if he was following her, he would not be ahead of her on the street, and he most certainly would not step into a pub rather than confront her. Her active and expansive imagination was very much running away from her.

That did not stop her from ducking into the entrance of a haberdasher across the street from the pub and leaning against the window so she could observe the pub for several long moments to see if Owen emerged and went after her. It also didn't stop her from taking a circuitous route back to the Oxford Society Club once she grew tired of watching the pub's door. If Owen had come to London and if he'd found her, she would do everything in her power to avoid him and thwart whatever plans he had to capture her and force her into what amounted to indentured servitude.

By the time she finally made it back to the street where the Oxford Society Club stood, she was anxious and restless. The skies had clouded over, and raindrops were beginning to fall. She clung close to the sides of buildings as she walked, constantly glancing over her shoulder and trying to hide.

That was why, when Lord Lawrence stepped down from one of the carriages parked along the street in front of the club and greeted her with, "Good day, Lady Minerva. Aren't you looking fetching this fine morning," Minnie nearly jumped out of her skin.

"Hurry! Hurry!" she said, grabbing the sleeve of Lord Lawrence's coat with her free hand and tugging him toward the entrance to the club. "We mustn't be seen at all."

Lord Lawrence smiled and moved quickly with her, as if he found the whole attempt at secrecy to be a game of some sort. Indeed, as they ducked into the club's door when one of the footmen held it open for them, he asked, "Are we escaping from the law today or evading some criminal gang?"

As soon as the door was shut safely behind them, Minnie straightened from her hunched posture and sent him a scathing look. If Lord Lawrence was going to be spritely and clever through the entire journey west, and if he thought he could tease her and she would laugh and titter like the rest of the vapid young ladies of the ton who merely wanted an older, distinguished husband with silver hair at his temples, then he had another think coming.

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Two

“... and so, you see, kind sir, this is why I cannot accept your invitation to drive in Hyde Park with you this Saturday, as flattered as I am by the offer .”

Lawrence sighed and refolded the letter he’d received from Lady Harriet Longstead several days before, tucking it into his traveling bag, along with the mountain of other communication he’d received since arriving in London.

“You can have this taken down to the carriage now, Danforth,” he said as Godwin House’s butler stepped into the room, two of the footmen behind him. He closed the case, but left it to Danforth and the others to secure as he headed out of the room. “I’m ready to leave all this behind me and return to the wilds from whence I came.”

He spoke with a smile and clapped Danforth on the arm before stepping away, but his heart was heavier than he wanted it to be. Lady Harriet’s letter was one of at least a dozen similarly gentle rejections he’d received in the last month. It was bad enough that it had taken him more than a quarter of an hour to puzzle out each letter when they were received, and it was not as if he cared overly much for any of the young ladies who had turned down his potential offers of courtship, but the rejection stung all the same.

His father had ordered that Lawrence and all his brothers and cousins marry, and he had proclaimed that the last of them to do so would inherit the cursed Godwin Castle. That had been in the spring, and now the year was waning. Cedric, Alden, and Waldorf had all found themselves the loveliest of brides. They were all exceedingly lucky in their choices as well. It was more than just being free of the burden of

Godwin Castle, they were all blissfully happy.

The only two of them left unmarried were Lawrence and his cousin, Dunstan. And while some might argue that Dunstan was a lost cause, after being so cruelly eviscerated by his deceased wife in the few, short years of their marriage, Lawrence had his own theories about how Dunstan might surprise everyone by making it to the altar, sooner rather than later.

That left Lawrence as the presumptive heir to the family curse, and truly, there were days when he felt as though it had already fallen upon him.

He was trying to find himself a bride, trying desperately. It was not as though he did not want to marry and have a family, although at his age, approaching fifty, he was not certain he had the constitution for raising a gaggle of children. He yearned for marriage, longed to find a woman with whom he could spend what he liked to think was the second half of his life.

But Lawrence had never been lucky in love. He had a string of failed affairs behind him with nothing more to show for it than a gallery of erotic sculptures inspired by mistresses of the past and sketches of past fancies who had never taken him seriously. Possibly because of said gallery of erotic sculptures.

The fact of the matter was that as Lawrence's reputation as a sculptor grew, his seriousness as a marriage prospect for the young ladies of the ton diminished. He had become the sort of man everyone wished to invite to supper, but whom few wanted any deeper sort of connection to.

Regardless, he would not give up. London had been a failure for him, but perhaps he could visit the continent or the American colonies and find a willing bride there, one who was not overly concerned about being married to the man who created those sculptures.

“Oh, my lord.” Danforth stepped out into the hall, arresting Lawrence before he’d made it to the top of the stairs.

“Yes?” Lawrence asked, turning back to the man with a smile. He usually wore a smile, even though his brothers and cousins teased him for it. One could always smile, even when the world was sinking into a bog around him.

“Before you go, there is another letter for you waiting downstairs,” Danforth said. “It was just delivered by special courier, not more than ten minutes ago.”

“Thank you, Danforth,” Lawrence said, his smile going tight.

He turned and headed down the stairs, wondering which of the young ladies he’d spoken to at the opening of Joint Parliament the day before had turned down his request to call now.

But when he reached the table in the foyer where the silver salver that held correspondence rested, it was not another rejection from a lady that awaited him. Instead, the address on the envelope was written in the blocky, slightly splotted handwriting that most definitely belonged to a man.

Curious, he snatched up the envelope, broke the seal, then slowly, painstakingly, read its contents, his smile returning.

“ Godwin, I’ve had an inquiry from a gallery owner in Hamburg who would like to curate an exhibition of your sculptures based on the theme of the four seasons. He is deeply familiar with your work and will pay well. But he has one unique requirement. Please call upon me for more .”

It was signed G. Loesser, the name of a friend and art broker Lawrence knew well.

“Excellent,” Lawrence said out loud, directing his comment to the two footmen who brought his traveling bags down while he’d been wrestling with the missive. “Hurry, hurry, lads. It appears as though I have a final errand to run before I’m through with London entirely.”

The footmen, kind, clever lads as they were, smiled at him as they carried his things out to the waiting carriage.

“Is this all of it, my lord?” Silas, his personal driver and sometimes valet, asked as he met the footmen at the door.

“It is,” Lawrence said, pausing to breathe in the cold, damp air as if it were the middle of summer. “As soon as it’s secured, we can go fetch Lady Minerva. Although I need to stop at Loesser’s offices along the way.”

Silas hummed and frowned, then said, “Begging your pardon, my lord, but the Oxford Society Club is on the way to Loesser’s gallery. If we go to the gallery then back again, it might take twice as long. I know you’re eager to be done with London.”

Lawrence sent Silas a kind smile. “You bring up a good point. Perhaps Lady Minerva would not mind attending this errand with me. We shall fetch her along the way, and then on to Loesser’s.”

“Very good, my lord.” Silas nodded and touched the brim of his hat, then held the door for Lawrence to hop into the carriage.

While Cedric detested it when his servants made suggestions and directed their master, Lawrence did not mind it at all. He trusted his servants. They’d been hired to do a job, and in almost every instance, they knew their job far better than he did. Because of that light hand with those many other gentlemen chose to command, most

people, his family included, considered Lawrence to be weak of mind and even weaker of will.

Perhaps he was. He accepted what others thought of him without attempting to change it, and that made him seem a little too affable at times. But what point was there in attempting to change the ways of the world? The world was what it was, and as an artist, his job was to observe and render it in whatever medium he chose. It was not for him to change what God had made so perfectly.

The drive to the Oxford Society Club was uneventful. He was told that Lady Minerva had gone out on last-minute errands when he arrived, and since men were not permitted inside the club, except in the foyer, and only then when they were accompanied by a member of the club, and as the sky had begun to spit rain, he waited in his carriage until Lady Minerva made her appearance.

Lawrence nearly burst into laughter when she did finally appear. Lady Minerva was an enigma. No lady of her beauty and cleverness within the ton chose to dress as if she were a recent widow, the way Lady Minerva always did. Lawrence had always found that proclivity, and the sharp intelligence of the lady's conversation, to be intriguing. When the opportunity had arisen for him to accompany Lady Minerva back to her home kingdom of Wales the day before, Lawrence had jumped at it. He needed to leave London anyhow, and Lady Minerva had provided him with the ideal excuse to flee.

And so he was in particularly good spirits when he stepped down from his carriage just as the lady passed and said, "Good day, Lady Minerva. Aren't you looking fetching this fine morning."

His words seemed to startle Lady Minerva far more than a greeting warranted. She grabbed his coat and dragged him towards the door of the club, hissing, "Hurry! Hurry! We mustn't be seen at all."

Lawrence nearly laughed at the excitement of it all. Lady Minerva already seemed to be caught up in some sort of fantasy, though Lawrence could not see why she would be so anxious to get off the street. No one around them was paying either of them the slightest bit of attention.

“Are we escaping from the law today or evading some criminal gang?” he asked as they stepped into the foyer of the Oxford Society Club.

Perhaps as expected, Lady Minerva narrowed her eyes at him in a disapproving scowl.

“Do you find something amusing in my wish to be discreet, Lord Lawrence?” she asked in clipped tones.

“Not at all,” Lawrence said, still trying to remain affable, as was his nature. “I love a bit of excitement in the morning. It makes the afternoon so much more restful when one has packed in their adventure before luncheon.”

A flat silence filled the space between Lawrence and Lady Minerva for a moment as she continued to stare at him.

Then she sucked in a breath, stood straighter, and tilted her chin up slightly.

“I am almost ready to depart, my lord,” she said, hugging her parcel closer. “If you will but give me ten minutes to complete the process and to have my things brought down, I shall be ready to venture out with you.”

“Of course, my lady,” Lawrence said, bowing gravely, though he couldn’t hide the delight he felt. The journey to Wales could take weeks, depending on the weather, and he would have the privilege of spending all that time with her.

Lady Minerva left him, and Lawrence was politely asked to step outside once more. The rain had picked up a slight bit, but he did not hide away in his carriage as he could have.

Instead, as soon as Lady Minerva emerged with a rather large valise, he rushed to assist her.

“Allow me, my lady,” he said, smiling despite the rain.

“I can manage quite well on my own,” Lady Minerva snapped in return.

Her attempt at independence, and Lawrence was certain that’s what it was, which he could easily forgive her for, was marred slightly by the alert way she glanced up and down the street before handing her valise off to Silas in order for him to add it to the trunk at the back of the wagon. She continued to search the area as Lawrence offered her a hand to step into the carriage. Once she was seated, she tucked herself into the far corner of the rear-facing seat and hugged her black coat around her.

“I say,” Lawrence joked, looking up and down the street himself, then pretending to peer blindly into the carriage without seeing much. “Silas, have you seen Lady Minerva Llewellyn? I swear, she was here a moment ago, but she seems to have disappeared entirely.”

“Must you?” Lady Minerva sighed over his antics.

“Oh! There you are,” Lawrence said, stepping into the carriage and sitting on the forward-facing seat. “You veritably blend into the shadows in that coat.”

“Yes, well, sometimes it is best to blend into the shadows,” she said frostily.

Lawrence laughed softly and settled himself in as Silas finished with the trunk, then

took his seat atop the carriage and nudged the horses onward.

“Oh, I should beg your pardon, my lady,” Lawrence said once they were moving safely along the road. “I have a final errand I must attend to before we take to the western road.”

“An errand?” Lady Minerva asked with far too much alarm. “Where? In the city?”

“In Marylebone, actually,” Lawrence said. “Not much farther on than here. A friend of mine who is an art broker sent me a letter just before I left the house an hour ago, informing me of a gallery in Hamburg that wishes to stage an exhibition of my work.”

Lady Minerva’s entire countenance changed as she blinked and sat straighter. “I’d forgotten you were an artist, my lord. My friends who have married into your family told me, of course, but I am sorry to say that I cannot recall ever seeing any of your paintings displayed.”

“Sculptures,” Lawrence said, blushing a bit. “I am predominately a sculptor. Though I do sketch quite a bit while doing studies for my pieces.”

“Sculptor, then,” Lady Minerva said with a nod. “Are you in the National Gallery?”

Lawrence cleared his throat. “Er, no. My sculptures are more for...private audiences.”

For the first time since fetching her, Lawrence caught a sparkle in Lady Minerva’s eyes. “I am intrigued, my lord.”

“As all good minxes are,” Lawrence answered her cheekily.

That caused Lady Minerva to tense up and hug herself tighter again.

“I beg your pardon, my lady,” Lawrence said, wincing. “I should not have presumed to jest with you so early in our acquaintance. I think you will find that I frequently make the wrong comment at the wrong moment. It is just that I find society to be so unbearably stuffy and restrained sometimes. Life is enjoyable. I cannot fathom why people hide from that so much.”

Lady Minerva waited far too long, staring at him, before saying, “Indeed.”

The conversation faltered from there. A few things were said about the weather and about the length of the journey as they traveled on to Loesser’s office, but not much.

Lawrence gave Lady Minerva the option of waiting in the carriage while he stepped inside to see what the details of the deal Loesser wanted to work out for him were, but she declined. That came as a bit of a surprise, but perhaps not as much as it could have when Lady Minerva rushed straight from the carriage and into the office building, pulling her bonnet down over her face, lest anyone passing recognize her.

“You are beginning to make me think you are some sort of spy, my lady,” Lawrence whispered as they approached the desk at the front of the office.

“No, you have me confused with my friend, Lady Kat,” Lady Minerva said, sending Lawrence a sideways look.

Lawrence’s heart lifted. It appeared Lady Minerva did have a sense of humor after all.

“Ah, Lord Lawrence, welcome,” Loesser said, stepping out of the back room and up to the other side of the desk. “That was quick.”

“I am about to depart London,” Lawrence said, reaching across to shake Loesser’s hand. “You might not be able to reach me for a few weeks, until I arrive at Godwin Castle after returning Lady Minerva Llewellyn to her home kingdom.”

“My lady,” Loesser greeted Lady Minerva with a nod and a smile.

Lady Minerva smiled briefly at him, then returned to looking around the front room of the office, which was filled with various artwork.

“About this Hamburg offer,” Lawrence said.

“Yes, I knew you’d be interested,” Loesser said with a wink. “It’s for one of the more progressive galleries in the city. They wish to do an entire exhibition of your work.”

“That’s splendid,” Lawrence said, beaming. “I suppose if one cannot be appreciated in his own country, the next best thing is to gain a following somewhere else.”

“It certainly is,” Loesser said. “And they’re willing to pay a pretty penny for the privilege of displaying your art, and perhaps selling a few pieces, if the opportunity arises.”

“I would be amenable to that,” Lawrence said. “Whatever of mine that you do not already have in your storerooms, I could have fetched for you from my studio in Winchester.”

“Perfect,” Loesser said. He then pinched his face and added, “There’s only one complication.”

“Oh?”

Lawrence glanced to the side at Lady Minerva’s sudden intake of breath. He was

more than a little alarmed to find one of his own, particularly erotic sculptures sitting out on a table near the window. Whatever hope Lawrence had that Lady Minerva had spotted whatever she'd been looking for outside the window and that that was what had caused her gasp was thwarted when he saw her clap a hand to her mouth as she looked at the carved man and woman in a particularly amorous embrace in marble form.

"The gentleman in Hamburg remembers a particular sculpture of yours," Loesser went on, either not seeing Lady Minerva's reaction or being so accustomed to the shock of ladies over art that he paid it no mind. "Primavera in Splendor."

Lawrence snapped his attention away from Lady Minerva and stared with wide eyes, face heating, at Loesser.

"Primavera in Splendor?" he asked, his voice hoarse and cracking.

"Yes," Loesser said with a knowing smirk. "It's one of your finest works."

"I, er, thank you?"

"The Hamburg gentleman is interested in purchasing it from you after the gallery show. For a thousand guineas."

"My God!" Lady Minerva gasped, twisting to face him.

"A thousand guineas?" Lawrence repeated. "For that old thing?"

"It seems he has never forgotten it, even though he first laid eyes on it ten years ago," Loesser said. "Do you think you can procure it for him?"

Lawrence was silent for a long time, thinking about it. He would have loved nothing

more than to rid the island of Britannia of that particular statue, and the memories behind it, forever. If he'd had it in his possession, he would have sent for it at once. He might have even given it the Hamburg gentleman for no price at all, just so that he would never see it again. Or more importantly, that its current owner would never see it again.

"The work in question is not in my possession at the moment," he said carefully.

"I know," Loesser said, grinning. "Lady Wimpole still has it, doesn't she."

Lawrence swallowed tightly. "She does, though she has remarried and is no longer Lady Wimpole."

Loesser shrugged. "So get it back from her, whatever she's called these days," he said. "Something tells me she wouldn't put up that much of a fuss, if she even still has it. Especially if she's remarried. If her new husband even knows the statue exists, I bet he'd be grateful to be rid of it as well."

"Indeed," Lawrence said.

"Where does this former Lady Wimpole live?" Lady Minerva asked, coming forward, even though part of Lawrence wished she hadn't.

"Er, Wiltshire," Lawrence said.

"How convenient," Lady Minerva said. "Wiltshire is on the way to Wales. We could stop at no-longer-Lady Wimpole's house and ask for the statue back."

"Yes, we could," Lawrence said, slowly and reluctantly.

"A thousand guineas," Loesser reminded Lawrence. "I could use the commission for

a sale like that.”

Lawrence let out a sigh, lowering his shoulders. Loesser had a point. A thousand guineas would not make or break him one way or another, but for a man who lived on such close margins as Loesser, it could mean a great deal.

“Alright,” Lawrence said with a shrug. “I do not suppose it could hurt to visit Wiltshire and inquire whether Lady Wimpole still possesses the statue.”

“Good man,” Loesser said, reaching across the counter to thump Lawrence’s arm. “I knew you’d be willing to help a friend out.”

“Yes,” Lawrence said with a smile.

Deep down, however, he wondered if his willingness to go out of his way for the benefit of others was one of the reasons so many people considered him to be so simple. One way or another, time would tell.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:08 am

Three

Few things truly shocked Minnie. She'd seen more than her fair share of despicable behavior, bad manners, and cruelty in her lifetime. And that was just from her family. She herself lived a life that was considered outlandish by most of the ton .

Seeing the wicked sculpture in the art broker's office, and then learning that it had been created by Lord Lawrence Godwin himself shocked her in a way few things had. Never in all her days would she have expected such a mild-mannered, kind, and distinguished gentleman like Lord Lawrence to be capable of creating something that was not only erotic, it was magnificently accomplished and really quite beautiful.

"You have talent," she complimented Lord Lawrence once they were in the carriage, finally making their way out of London along the western road.

"Hmm?" Lord Lawrence hummed, dragging himself out of his contemplation of the scenery they passed as he stared out the window. Or, more likely, pulling himself from all-encompassing thoughts.

"I merely observed that you have exquisite talent in sculpting," Minnie said, hugging herself tighter, as the carriage hadn't completely warmed up yet.

"Oh," Lord Lawrence said with a small smile. "Thank you. While all of my brothers and cousins were intent on attending university to broaden their education in the classics and in land management, or, in Alden's case, in herpetology, all I wanted to do was draw and play with clay."

Something about the way he said that, the hunch of his shoulders and the sheepish look that accompanied the self-effacing gesture had Minnie certain there was much more to the story than met the eye. Just as she was certain there was more to the story of why the former Lady Wimpole in Wiltshire was in possession of an erotic sculpture he had fashioned.

“I studied mathematics at Oxford,” Minnie said when Lawrence didn’t seem keen to keep the conversation going. “Mostly as they applied to financial matters.”

Lawrence’s brow shot up, and he sat a little straighter. “I would have thought you would study poetry and exotic works of literature from far-distant lands,” he said.

“I studied a bit of that,” Minerva said with a nod. “But as delightful as sad ballads and tales of woe from the orient are, they do not assist one in making wise investments and providing independent financial security.”

Lawrence’s expression registered surprise again, which made him look like a man of half his years. Minnie knew from her association with the Godwin family through her friends that Lawrence was the middle of Lord Gerald’s three sons, and that he was about fifty years of age, but even the streaks of silver in his dark hair couldn’t disguise his youthful spirit.

“Are you financially independent?” he asked, his curiosity clearly genuine and not at all disapproving.

“I am,” Minnie nodded. “I have been quite successful in investing in shares of ships trading with the American colonies, though now that they are rumbling for independence, I intend to redirect my investments elsewhere.”

“How extraordinary,” Lord Lawrence said. Minnie could see that he actually meant it, unlike most men she discussed her financial adventures with.

“I have no intention of being dependent on anyone for my position in life,” she said with a shrug. “Least of all a husband.”

Just thinking the word “husband” cast her mind back to her escape from a wedding she had not wanted, and to the possibility that Owen had pursued her to London. She gave a little shiver, then pulled her coat tighter around her arms, using the excuse of the cold to dismiss the gesture.

“Perhaps you would care to ride in the seat beside me?” Lord Lawrence asked carefully. “I see you are chilled, and sitting closer would keep us both warmer.”

“No, thank you, Lord Lawrence,” Minnie said, instinctively suspicious about his reasons for asking. “I am enjoying the view from here.”

It took her a moment or two to realize her words could be taken to mean she wanted to gaze upon Lord Lawrence’s handsome figure as they drove on. She had to admit that he was finely formed, particularly for a man his age. He was tall and broad of shoulders, with a trim waist and very little paunch, unlike most men his age of her acquaintance. His face was pleasingly formed, with strong lines and cheery eyes.

“I mean the view of the countryside out the window,” she corrected herself all the same as she grew warmer at the way Lord Lawrence smiled. “I do so love the way rain bathes the countryside in soft greys.”

“By all means,” Lord Lawrence said with a small nod. “I would not want to impinge on your enjoyment of the countryside .”

Minerva tensed at the comment and peeked at Lord Lawrence out of the corner of her eye as she pretended to be absorbed in the passing landscape. Any other man of her acquaintance would have pressed the matter, perhaps to the point of forcing her to take a seat by his side. Lord Lawrence had bowed to her wishes so swiftly that she

wondered what game he was playing.

As the hours and miles passed, however, Minnie began to wonder if Lord Lawrence had any games up his sleeves at all. He seemed more than content to sit in silence with her, watching the world pass them by as they rolled sedately over muddy roads and past sodden fields and hamlets.

They stopped at a coaching inn that night, and the entire evening passed without incident. Lord Lawrence made certain Minnie had her own, small room, that they were fed, and that Silas, his driver, was given warm, dry lodgings as well. His kindness was apparent to Minnie in the friendly deference Silas showed him.

The next day passed in much the same way. Minnie brought a book out of her valise to read and pass the time, and in a test of how amenable to her eccentricities Lord Lawrence would be, she brought Clarence out and sat him on the seat beside her as they drove on.

“What a magnificent specimen,” Lord Lawrence observed once the carriage lurched forward along still-muddy roads, smiling at Clarence. “Where did you obtain such a thing?”

Minnie had only just picked up her book, so it could not be said that Lord Lawrence had interrupted her reading. Yet.

“I purloined my friend here from one of the medical laboratories at the physician’s college within Oxford University,” she said, daring Lord Lawrence with her eyes to object to her long-ago mischief.

“May I?” Lord Lawrence asked, reaching out for Clarence.

Curious to see what he would do next, Minnie nodded. “You may.”

Lord Lawrence picked up the skull and turned it over in his hands. The way he caressed it reminded Minnie that he was a sculptor. He had a way of following the ridges of Clarence's facial bones as if he could see what they would have looked like covered with flesh, and stroking Clarence's skull bones as if he would run his fingers through his hair.

The fleeting thought occurred to Minnie that she would not have minded if he wanted to run his fingers through her hair or caress her cheekbones in such a way.

She put that thought immediately aside as Lord Lawrence sighed his approval of Clarence and returned him to the seat beside Minnie, saying, "You are lucky to have such a beautiful ornament."

Minnie blinked at him. He was not teasing her, nor was he merely lowering her defenses so that he could attack her for her oddities. It was...it was annoying, in a way. She shifted restlessly in her seat, reaching for Clarence to rearrange the way he sat. How dare Lord Lawrence unsettle her so by being so...so... nice ?

Her itching, uncomfortable annoyance with the man continued throughout the day when he let her read her book in peace without once interrupting to ask what she was reading or to tell her what he thought on the subject. Lord Lawrence seemed content to watch the world out the window, since he had not brought a book himself. After their stop at another inn for luncheon, he fell asleep as the carriage rattled on, making slow progress over the muddy roads. He snored a bit as he napped, but even that was frustratingly charming.

By the third day of their quiet, companionable journey together, Minnie had reached her limit of patience for traveling.

"I cannot sit for a moment longer," she told Lord Lawrence when they reached yet another coaching inn along the road. "I simply must go for a walk to work some

blood back into my legs.”

“I agree,” Lord Lawrence sighed. “As marvelous as the modern conveyance of a double spring carriage is, one simply must exercise the physical body now and then before it calcifies completely.”

Minnie paused in the courtyard in front of the inn and stared at Lord Lawrence with narrowed eyes. He wasn’t going to advise her on the dangers of walking in an unfamiliar country? He wouldn’t forbid her from going for a walk because it was raining lightly and her health might be at risk? He wasn’t going to order her to sit prettily by the fire in the inn while he arranged everything around her exactly to his specifications?

The nerve of the man!

“Let me just inquire at the inn to be certain they have rooms for us,” he said, holding up a finger to Minnie as he stepped toward the inn’s front door. “And perhaps they have a pair of umbrellas we could borrow for our walk.”

“Yes, please,” Minnie found herself saying, even though her natural instinct was to be annoyed over any infringement on her independence.

Lord Lawrence was quick about his errand. Minnie waited for him under the awning outside of the inn’s door as Silas drove the carriage around so he could tend to it and the horses. A few of the inn’s patrons and fellow travelers stared at her, but as Minnie had learned long ago, the black she wore immediately made those around her assume she was mourning someone, which meant she had peace and sympathetic looks instead of being accosted or, even worse, flirted with.

“Here we are,” Lord Lawrence said a few, short moments later, exiting the inn with two, sturdy, black umbrellas. “They do not mind if we borrow these. I paid well for

the privilege, and for the rooms.”

“Thank you, Lord Lawrence,” Minnie said, desperately tempted to smile as Lord Lawrence opened an umbrella for her, then handed it over.

It irritated her to no end that she wanted to smile at the man. What had come over her that she was so quickly inclined to like a male of the species? Men had caused nothing but trouble for her in her thirty-seven years, constantly badgering her and attempting to woo her into giving up everything she was and cared about. How dare Lord Lawrence defy those trends?

The two of them started along a small path leading away from the inn, which Lord Lawrence said the innkeeper had recommended to him because of its expansive view of the hills around them. Indeed, the vista was breathtakingly beautiful in all its rainy, gloomy splendor. Not only that, Minnie spotted a small church with a graveyard a short distance down one of the hills.

“I intend to explore the graveyard,” she told Lord Lawrence, eyeing him sideways.

She waited for him to protest that a lady should not enjoy such things, but instead, he said, “Oh! What an interesting activity.”

Minnie clenched her jaw, waiting for the barb that would follow that apparent approval, but none came.

It was a relief to walk in the rain after so long tucked away in a carriage, and by the time they approached the small churchyard, Minnie’s expectations of being thwarted by Lord Lawrence had vanished, leaving her with a strangely light sort of contentment.

“I’ve always enjoyed graveyards,” she said as Lord Lawrence skipped ahead to open

the small gate dividing the graves from the rest of the churchyard. “They contain such a rich history of humanity.”

“I suppose they do,” Lord Lawrence said, his expression as bright as a spring day, despite the increase in the rain’s intensity.

Still off-balance by his cheeriness, Minnie began to walk among the headstones, reading them and absorbing the names they contained. Her mind buzzed with a dozen stories to match the simple epitaphs she read.

“Here lies Constance Whitcomb, beloved wife and mother,” she read aloud.

“Poor thing,” Lawrence said.

Minnie glanced to him with a small frown. “Why poor thing?” she asked.

Lawrence nodded to the smaller stone beside Constance’s. “Her date of death is the same as the infant beside her.”

Minnie sucked in a small breath and glanced at the two stones, seeing the connection.

“Ah, yes,” she said. “I’d wager that she waited for all of her—” she paused as she calculated Constance’s age at her death, “—thirty-one years to have a child, and when she finally did, the babe died before the night was done. Poor Constance died of a broken heart in the morning.”

Lawrence hummed, then said, “Perhaps not. Gauging by several of the other stones nearby, Constance and H-Harold,” he squinted as he read the stone, “had quite a few children.” He pointed to three other stones, stating the dates of those buried there aloud. “I’d wager that they had a lovely, happy family. Constance was the apple of her dear Harold’s eye and beloved by her children, most of whom lived to a ripe, old

age. They may have lost their mother in childbirth, but Constance was well-loved and her memory was cherished by all.”

Minnie stared flatly at Lord Lawrence. “Dying of a broken heart is a far more romantic death than an ordinary, comforting one,” she said. “And her husband’s name was Harland, not Harold.”

“Oh? I beg your pardon,” Lord Lawrence said, blushing, and bowed to the headstone.

Minnie moved on, finding another name that struck her fancy.

“Paul Abercrombie,” she said, pointing to the stone of a man who had lived well into his eighties. “He was a terrible miser who made the lives of those around him miserable. He had two wives whom he poisoned, but they were so glad to be rid of him that they drank the poison willingly.”

Lord Lawrence squinted at the headstone and tilted his head. “Oh, no, that’s not it at all. Paul Abercrombie was a jolly, beloved soul. He hosted picnics for the entire hamlet at his country house every midsummer, even though he hardly had any money of his own. He was a wise and beloved grandfather to all who knew him. He loved his first wife dearly and never truly got over her early death, but when his wife’s fetching cousin came to care for him and the children in the hour of his grief, he fell in love with her, a different sort of love, and married her when the appropriate mourning period was over. They lived happily for the rest of their lives and never forgot the beloved first wife.”

Minnie wanted to huff and stomp away through the wet grass in protest. Lord Lawrence clearly did not know how the game was played.

She moved on, attempting to find a stone with a story behind it that he couldn’t possibly turn into a cheery, romantic tale.

“William Everley,” she said, pointing at a newer stone. The man had only been eighteen, and he’d died two years before. “Struck down by a speeding carriage while on his way to his wedding. The physician thought he could save him at first and amputated his mangled leg in an effort to save his life. But the wound turned gangrenous, and he died in agony after days.”

Lord Lawrence started, then turned to look at Minnie with a strange look of bewilderment.

“He was a soldier,” he said, as if it were obvious. “He died a hero on the battlefields of France, defending an entire village against Napoleon. He helped a distraught, widowed noblewoman to escape to England. She wished for him to escape with her, and she promised to marry him and make him a rich man. But Billy had a higher calling and returned to fight for what he believed was right. He took a bullet in the heart defending the captain of his regiment and was awarded a cross of honor posthumously.”

Minnie huffed and shook her head. “How do you know all that?”

“How do you know that he was struck by a carriage?” Lord Lawrence asked in turn.

“I have imagined it,” she said, tilting her chin up.

Lord Lawrence pointed to the headstone. “I have observed the carving of the Medal of Honor that was given to those who died in the war against Bonaparte on the headstone,” he said.

He kept a straight face, but his eyes glittered with mischief.

Minnie felt her face, and the rest of her body, heat over the observation. She had not noticed the carving. All the same, she thought her story was much more lurid and

enticing.

“I believe it is time to return to the inn,” she said, picking up her skirts and stepping away from the gravestones. “As much as I do not mind the rain, it is increasing, and I am hungry.”

“I believe I smelled rabbit pie at the inn,” Lord Lawrence said as he jumped ahead of her once more to hold the graveyard’s gate open for her. Minnie noted that he did not poke fun at her for her observational failures. “The other patrons of the inn looked jolly and content, so I assume the inn’s cook is accomplished in their craft,” he went on.

Minnie walked past him with a nod of thanks for holding the gate, then waited so that the two of them could walk side-by-side up along the path back to the inn.

“Unless, of course, they were all just being poisoned into smiling and enjoying each other’s conversation,” Lord Lawrence added with a wink.

Minnie quivered on the inside, but as much as she wanted to believe she was shaking with rage, she had a terrible feeling that it was laughter, not anger, trying to escape from her.

“We shall have to be careful about what we eat, then, Lord Lawrence,” she said in as somber a tone as she could muster. “I would hate to be poisoned into laughing and enjoying anyone’s company.”

“Of course, of course,” Lord Lawrence said. “We couldn’t have that. I shall endeavor to keep all mirth well away from you.”

“Good,” Minnie said with a nod.

She had to turn her head away to hide the smile that would not be denied.

It angered her in frustrating ways, though. She was not supposed to enjoy Lord Lawrence's, or any man's, company. She was supposed to avail herself of Lord Lawrence's assistance in getting her as far as Bristol, and then she would execute her plan and flee to Sweden.

She still intended to do just that, but now she wondered if Owen were the only man she needed to be wary of ruining her vision for her future life.

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Four

Lawrence had never been so satisfied with the rain slowing down a journey in his life. He knew from consulting with Silas that they were merely inching across the sodden landscape of Wessex instead of making anything close to good time. The horses needed to stop more frequently because of the strain of pulling the carriage through mud, and they'd lost an entire day of travel when one of the carriage wheels suddenly needed replacing.

But the journey could last all winter, as far as Lawrence was concerned, as long as he could continue to keep company with the clever and enigmatic Lady Minerva.

"I consider myself extraordinarily fortunate that the last inn contained a book exchange," Lady Minerva said shortly after they'd departed a particularly well-kept inn just past Camberley, where they'd paused to have a bite to eat. "I was glad to surrender a few of the books I have already read and had no further use for in exchange for these gems."

Lawrence smiled at the way she eagerly ran her hands over the books, drawing her finger down their spines, each in turn, then flipping through the pages to see what they contained. He'd never seen anyone so excited about the pulp of trees before, but as he understood it, one of the volumes in question was a collection of poetry by a Mercian woman, and the other was a gothic novel of the sort she'd told him three times now that she adored.

"This one should have a great deal of blood in it, since it is about a vampire set loose in the German countryside," she said, setting the poetry book on the seat beside her

faithful skull companion, Clarence.

“I know how you love your blood and horror,” he told her with a smile.

Lady Minerva raised her eyes slowly from the page in front of her, one eyebrow arched, as if she were demanding he explain his comment.

“And I can imagine it’s all very thrilling,” he added, intending to leave her questioning whether he was teasing her or not.

In fact, he was teasing her, but he did not feel as though there were anything malicious in his teasing. Lady Minerva took herself and her hobbies quite seriously, but underneath all that gothic grace, Lawrence was certain he could sense a woman who wanted to let herself go and laugh. Whatever had inspired her to cloak herself in a protective shell of gloom, it was not a permanent part of her. It was the shell that covered the rich and vibrant egg inside.

“Perhaps you could learn something about the depths of emotion if you were to read Miss Banbury’s poetry, my lord,” she said, holding onto her vampire book with one hand and handing the book of poetry across to Lawrence.

Lawrence’s humor faltered as he stared at the book for a moment. His pulse sped up and his throat felt like it might close up on him. There was nothing for it but to take the book from Lady Minerva, though. To do otherwise would have been rude.

“Enjoy your exploration,” Lady Minerva told him, then happily opened her book once more, turned to the first page, and settled in to read the tale.

Lawrence glanced from her to the book he now held, uneasiness rippling through him. He took a deep breath and mirrored Lady Minerva’s pose of literary contentment as he nestled back into the seat. Then, with a deep breath and a prayer for patience, he

opened the book.

As he'd expected, the words on the page in front of him danced and shifted, refusing to give up their secrets to him. At least he could manage the printing better than handwriting.

It wasn't that Lawrence did not know the letters or how they worked together to form words. He'd had an unusual and accomplished tutor at one point in his childhood who had explained to him that he was one of a small number of people who had great difficulty perceiving letters printed on a page, but that it did not mean he was an imbecile, or that he could not read. It simply took him longer to make sense of what he saw where letters were concerned. Much longer.

He put one finger on the page, hoping Lady Minerva didn't notice the action, and squinted slightly as he attempted to make out the first line of the first poem in the volume. It was something about May, possibly buds on trees, although it might have been bugs. The trouble was, every technique he knew for deciphering his enemy, letters, was hopeless and pointless in a jostling carriage.

"I wonder that you can read at all with the carriage jostling about so much," Lawrence said after a solid ten minutes of attempting to read past the first few stanzas of his poem. "I dare say the roads between here and Wiltshire have been completely destroyed by the rains we've been having."

Lady Minerva glanced wryly up from her book, arching one eyebrow at Lawrence. "My lord, do you not see that I am deeply engaged in the world of Black Forest vampires at this particular moment."

"I beg your pardon," Lawrence said, matching her solemnity. "I was merely concerned for the condition of your eyes, and perhaps your stomach, while trying to read in a jostling carriage."

“My eyes are perfectly well, my lord,” she replied. “And my stomach is still digesting the magnificent repast we were just treated to.”

“Yes, there is something so warm and comforting about luncheon at a coaching inn along a heavily traversed road,” Lawrence pressed on, despite her hint that she did not wish to be disturbed.

For the last several days, Lawrence had vigilantly guarded Lady Minerva’s privacy and her reading time. He was loath to interrupt her at a pastime she clearly enjoyed. The trouble was, there were only two of them in the carriage, and after so many days of keeping himself to himself, he was beginning to consider it cruel that his only companion would withhold conversation from him. Clarence certainly was not much of a conversationalist.

Which was why he did not feel at all bad about asking, “What do the vampires of the Black Forest of Germany have to say about traveling across muddy roads?”

Lady Minerva glanced up from her book once more. “They do not travel across muddy roads,” she said. “They transform into bats and fly over them.”

“Ah,” Lawrence said, smiling. “Now that is the way to travel. Although I would not turn into a bat. I think it far more likely that I would transform into some sort of confused tit.”

Lady Minerva appeared to choke on her own spit and burst into a coughing fit in an effort not to laugh.

Lawrence caught his breath in excitement. He was determined to make the somber lady laugh if it was the last thing he ever did.

“Though I suppose the birds of the air are in too much of a hurry for me,” he went on.

“If I were to transform into any creature, it would most likely be an enormous toad of some sort.”

“A toad?” Lady Minerva asked, lowering her book slightly.

“Yes, of course,” Lawrence said. “I have always considered myself entirely ordinary, and what could be more ordinary than a common garden toad?” He paused, tilted his head to the side, then continued with, “Well, I suppose Alden wouldn’t find me common. Or rather, he would consider me common, but a fascinating specimen all the same. He could house me in his terrarium, along with the rest of the alligators and poison dart frogs.”

“Would you not grow tired of spending your entire life enclosed in glass?” Lady Minerva asked, her mouth twitching.

“Oh, no, not at all,” Lawrence said. “Alden takes very good care of his creatures. I should have sunshine whenever I wanted it, amphibious companionship, and as many flies and bugs as my heart desired.”

“Would you?” Lady Minerva lowered her book all the way to her lap.

“I would,” Lawrence nodded seriously. “Bugs make quite a feast, I’m told. It even says so in this poem.”

“And which poem is that?” Lady Minerva asked, closing her book entirely and leaning slightly closer to him.

“Right here.” Lawrence picked up the book of poetry, opened it to the page he’d been struggling over, and recited from memory what he’d thought he’d read earlier. “Oh, bless the daring bugs of May that swing and flow on general breezes.”

Lady Minerva's mouth moved through contortions that most definitely hinted at her desperation not to laugh at his ridiculousness. "Are you quite certain it is not the darling buds of May that sway and flourish on gentle breezes?" she asked.

Lawrence felt heat rush up his neck to his face at being caught in his illiteracy, but he pretended nothing at all was wrong with what he'd said.

"If I were a toad living a rich and peaceful life in Alden's terrarium, I would sing verses more along the lines of 'Oh, delicious bug! How I adore the crunch of your wings and the squish of your tender body bursting its blood in my mouth!'"

Lady Minerva clapped her free hand to her mouth, practically pinching her lips to stop herself from laughing.

"I thought you might like that," Lawrence said. "It did contain blood, after all."

Lady Minerva snorted then coughed as her closed mouth prevented her laughter from freely escaping.

"See? You even sound like a frog now," he said. "I accept your appreciation."

She could not help herself then. She laughed freely for a moment before clapping her hand over her mouth again.

The sound was beautiful, and it was in complete contrast to the somber, even macabre presentation Lady Minerva always tried to make of herself. She really was a beautiful and spritely woman, despite her attempts to appear as though she were an animated corpse. Her complexion was too warm and her cheeks too pink for her to look like the vampires she so loved to read about, and while her hair was, indeed, dark, it was a rich shade of brown that caught the sunlight and ignited with flecks of auburn.

Lawrence suddenly found himself thinking that it did not make an ounce of sense that Lady Minerva had come so far in life without some half-mad suitor snapping her up and becoming her devoted slave. He could not see her as anything close to a submissive, Wessex wife, but Lawrence had seen and participated in enough in his life to know that not every man wished for a meek and bland wife who would look pretty and never bother him with her thoughts.

He had been searching for something that was the exact opposite of that expression of womanhood himself for a very long time, but without luck.

“I am not a frog, my lord,” Lady Minerva said, still grinning slightly, though the look had become more sly than anything else. “Find another poem to compare me to or I shall never forgive you.”

A twist of panic hit Lawrence’s gut. He glanced down to the book in his hand, wondering if he could somehow please Lady Minerva while still concealing his secret shame. His only hope was that she had never read that particular book of verse before.

“Certainly,” he said, lifting the book and flipping through the pages.

He scanned the pages he passed, willing the letters to come together into something he could read at least a few lines of. He was able to spot a word here and there that he thought he’d made out correctly, but nothing that formed itself into sentences of any sense. He would be forced to invent poetry at a moment’s notice and to deliver it convincingly.

The best way to do that, he reasoned, was to stick as close to the truth as possible.

“Ah, here we go,” he said, pretending to find something in the middle of the book.

“I am ready, my lord,” Lady Minerva said, watching him with a clever, calculating look.

Lawrence cleared his throat as sweat broke out down his back.

“Heaven knows little beauty as precious as a raven in the rain,” he said, thinking of Lady Minerva and willing the words to come to him. “She glistens where others see only gloom and thrills where others know only tragedy.”

He peeked over the top of the book at Lady Minerva, only to find her watching him with breathless intensity.

“Shall I go on?” he asked, part of him hoping she would say no.

But she said, “Yes, yes, by all means!”

Lawrence cleared his throat and stared blankly at the page in front of him again.

“From spire to spire she flies, free to dip and wheel and plunge as she sees fit,” he said, focusing his heart on his impressions of the unique woman watching him. “No simpering dove or chattering sparrow can conquer her. She holds her own amongst the court of goldfinches, shaming their gaudiness with her might. She is bold and proud. She is her own.”

That was all Lawrence thought he was capable of, so he lowered the book and closed it with a snap, lest Lady Minerva took it upon herself to snatch the tome away and see the supposed poem for herself.

“That was remarkable,” she said without reaching for the book. “I did not know Miss Banbury was capable of such metaphors.”

Lawrence's face flushed hotter. Of course Lady Minerva was familiar with the work of a poetess from Mercia. She had to know that he'd made up the poem himself. He only hoped that she did not guess the reason why.

He liked Lady Minerva. More than he liked most women, including several of the ones he'd sought to court. He did not think he could bear it if she put him off, like so many others had, because she thought him to be an imbecile.

"You should do a reading when we reach tonight's inn, my lord," Lady Minerva said instead of rejecting him or demanding to see proof of his poem. "I'm certain the good people of whichever village we will pass through later would enjoy being read to by a nobleman of your caliber."

Lawrence laughed, continuing to feign careless affability when really, the very thought had him quivering in his boots.

"I doubt anyone would want to listen to a tired, old artist attempt to spout poetry," he said. "If anyone were to gain a crowd of appreciative admirers, I am certain it would be you."

"I sincerely doubt it," Lady Minerva said.

Lawrence waited for her to go on, waited for his secret to be revealed, but instead, Lady Minerva raised her book once more.

As disappointed as Lawrence was not to continue conversation with the woman, he very much enjoyed the warm, almost cheeky glance she sent him over the top of her book. It was as if she was flirting with him before returning to the world of her vampires.

Lawrence smiled and settled back into his seat, opening the book of poetry to make

another effort at reading it. He couldn't make out a single word, of course, but he did enjoy staring at the shapes on the page while letting his thoughts drift off to imagine how Lady Minerva might do if she did stand up before an inn filled with travelers to recite poetry.

As wonderful as those thoughts were, between the rocking of the carriage, the coziness he felt, and the monotony of endless movement, Lawrence fell asleep.

He was awakened an indeterminate amount of time later by the feeling of the carriage stopping. As soon as he dragged himself to full wakefulness, he heard the sounds of people talking, animals kicking up a fuss, and dogs barking nearby. That, combined with the scent of chimney smoke, a stable, and supper cooking hinted to him that they'd arrived at the next coaching inn.

Lady Minerva had fallen asleep as well, so Lawrence took the liberty of touching her knee to shake her awake. He had to shake her twice, and when she was slow to pull herself out of slumber, Lawrence saw an opportunity to tease her and reached for Clarence on the seat beside her.

He held the skull in front of his face like a mask, and when Lady Minerva drew in a breath and pushed herself to sit, he said in a low, somber voice, "You have arrived in the land of the dead. Prepare yourself!"

Lady Minerva let out a small squeak, then snatched Clarence back from him, saying, "You wretched man," in a slightly groggy voice.

Her eyes glittered with mirth, and she had a difficult time keeping a smile off her lips once again.

Lawrence laughed, knowing he was laughing along with her, and shifted to open the carriage door. He stepped down with a groan, stretching his back and shaking his leg

before turning and extending a hand to help Lady Minerva down.

Lady Minerva moaned and stretched as well—Lawrence averted his eyes to where Clarence had been left on the carriage seat in order not to let his imagination run wild with the sounds his traveling companion made—and breathed in the air of the crossroads they'd come to.

"It seems we'll have a bit of choice in where we stay and dine this evening," Lawrence told her, glancing between the two large, comfortable-looking inns on either side of the road. "Shall we?"

He offered his arm to Lady Minerva and was surprised when she took it.

But when he headed towards the inn closest to where the carriage had stopped, Lady Minerva pulled him back.

"We cannot stay there," she hissed, eyes wide with alarm as she glanced at the inn.

"Whyever not?" Lawrence asked, confused. "It looks to be a right cheery place."

Lady Minerva shook her head, then stared at him in thought for a few seconds. Then she said, "No, we cannot stay there. See the sign?"

Lawrence swallowed awkwardly, then turned back to the inn. There was a sign on the door, but he'd assumed it was something having to do with the name of the inn, or perhaps a menu, or a schedule of coaches that traveled through the town. He could see it wasn't a timetable of any sort, but the more he squinted at it, the more jumbled the letters became for him.

"It says that the inn is under quarantine because of a fever," Lady Minerva whispered to him. "It urges us to seek out rooms in the inn across the way."

Embarrassment that skated closer to alarm shot through Lawrence. What might have happened if he'd ignored the sign and gone into the inn hosting a fever? He shuddered to think about the perils of putting Lady Minerva in danger like that.

"We'll check the other inn, then," he said with a smile that hid his shame over his shortcomings. "I only hope everyone else traveling this way hasn't had the same thought."

"It looks as though public coaches might be passing this town by entirely," Lady Minerva said as they crossed the street to the other inn after waiting for a speeding coach to rush past them.

"Do not be distressed, Lord Lawrence," Lady Minerva went on as they approached the inn's door. "If this inn has a fever raging within it as well, then I'm certain we will both catch it and die magnificently romantic deaths. Particularly if we are cast out to die in the stable or along the side of the road."

Lawrence laughed, and patted Lady Minerva's hand, then stepped ahead of her to open the other inn's door.

Inwardly, he worried. He was all but certain Lady Minerva was suspicious of his abilities, or his lack thereof. He just prayed that if she found out, she would not despise him. Not when he was coming to like her as much as he did.

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Five

Something was amiss with Lord Lawrence Godwin. Minerva was certain of it as she pulled back the bedclothes on the small bed in her room at the inn that night to make certain they had actually been cleaned for her use. She was reasonably satisfied with the room and the bed, though not quite as amused with the crack at the bottom of the wall that enabled her not only to hear Lord Lawrence shuffling about in the room adjacent to hers, but allowed her to see a sliver of light from his lamp once she snuggled into bed and blew out her own. The rooms had obviously been one at some point, but had since been divided by a hastily constructed wall to make more rooms and therefore more profit.

Minnie did not mind that so much. It was clever and enterprising, and as long as the room she'd been given was kept clean, its size was inconsequential. What bothered her more was the mystery of what could be wrong with Lord Lawrence.

Her first thought was that he was blind or partially blind, but had not told anyone. A sculptor did not need the use of his eyes if he was to practice his art.

Then again, Lord Lawrence worked in marble, which required the use of tools, unlike clay, and he mentioned that he sketched his subjects before committing them to stone. Additionally, his eyes were quite intent in their focus, both as he observed the countryside they passed through on their journey, and when he gazed at her.

Lord Lawrence had beautiful eyes. They were dark and mischievous, with crow's feet at the edges to show he'd spent most of his life so far smiling. They were inviting and had a sparkle to them that made him seem years younger, canceling out the

occasional wrinkle that dared mar his handsome face. In fact, when he glanced across the carriage to Minnie, grinning at something she'd said or plotting some silliness that he was about to say, he veritably shone with?—

Minnie let out a breath and brought her fist down on the bedcovers beside her. What was she doing, extoling Lord Lawrence's virtues when she should have been attempting to discern his faults? There was no point at all in her taking any sort of a fancy to the man. He was a means to an end, and though she would not treat him cruelly because of it, she had no interest in befriending him.

Except, she was certain Lord Lawrence would be a wonderful friend to have. Perhaps even more than a friend. It had been ages since she'd had a lover, and she quite missed some of the benefits of keeping a man in that way.

But no, she needed to puzzle out whatever was the matter with the man.

Her second thought was that he could not read. More than a few noblemen of her acquaintance had been lazy students, never bothering to learn what they felt they did not really need to know.

But then, she'd handed Lord Lawrence the book of poetry earlier, and he'd spent the better part of the afternoon's journey reading it. He'd even recited some of it to her, though he'd been silly and changed the words for comedic effect.

Then again, he'd misread Constance and Harland's gravestone a few days before, mistaking one name for another.

By the time Minnie fell asleep, she'd decided that either Lord Lawrence's eyesight was beginning to fail, but not so much that he could not function, or he somehow could not read particularly well.

In the morning, she was handed an ideal opportunity to test her theory about Lord Lawrence's reading comprehension.

"Here's the bill," the innkeeper said, sliding a list of items across the table where Minnie and Lord Lawrence sat breaking their fast as Silas prepared the carriage for departure. "I'll ask that you settle up now so you can be on your way without encumbrance."

"Very well," Lord Lawrence said, staring briefly at the bill before reaching into his pocket.

Minnie was alarmed by the total they were being charged, but it all made sense once she spotted several ridiculous items that were clearly added to the ones they'd legitimately incurred. She cleared her throat, staring hard at Lord Lawrence until he met her eyes.

Lord Lawrence looked back at her, puzzled. "Is something amiss?"

Minnie rested a hand on the bill and tapped her finger on the paper.

Beside the table, the innkeeper shuffled, looking nervous.

Lord Lawrence stared at the paper with a look Minnie was beginning to see meant he knew he was on the spot and he feared he would fail whatever test he was being given. He hummed and frowned, and if Minnie wasn't mistaken, his sudden, deep concentration was an attempt to make sense of what he saw on the page.

"Half these charges are not ours," she said, half for Lord Lawrence's benefit and half so that the innkeeper would know his ploy would not work. "We did not dine on the side of beef last night," she continued, putting her finger on the line-item in question, "and neither of us asked for additional bedding."

A flash of understanding lit Lord Lawrence's eyes, and he said, "Yes, of course." He glanced up at the innkeeper with his usual affable smile, but with stone in his eyes. "You seem to have calculated the charges incorrectly."

The innkeeper coughed and shuffled, then snatched the bill up from the table. "Er, sorry, m'lord. I must've brought you the wrong bill. I'll be right back."

"We know what charges we incurred," Minnie called threateningly after him for good measure.

Once the bill was properly settled, Silas pulled the carriage around, and Minnie and Lord Lawrence left the inn, resuming their places across from each other on the carriage seats. Minnie took Clarence from where he'd spent the night on the padded seat and rested him in her lap, stroking his parietal bone as if she were Kat stroking Napoleon.

Lord Lawrence laughed at the gesture and reached over to give Clarence a pat. "Next time, we should bring you into the inn with us," he addressed Clarence. "I doubt any innkeeper would dare attempt to cheat us with you sitting on the table."

Minnie smiled, appreciating Lord Lawrence's attempt at humor, but she saw it for what it was. Lord Lawrence was embarrassed, and he was attempting to cover that with his sunny disposition and easy manner.

It left Minnie wondering how much of his entire mien was but an attempt to compensate for what many might see as a serious defect.

They were quiet for most of the morning as they traveled on. For a blessed change, the sun had come out late the day before, and it shone down with unusual warmth for November. That carried with it the added advantage of drying out the roads a bit so that they could make good time for once.

There were a few spots of mud still, and just because the roads had dried did not mean they were not rutted and rough, sending Minnie, Lord Lawrence, and Clarence bouncing around the carriage a time or two, but all in all, the journey was swifter than the last week had been.

When they stopped for luncheon at a small town with a magnificent view of the verdant Wessex countryside, Minnie was deeply glad to be able to get out and breathe in the fresh air.

“Do you suppose the inn would let us take our meal outside so that we might eat it as a picnic?” she asked, scanning the area for a place they might sit already.

“What is this?” Lawrence teased her. “Has the dark and gloomy Lady Minerva Llewellyn decided that she enjoys the sunshine after all?”

Minerva let out a playfully irritated breath and swatted Lord Lawrence’s arm without thinking about it.

A moment later, she stiffened as the significance of such a physical gesture hit both of them. Lord Lawrence stared at the place on his sleeve where Minnie’s hand had been moments before, then glanced up to meet her eyes.

Of course, it wasn’t Lord Lawrence’s eyes that arrested Minnie’s attention. It was his expressive mouth. His lips were slightly parted, and they had the softest, pinkest look to them. Lord Lawrence was meticulous in his grooming, which meant the idea of kissing that beautifully shaped mouth filled Minnie with carnal feelings that coalesced in parts of her that had been entirely too squashed of late, and not just from traveling.

“I will inquire at the inn as to whether we can take our luncheon outside,” Lord Lawrence said, his voice hoarse.

Minnie hummed, cleared her throat, and nodded. “You do that,” she said. “I will investigate the wall over there to ascertain if it is suitable for sitting on while we eat.”

Without waiting for Lord Lawrence’s answer, she turned and marched off for the wall in question. It was far enough from the inn that they could have a bit of privacy but not so far that they would be in danger from any brigand that might try to accost them for being far from help. Besides that, Silas moved the carriage around to a spot near the wall where a trough waited so that the horses could drink and be fed.

The wall was sufficiently dry, so Minnie had a seat. She folded her hands in her lap and gazed out at the beautiful, sunny view. For once, she was glad for the wide rim of her bonnet. Most of the time, bonnets were a nuisance, but in this case, she was grateful for something to conceal her troubled thoughts from anyone who might pass them by.

It wasn’t that she was immune to love or the wish to be loved. Love was a beautiful thing, as she had observed in her friends who had recently married or would soon marry. It was just that she never imagined it happening to her. She had been raised to believe that a woman’s place was to raise children and keep a home, and she had been treated in a way commensurate to that belief from her earliest memory. It was not until she found the companionship of her dear friends at university that she had learned what love was, and that one did not need to be loved by the other leaves and branches of one’s family tree to experience it.

But falling in love with a man was a different prospect entirely. Men took what they wanted and gave very little in return. They demeaned and diminished women, as she had seen countless times in everyone from her mother to her sisters, and even among some of her old university friends who thought they had escaped the curse, only to have it fall on them when they fell in love and married someone whom they thought would be different.

Lord Lawrence most certainly seemed different, but if she gave her heart away, would that last?

She shook her head and heaved a heavy sigh. Her plan was already in place. She would escape to Sweden, making everyone believe she was dead in the process, and she would start a new life.

Although, perhaps it would be kind to at least inform Lord Lawrence of her plan. He might write to her in Stockholm under her new name.

“We’re in luck,” Lord Lawrence’s voice sounded behind her a few minutes later, just as she was sagging with morose feeling over the idea of only corresponding with Lord Lawrence instead of seeing him whenever her friends gathered with the family they’d married into. “They’ve put together a basket for us.”

Minerva turned to watch Lord Lawrence’s approach. She smiled when she saw his handsome form carrying a cloth-covered basket, like he was bringing her the most precious prize he’d just stolen from a sleeping dragon.

A moment later, her gaze slipped past Lord Lawrence, traveling on to the inn. She gasped, held a hand to her bonnet, and rolled over the low wall to crouch behind it so that she would be completely out of sight.

Owen had just stepped out of the inn.

“What new game is this?” Lord Lawrence asked, laughing as he reached the wall. “Are we to sit on the grass with the wall at our back, hiding away from the world for a while?” He sounded as if the prospect pleased him.

“Yes, yes, hurry,” Minnie hissed, sinking down even lower when Owen turned slightly in their direction.

He did not appear to see them, and a few seconds later, Minnie realized that Owen was speaking to a stable hand of some sort who had just brought a horse to him. There was enough activity around the inn's yard that Lord Lawrence standing at the wall with a basket did not stand out as particularly odd, but Minnie did not want to take any chances.

Lord Lawrence sat on the wall, setting the picnic basket beside him, and glanced back to the inn. "Is something wrong?" he asked, frowning in puzzlement.

He looked right at Owen as the stable hand helped him to mount, but as Lord Lawrence didn't know that what he was seeing was significant, his gaze traveled on to a pair of young ladies laughing as they walked up to the inn, another stable hand mucking out the long building where several carriages were parked, and then at Silas as he stood attending their horses.

Silas glanced around as well, then shrugged, and Lord Lawrence turned his attention back to Minnie.

"Is this a game or is something more serious afoot?" Lord Lawrence asked seriously.

Minnie delayed her answer as she watched Owen thank the stable hand, then nudge his horse forward. She didn't emerge from her hiding place until the odious man had ridden all the way down the lane, then disappeared behind a hill. Even then, she sat tensely on the wall across the basket from Lord Lawrence, convinced Owen might suddenly gallop back and cry out, "Ah ha! I found you at last!"

"Do you know that man on the horse?" Lord Lawrence asked, lowering his voice to a concerned tone.

Minnie swallowed and glanced guiltily to him. She could run from the truth or pretend her life as she knew it was not in danger, but judging by the look in Lord

Lawrence's eyes, he'd figured her out.

"I suppose you have a right to know," she sighed, distracting both Lord Lawrence and herself from the direness of the situation by pulling the cloth off the basket to see what they'd been given for luncheon.

"Yes, I believe I do," Lord Lawrence said, taking the cloth from her and spreading it on the top of the wall.

He then removed the meat pies and mugs of weak ale that the basket contained and set them out as if they were at a formal supper.

Minnie considered delaying by picking up one of the meat pies and taking too large a bite of it, but that would have just drawn things out.

"I do know that man," she said, trembling on the inside, worried that her confession would bring about the end of her journey with Lord Lawrence and her life of freedom. "His name is Lord Owen Scurloch, and...I was supposed to marry him."

Lord Lawrence, who had picked up a pie and taken a bite, nearly choked. He chewed a bit, swallowed, then reached for a mug to wash the bite down, then said, "Supposed to marry him?"

Minnie reached for her pie and picked it up sadly. "It was to be an arranged marriage," she specified. "I wanted no part of it. But my parents insisted they had grown weary of my spinsterhood, my father knows Owen's father, they have business dealings they want to solidify through marriage, and so I was to be the sacrificial lamb to advance their wants."

"That is barbaric," Lord Lawrence said with a serious frown.

Minnie blinked and paused in the middle of taking a bite of her pie.

She quickly finished the bite, swallowed, then asked, “You are not siding with my father on this matter?”

“Why would I?” Lord Lawrence asked, as if it were obvious. “No woman should be forced to marry against her will. I cannot imagine you ever doing such a thing.”

The uncertain sprouts of affection for Lord Lawrence in Minnie’s heart blossomed a little.

“I never would do such a thing,” she agreed, more strength in her voice. “My family was insistent, though. I attempted to leave Wales for the sanctity of London, but my mother caught on to my scheme. She kept me locked in the family castle until the day of my wedding.”

“She did not!” Lord Lawrence gasped, as if she were telling one of her stories instead of the absolute truth. “How is it that you are here with me now and not on your honeymoon?” he asked on.

Minnie smiled broadly. “I escaped from the church before the wedding,” she said. “I had my maid take my trunk to a certain carriage inn. I asked to be alone for a moment to pray before the ceremony, and as soon as my mother left me, I escaped through the vestry and raced to the inn just in time to catch the next coach to London.”

Lord Lawrence took another bite of his pie and studied Minnie while chewing. “On the one hand,” he said once he’d swallowed, “that sounds very much like the sort of thrilling tale you would invent.”

Minnie laughed humorlessly. “I can assure you, it is not invented.”

“That is what I was about to add,” Lord Lawrence went on. He took another bite of his pie, nearly finishing it, then continued. “On the other, that is also precisely the sort of thing I can imagine you doing if you were trapped in an unwanted union. You are not the sort to go meekly to the altar, weeping as you do, and to allow your fate to be decided by others.”

Minnie smiled, sitting straighter. “Why, Lord Lawrence, I believe that is the kindest compliment I’ve ever received.”

“It is sincerely meant,” Lord Lawrence said with a solemn nod, then popped the last of his pie into his mouth.

As he chewed, Minnie finished her tale. “Lord Owen had followed me to London. I cannot be certain if he has been following us since we set out or if he merely believes himself to be thwarted and is returning home to Wales, and that our convergence today is coincidence.”

“Let’s hope it’s the latter,” Lawrence said, smiling as he picked up his mug of ale.

“Either way,” Minnie sighed, picking a flake of pastry from her pie, “I cannot let him or anyone else who might inform my parents and ruin my life see me.”

“Of course not,” Lord Lawrence agreed. “And it is a lucky thing that we are about to veer off the road to Wales so that we might divert to the no longer Lady Wimpole’s estate.”

Minnie sat straight again and smiled. “I’d nearly forgotten our secondary errand,” she said. “Are we very close to formerly styled as Lady Wimpole?”

Lord Lawrence hummed and shrugged. “A day or two south of here ought to get us there. Either way, you have no need to fear being discovered and bundled off to

Wales.” He reached across and placed a hand on her thigh as it rested at an odd angle while she sat on the wall. “I will protect you from evil, Lady Minerva.”

Minnie’s heart swelled in her chest, and she feared that she looked like a sappy fool as she returned Lord Lawrence’s look. She’d never had a protector like Lord Lawrence before, and of all things, she quite liked it. He made her feel safe and valued, neither of which were emotions she was at all used to.

“And I will protect you, my lord,” she said, resting a hand on his arm when he withdrew his touch. “I will protect you from whatever trouble we might encounter in retrieving your statue from a lady whom I gather you were once romantically involved with?”

Lord Lawrence cleared his throat. “Er, yes, I was. A very long time ago.”

Minnie couldn’t imagine why any woman would throw Lord Lawrence over, which was partially why she suspected he would need protecting of one sort or another.

“We shall be a team of two, then,” she said, smiling. “Come what may.”

“Hear, hear,” Lord Lawrence said, then downed the last of his ale.

Minnie smiled. She had a feeling that the excitement of their journey had only just begun.

Six

Lawrence figured there was an even chance that Lady Minerva was either telling the truth or making the entire outlandish story of leaving an unwanted fiancé at the altar and escaping with the help of her maid on her wedding day. The tale was outlandish, but so was Lady Minerva.

If he was honest with himself, Lawrence liked Lady Minerva's outlandishness. He liked how different she was from any other woman of his acquaintance. He liked her vivid, often macabre imagination. He liked the easy way she carried herself and pleasing shape of her, even when she was squashed in a carriage seat, squirming to be comfortable as they jostled over bad roads.

He liked the soulfulness of her dark eyes and the softness of her hair, which always found a way of escaping from the careless chignon she kept it in while they traveled. He liked the porcelain softness of her skin, even if it had gained color since they set out from London. And her lips.... Well, her lips inspired thoughts in him that were best not thought of when they were stuck in such close proximity for so long.

The simple truth of it was that he liked Lady Minerva Llewellyn, and even more astounding, Lawrence was relatively certain that she liked him as well. There was something easy in her manner that had developed over the course of the last few days that made him nearly certain of her regard. It was in the way she now smiled at him freely whenever he gestured with her, the way she propped her feet up on the seat beside him sometimes so she could stretch out as they traveled, and the way she touched him so freely, almost without thought.

Yes, Lawrence was certain of it. He and Lady Minerva liked each other.

But with that knowledge came a terrifying feeling of doom. Things had always started off well for him in the past, but a woman's passion cooled all too quickly when she discovered he was not the man she thought he was. He was not perfect. He had glaring flaws. In the past, every time those flaws had come to light, the women he'd given his heart to would leave him, laughing as they went.

"My lord, are you quite alright?" Lady Minerva asked as they rolled across Wiltshire on their final approach to Tidworth Hall, where the former Lady Wimpole, now Lady Jessica Bellinger, lived with her husband, Lord Otho Bellinger.

"Hmm?" Lawrence glanced up from the hole he was boring into Clarence with his gaze. "Oh, yes," he said, smiling tightly.

"You and Clarence seemed to be in deep discussion," she said, eyeing him carefully, then glancing to her faithful skull companion, then back to Lawrence. "Is there something the two of you would like to share with me? I've found that while Clarence is an excellent listener, he is not much of a conversationalist."

Lawrence relaxed by a hair, and his smile relaxed with him. "I was just relating stories of days gone by to our hard-headed friend," he said.

Lady Minerva's lips twitched as though she were hiding a smile. "You know I love stories of days gone by."

Lawrence's smile faded. He needed to tell Lady Minerva the sad tale of his failed love affair with Jessica, but the humiliation of it all was too much.

Then again, Lady Minerva had been free with her own tales of woe, if they were to be believed.

“I was telling Clarence a tragic love story,” he said, figuring he owed Minerva the same sort of truth she had shared with him, but grateful to have Clarence as a buffer.

“They are my favorite sort,” Lady Minerva said, closing her book and setting it aside, as if indicating she was ready to hear all. “Clarence’s as well.”

Lawrence sighed. “It’s the story of a bright-eyed and eager young artist who spent a lovely summer in East Anglia, years ago, at the house of a certain Lord Wimpole.”

“I see,” Lady Minerva said, nodding seriously and shifting into a position to listen.

“The young artist was very much enamored of Lord Wimpole’s daughter,” Lawrence told his embarrassing story. “He fawned over the lady horribly and asked to draw and sculpt her.”

“And she allowed this?” Lady Minerva asked, one eyebrow raised.

“Oh, yes,” Lawrence said. “She welcomed it. The young artist had already gained something of a reputation for his work by that point, and it was considered an honor to be an artist’s muse.”

“Naturally,” Lady Minerva nodded.

Lawrence pinched his face and stared at Clarence again. “Many a lovely summer’s night was spent in passion that would not otherwise have been permitted or welcomed,” he continued. “And while the young artist was by no means a lothario or more than passingly talented in the techniques of the night—” Lady Minerva’s lips twitched with the urge to smile again, “—those nights held great promise.”

“I should say so,” Lady Minerva said, her eyes sparkling wickedly.

That nearly threw Lawrence from his story entirely. He suddenly realized that Lady Minerva had an impish streak in her. And if what his brothers and cousin had told him about her friends and other Oxford Society ladies was true, they were educated in the same sort of nocturnal activities as men were and engaged in them the same way gentlemen did.

But that was a subject best not examined at present.

“The young artist was quite certain that his proposal of marriage would be accepted,” Lawrence went on, wincing a little as he did.

“I take it the proposal was not accepted?” Lady Minerva asked, a hint of compassion in her voice.

“No, it was not,” Lawrence said flatly. “When the question was asked, the lady in question...laughed.”

“Laughed?” Lady Minerva’s voice was suddenly hard and incredulous.

“I was deemed an unsuitable suitor,” Lawrence confessed, lowering his head slightly. “Good enough to bed, but not enough to wed.”

“And what, pray tell, were the lady’s objections to the match?” Lady Minerva’s emphasis hinted that she did not think Jessica was a lady at all to refuse him. Lawrence liked her feisty defense of his honor, though.

“She objected to many things,” he went on. “I was not an eldest son. I did not, at the time, have an estate of my own. I was merely an artist.” There were other objections, the ones Lady Minerva already suspected about him, but he could not bring himself to admit that Jessica, and so many others, had thought him stupid.

“What does it matter whether you owned an estate or not?” Lady Minerva argued, enough fury in her eyes to face down a gorgon. “You are the second son of the Duke of Amesbury. Under Wessex law, that makes you the Earl of Amesbury. Did this woman not think it was good enough to be a countess?”

“East Anglians scoff at Wessex titles,” Lawrence admitted with a sniff. “They believe they are silly and confusing, not worth the paper they are written on. And she is a marchioness now.”

“I see,” Lady Minerva snapped. She crossed her arms over her chest and stared out the window. “That does not endear the woman to me at all.”

“You have not met her yet,” Lawrence said. “She can be very charming.”

Lady Minerva huffed. “Any woman who would throw you over because of a Wessex title and the absence of an estate is not someone I wish to meet. And if she thinks so little of Wessex titles, why did she marry a Wessex marquess?”

“That I do not know. And I do not think you have a choice but to meet her at this time,” Lawrence said, glancing out the window himself. “We have just arrived at Tidworth Hall.”

Lady Minerva blinked at him, then leaned closer to the window, gazing out at the landscape they now traveled through.

Tidworth Hall was one of the grander houses in that part of the Kingdom of Wessex. He’d visited Lord Otho years ago, well before he’d married Jessica after his first wife had passed. He remembered being impressed by Lord Otho’s interest in horticulture and landscaping. The grounds truly were magnificent, though it was difficult not to have beautiful grounds in such a green and perfect part of the kingdom.

He knew from a few instances of being forced to make polite conversation with Jessica at balls that she had taken it upon herself to renovate the interior of Tidworth Hall upon marrying Lord Otho, and that she had brought a significant amount of her art collection into the marriage with her. Which was why Loesser knew that she had the statue he'd carved for her in her possession still.

It was the vague invitation to come to Tidworth Hall for a visit at some point, likely delivered for appearance's sake at one of those balls, that Lawrence was counting on to gain them admittance to Jessica's house now.

"I am anxious about this visit," Lawrence admitted as Silas began to slow the carriage as the ground under the carriage turned to the sort of gravel that lined paths closer to great houses. "We will be arriving unannounced, so there is a chance we could be turned away."

Lady Minerva shook her head. "A woman of no longer actually Lady Wimpole's status would not turn away guest arriving at her door."

"It's Lady Jessica now, since she married Lord Otho Bellinger."

"Whatever her name is, I will make certain we are given shelter, for one night at least."

Lawrence drew in a breath, impressed and a little intimidated by Lady Minerva's certainty.

"Would you...." He started, then second-guessed himself, biting his lip. When Lady Minerva stared at him, he tried again with, "Do you think you could...." That didn't materialize into the question he wanted to ask either.

"Is there something I could do for you?" Lady Minerva prompted him.

Once again, he'd reached a point where there was nothing for it but to blurt everything out.

"When we are shown into the house and introduced to Lord Otho and Lady Jessica, do you think you could, that is, would it be alright for me to tell them that we are together?"

A slow smile of understanding spread across Lady Minerva's face. "You wish to show them that you are worthy after all, and that someone wants you, even if she did not."

"Yes," Lawrence said, puffing the single word out on a breath.

Lady Minerva leaned toward him just as the carriage lurched to a stop and rested a hand on his knee. The motion of the carriage meant her hand slipped a bit too far up his thigh.

"Of course you can tell them we're together," she said with a wicked smile that had Lawrence's breeches tightening. "I will follow along with whatever ruse you wish to perpetrate."

Lawrence met her smile with one of his own, relieved, and also a bit giddy that he had found a friend as willing to get into mischief as he was.

He did not, however, anticipate the sort of mischief that blurted out of him less than five minutes later, once they'd stepped down from the carriage and been shown by the butler into one of the house's magnificent parlors.

"Lord Lawrence." Lady Jessica entered the room dressed in the sort of day gown that one generally only wore when they were staying at home for the day and not expecting visitors, a look of shock in her eyes. "What a charming surprise to find you

here today.”

“I am terribly sorry that I did not write to inform you of our imminent arrival,” Lawrence said, bowing like a gentleman and taking Jessica’s hand once she came close enough to offer it.

And then the mischief happened.

“It is just that my wife and I were passing through on our way to Wales, and she has grown so fatigued, being in the delicate condition she is in, that as soon as I realized we were close to a friend’s estate, I assured her we would stop so that she could rest for a bit.”

The parlor went completely silent in the wake of his pronouncement.

Jessica pulled her hand away from his, her mouth opened as the smile she’d worn transformed into a look of shock.

But that shock was not nearly as pronounced as the look of stunned giddiness that Lady Minerva wore when Lawrence peeked, wincing, at her.

Lady Minerva looked as though she might dissolve into hysterics, but whether the good kind or the bad, Lawrence could not tell. A flush painted her cheeks, and her eyes were wide with surprise.

“Oh, dear,” Jessica said, shaking herself a little as she remembered her manners. “What a miserable condition to travel in, and with all the rain we’ve been having. Please do have a seat, Lady?—”

“Minerva,” Lady Minerva answered in a strained voice as Jessica hurried over to her side, like she might faint at any moment.

“Lady Minerva,” Jessica said, ushering Lady Minerva to one of the settees and helping her to sit. “Of course you can stay here and rest a while. Do you require tea? Cakes? Something heartier to fortify you?”

“Tea would be lovely,” Lady Minerva said.

And then the blessed woman pressed a hand to her stomach and added, “It is early days still, as you can see, but I have been so queasy, and tea helps.”

“Yes, I remember with my children,” Jessica said, fawning over Lady Minerva, as if the two of them were suddenly bosom friends. “From my first marriage, of course. They are both grown and married themselves now. Lord Otho and I have not been blessed with children, but I can imagine that if we were, I would wish for the kindness of old friends while traveling as well.”

Lawrence was utterly gobsmacked by the way the scene had begun to play out. It must have been the magic of women. When one of them found themselves in a spot of trouble, it was as if an army of them were waiting to rush to their assistance.

Jessica glanced to him as she stood and made her way to the door, as if to fetch a maid. “You are more than welcome to break your journey here for a night or two, Lawrence—er, Lord Lawrence. I will go and find Lord Otho to inform him we have company, and I will have the housekeeper prepare a room for the two of you.”

“Thank you, Lady Jessica,” Lawrence said somberly, crossing so that he could sit by Lady Minerva’s side, like any doting husband with an expecting wife would. “You are most kind.”

Jessica gave him one last, almost incredulous look before shaking her head and rushing out of the room.

A few moments of bubbling silence passed between Lawrence and Lady Minerva before Lady Minerva pivoted toward him, arched one eyebrow, and said, “Your wife?”

“Yes, I know,” Lawrence answered tilting his head down sheepishly.

“Your expecting wife?” Lady Minerva added, her tone rising an octave.

“I panicked,” Lawrence whispered, snapping his eyes up to meet Lady Minerva’s. “I could not think of anything else that would engender sympathy to the degree that we would need it to stay in the house long enough to bring up the topic of the sculpture.”

Lady Minerva’s lips twitched and her eyes danced with mirth. She cleared her throat and said, “Might I suggest asking Lady Jessica if she is still in possession of the sculpture in question and then inquiring as to whether you could have it back?”

Lawrence lowered her head again. “Er, we had a bit of a row over the sculpture when we parted ways,” he admitted. “I asked for it back then, and she told me that she would never part with it, that it was a gift, and that I was a blackguard for asking that a gift be returned.”

Lady Minerva made a snorting sound and clapped a hand over her mouth.

“And,” Lawrence added, glancing guiltily up at her again, “the, er, subjects of the sculpture are very distinctly her and me.”

Lady Minerva burst out with laughter. The sound was so sudden and forceful that the maid who had just entered the room, as if to inquire whether there was anything they needed while tea was being prepared, nearly tripped over her own feet.

“Oh, Lord Lawrence,” Lady Minerva giggled, resting a hand on his knee. “You have

painted yourself into quite a corner, haven't you. Or should I say that you've carved out a difficult niche for yourself?" She continued to giggle at her bad pun.

Lawrence found her laughter contagious, even though they had landed themselves in an extremely serious situation. "I suppose I have," he chuckled in return. He placed his hand over hers, leaned in closer, and whispered, "We should probably refer to each other by our given names, seeing as though we are married and you are with child, possibly twins."

That sent Lady Minerva into another peal of laughter. "You do beat all, Lawrence," she said.

There was a sparkle in her eyes that completely took Lawrence's breath away when they met his. Of all the women he could have asked to carry out an adventure filled with subterfuge like the one they were on now, Minerva was exactly the one he would have asked for. As mad as their reasons for being at Tidworth Hall were, he was certain he'd picked the right partner in crime for the visit.

The maid cleared her throat, drawing their attention.

"If you please, my lord, my lady," the smiling maid said, "Lady Jessica would like to send the footmen to retrieve your belongings from your carriage, and she would like to know what sort of accommodations your driver is used to."

"Yes, thank you," Lawrence said, sitting straighter, but keeping Minerva's hand in his. "Our driver, Silas, is used to good accommodations, so if there is an apartment in the stables or a room in the servants' quarters, I would be grateful if he could be given a place there."

"Yes, my lord." The maid curtsied, and as she turned to go, she said, "Lady Jessica will return in a moment, and tea will be served shortly."

“Thank you?” Minerva turned her thanks into an inquiry.

“Prissy, my lady,” the maid gave her name with a curtsy.

“Thank you, Prissy,” Minerva said. As soon as the maid left the room, Minerva added, “It’s always best to keep the servants on your side. One never knows when they will become useful.”

“If we have to pack our things in the middle of the night and escape from a church vestry, you mean?” Lawrence asked, grinning all over again.

“Precisely,” Minerva said, giving his hand a squeeze.

Lawrence now fully believed Minerva’s story about escaping her intended on the day of their wedding. He hoped that she still had that sort of daring and ingenuity. They were going to need it if the madness he could feel was about to begin came to pass.

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Seven

Minnie was surprisingly unbothered about sharing a room with Lawrence under Lady Wimpole who had transformed into Lady Jessica's, roof. They'd spent the last few days in such close proximity inside the carriage that Minnie was already used to the quirks of Lawrence's character. She'd grown accustomed to the way he hummed and grunted, as if having a conversation with himself, when he was thinking, the way his hands twitched like they wanted to be holding sculpting tools when he became excited about something, and about the ridiculous way he smiled at almost anything, whether it warranted smiling or not. She appreciated his consideration for Clarence, who had been brought out and placed in one of the room's windows with a view of the front drive, as well.

What she was not at all used to was changing out of traveling clothes, bathing, and donning a gown that was suitable for supper, all while Lawrence was so nearby she could hear him shuffling around. He, too, needed to bathe and change, so Prissy and a veritable army of footmen had brought up not one, but two brass tubs, placing one in the dressing room and one in the main bedroom.

At least they had not been asked to share a tub. Minnie was able to cast a great deal of social propriety aside to maintain their ruse, but sharing a bath with Lawrence crossed her limits.

Although, under the correct circumstances, perhaps after a bit too much wine, she could most definitely see herself bathing simultaneously with Lawrence. Bathing, in her experience, was a lovely prelude to other things.

She shook her head and muttered to herself, not unlike the way Lawrence was wont to do, as she scrubbed the travel dirt from her body, then stood from her bath as quickly as she could. It would do no good for her to let her imagination wander down those particular paths.

As much as it might have wanted to.

“I say, you are looking lovely,” a dinner-dressed Lawrence greeted Minnie when she finally emerged from the dressing room. His eyes glittered and his mouth pinched for a moment before he continued with, “Pregnancy agrees with you.”

Minnie found herself flushing at the ridiculous compliment as her heart lifted lightly in her chest. “You wretched beast,” she said, approaching him as he stood near the dressing table. “You are responsible for my condition.”

Lawrence laughed, and Minnie had meant it as a jest, but it was also true. Lawrence was the reason she had felt so happy and engaged throughout the sometimes arduous journey from London. She hadn’t thought about her plot or her intended destination for days, which had come as a surprise, since it had once been all she’d been able to think about.

“Would you be so kind as to do up the ties at the back of my gown?” she asked, turning her back to Lawrence and gathering up her loose hair, which she’d just washed, despite knowing that would leave it damp for supper, and holding it so her neck was exposed as well as her back.

“Certainly,” Lawrence said with a somewhat husky version of his usual cheer.

As soon as Lawrence stepped behind her and reached for her gown’s ties, Minnie became well aware of the reasons Lawrence’s voice had taken on the quality it had. All he did was fasten the ties of her gown so that it fit the way it was meant to. He did

not dally overly long or take any sort of liberties. But his sheer proximity, the way his fingers moved across a part of her he had never touched before, never had a reason to touch, and the sheer, warm presence of him behind her had Minnie feeling as though he'd caressed her back and brought his lips to the pale skin of her neck.

She drew in a breath, nearly shivering when that caused Lawrence's touch to become just a bit heavier. It was alarming to discover that she wanted his hands to venture away from her gown, to slide over her shoulders and across her collarbone. She wanted to feel the slight callouses on his fingers from his artistic work brush across her décolletage, and perhaps lower. More alarming still, she closed her eyes and fantasized about him clasping his large hand around her neck so that he was able to cut off her air and hold her very life within his power.

Lawrence cleared his throat a moment later, drawing Minnie back to the moment. She started and blinked as she came out of her fantasy, realizing the sensation between her legs was not a remnant of her bath.

"We should get a wiggle on," Lawrence said with cheer that was decidedly false. "I'm certain we were expected at supper ages ago."

Minnie turned slowly to look at him. His face was flushed and his eyes had gone dark with desire. If that was not enough of an indication of his state of mind, his breeches were noticeably tented.

"Let me put my hair up first," she said, her voice coming out as rough and passion-tinted as his. "It will only take a moment."

She moved to sit at the dressing table, reaching for her hairbrush, which had been unpacked earlier, with a shaking hand. The carnal draw toward Lawrence was so strong that were they in an inn instead of his former beloved's home, she feared she would have done something about it.

As it was, she took her time brushing out her damp hair and fastening it into a simple chignon. She was capable of styling her hair much more quickly, but she took her time to allow Lawrence's state to settle into something presentable for supper.

It took a desperately long time.

"There," Minnie said at last, once Lawrence had finally stopped exacerbating the situation by watching her stroke the brush through her long, dark locks and had taken himself to the other side of the room to look out the window with Clarence. "I think that will do."

"It will do nicely," Lawrence said, smiling as he came over to take her arm.

Still, the tension between them bristled as they left their room and headed downstairs. Minnie tried not to look at him, tried not to dwell on how handsome and desirable Lawrence was, or how natural it felt for her to call him by his given name. She tried not to think about a great many things, but failed.

All of that changed, however, the moment they joined Lord Otho and Lady Jessica in the dining room.

"I remember how long it took to compel myself to do anything when I was in your condition," Lady Jessica said as they all took their seats, her smile false and her impatience obvious.

"I did not want to rush my darling," Lawrence said with an adoring smile that wasn't as false as it should have been. "She requested that her feet be rubbed, and since there is nothing I would not do for my goddess, Minerva...."

Minnie nearly broke into laughter as she sat across the table from Lawrence.

More importantly, she noticed the quick pinch of jealousy in Lady Jessica's eyes, along with the sheer incredulity in Lord Otho's expression.

Perhaps that was Lawrence's game. Perhaps he merely intended to show Lady Jessica what she had missed by throwing him over.

She tried not to think of that horrific possibility as well as the footmen raced around the table with the first course of the night.

"I hope you do not mind turtle soup, my dear," Lord Otho told Minnie with a look that was a bit too friendly. "It is my understanding that women with your affliction do not always take to the food they are served."

Minnie answered with a completely straight face, "I have found that instead of developing an aversion to food, I have developed quite a craving for it, my lord."

She picked up her spoon and dove into the delicious soup.

"I am curious," Lady Jessica said stiffly, glancing to Lawrence. "Where did the two of you meet? The last I had heard of you, Lord Lawrence, you were tucked away in the country somewhere, playing with clay."

On second thought, Lady Jessica's sour disposition might have been enough to put Minnie off her food.

"I have spent a good deal of time at my country house near Winchester, yes," Lawrence answered the question with more grace than it deserved. "But I am working in the medium of marble these days rather than clay, as I am certain you remember."

"We met when dear Lawrence rescued me from a ravening band of highwaymen as I traveled from my home in Wales to London," Minnie said, a bit louder than she

needed to.

Silence thudded down over the table for a moment, likely both because of Minnie's outburst and Lawrence's reminder that Lady Jessica was most definitely familiar with his work.

"Is that so?" Lady Jessica asked, which could have answered both statements, turning from Minnie to Lawrence.

Lawrence cleared his throat, his mouth pulling to one side for a moment. "It is," he answered at last, meeting and holding Minnie's eyes across the table. "The highwaymen were most fearsome, but my darling Minerva was attempting to hold them off with a particularly large hat pin."

Minnie nearly barked with laughter at the gauntlet Lawrence had thrown down for her.

"It was an instrument designed to resemble a hat pin, but it was, in fact, a small dagger," she said.

"Minerva is a master swordswoman," Lawrence said, almost as an afterthought. "She trained with the Chevalier d'éon in Paris as a young woman."

Minnie nearly snorted. She supposed she shouldn't be surprised that Lawrence knew of the Chevalier d'éon, who lived half his life as a man and half as a woman, but was regarded as one of the most brilliant spies of the turn of the last century.

Lord Otho and Lady Jessica didn't seem to know what they were talking about, and in more ways than just the chevalier.

"You...fought off brigands with...a hat pin?" Lady Jessica asked, her soup spoon

suspended over her bowl, dripping greenish soup.

“She tried,” Lawrence said, setting his spoon down as he finished his soup. “She was on the verge of being defeated and subjected to the inappropriate attentions of the brigands when I stumbled across the scene and rescued her.”

It took everything Minnie had not to clap a hand to her mouth to prevent her laughter. To hear the way Lawrence told it, the highwaymen merely wanted to use the wrong fork at supper with her.

“One of them had already run me through,” she said, meeting and holding Lawrence’s gaze, and being as vague about the potential double meaning of her words as she could be, “but Lawrence fought the men off, scooped me into his arms, and carried me off to a nearby gamekeeper’s cottage on a local estate.”

“Would that be Lord Elan Dunbridge’s estate?” Lord Otho asked, absorbed in the story, but for all the wrong reasons.

“Er, no, I was closer to Romsey,” Lawrence said, nearly fumbling.

“It could have been the moon, for all I was aware.” Minnie tugged the story back into her control. “My wounds were grievous, but Lawrence was attentive and quick-minded in my care.”

“Lawrence?” Lady Jessica balked. “Quick-minded?” She let out a peal of sharp laughter and tipped her head back as the footmen served the next course. “Now I am certain you are inventing stories merely for entertainment.”

Lawrence lost his bright, passionate look, but instead of turning to fury, like Minnie’s mien had, he lowered his head far too sheepishly and studied the fish he’d just been served.

“I can assure you, everything I say is the absolute truth,” Minnie said in clipped tones. “Lawrence rescued me from tragedy and certain death. Without him, I do not know what I would do.”

She glanced back across the table to Lawrence, who lifted his head and met her eyes.

The sudden, warm and grateful smile that seemed to encompass Lawrence completely made Minnie’s heart skip within her chest. With that came the overwhelming desire to defend him from whatever social brigands attempted to attack him. She was more certain with every minute that passed that Lawrence had been attacked far too frequently in the past.

If it was the last thing she ever did, she would defend Lawrence against anyone who dared to turn their nose up at him or disparage him until her dying day.

Except that in just over a week, she would be on a boat bound for Ireland, then Stockholm to begin a new life.

“Do you not enjoy your fish, Lady Minerva?” Lady Jessica asked once the dish had sat in front of Minnie for a full minute without her touching it. “It is a specialty of our cook. He trained in Paris before the troubles there. It was quite a coup for us to hire him, as he swore he wanted nothing more than to retire.”

The rest of the supper conversation revolved around the improvements Lady Jessica had made to the house upon her marriage to Lord Otho, and around the servants she had hired. Lord Otho spent a fair amount of time lamenting the servants he’d lost in the past, though by the sound of things, they’d all quit due to Lord Otho’s heavy hand and demanding ways.

The food was excellent, though, and by the time supper was over, Lawrence and Lord Otho retired to smoke pipes and drink port, and Lady Jessica brought Minnie into her

favorite sitting room for tea, Minnie had calmed down sufficiently to endure the after-supper moment.

“I am deeply appreciative of your hospitality,” she managed to say, scrambling to find ways to help Lawrence in his mission. “I do so admire the way you’ve decorated your home. Do you, perhaps, have any of my dear husband’s work in your collection?”

The speed with which Lady Jessica’s face turned stony and pink flushed her cheeks told Minnie that the woman did, indeed, still have the sculpture she and Lawrence were seeking in her possession.

But Lady Jessica’s answer was, “I do not know if you are aware of the sort of art Lawrence creates, but it is not suitable for public display.”

“It is very nice, though,” Minnie said, sipping her tea coquettishly and leaving the door open for Lady Jessica to giggle and titter and say naughty things to her.

Lady Jessica did the opposite. She sat stiffer and set her tea down. “It is not appropriate,” she repeated.

A different sort of curiosity struck Minnie. “Is that why you threw him over when he sought your hand in marriage?” she asked, arching one eyebrow and pulling the proverbial hat pin from her head.

Lady Jessica’s eyes widened a bit before narrowing into a different sort of understanding. “He told you, then?” she asked.

“He did,” Minnie said, finishing her tea and setting the cup down. “Lawrence and I share complete openness and honesty with each other.”

“Yes, well, that does not surprise me,” Lady Jessica said, tilting her head up slightly so that Minnie could see her flared nostrils.

Minnie swallowed her impulse to attack Lady Jessica for what might have been a slight. “You refused him because of his artwork?”

Lady Jessica laughed. “No, I refused him because he is the stupidest man in the Kingdom of Wessex, and in all of Britannia.”

Hatred so sharp that it sent bile up the back of Minnie’s throat gripped her. “I beg your pardon?” she asked in a harsh whisper.

“Surely, you must have noticed,” Lady Jessica said, her manner relaxing. Now she wanted to play the sister sharing wise counsel? “The man is pleasing to look at, and as I am certain you know, he has certain skills that make him decidedly tempting.”

Minnie went hot all over. She did not know, but after dressing for supper, she suspected. Now she desperately wanted to know everything.

“He is as simple as a child,” Lady Jessica went on. “One who never learned his letters. He cannot converse with any ease or grace, and he has embarrassed himself on so many occasions that I have lost count. He is silly.”

Minnie blinked and stared incredulously at the woman. Could not converse with ease and grace? Had they not just been sitting at the same table as Lawrence followed her in spinning the most delectable tale of excitement and adventure the dull woman before her had ever heard?

But then, Minnie was beginning to see that Lady Jessica’s idea of good conversation was probably merely parroting the same things that everyone else in the ton said. Lawrence did not care for such things, so she likely thought that stupid. And she must

have discovered Lawrence's difficulties with the written word.

"It is as if we know two different Lawrences," Minnie said, pretending everything was amenable between the two of them. "I find Lawrence to be jolly and clever. I have never found myself bored in his company or wishing to escape before I perish from dullness. If you will excuse me, Lady Jessica," she said standing before her hostess could fit a word in, "I believe I will retire for the evening."

"Oh! I, er...." Lady Jessica tried to rise to bid Minnie goodbye, but she was too late and too clumsy.

Minnie swept out of the room with a scowl, indignant that someone as shallow and uninteresting as Lady Jessica could be bold enough to criticize Lawrence. All she had managed to talk about, nearly from the moment they'd arrived at the house, was her blasted improvements to the house and how brilliant she thought she was because of them.

As it happened, Minnie met Lawrence coming from the other hallway as she entered the front hall and approached the stairs. He, too, wore a scowl that hinted his conversation with Lord Otho had been just as frustrating as hers with Lady Jessica.

"I take it you've no wish to remain in company with our host?" Minnie asked as they met at the foot of the stairs and headed up together, shoulder to shoulder, walking in step.

Lawrence huffed an incredulous laugh and shook his head. "I've no wish to converse with a man who speaks of women as if they are horses."

Minnie could only imagine what that meant.

"It is lucky for him that he has married a woman who resembles a horse, both in

appearance and manner,” Minnie grumbled.

Lawrence peeked sideways at her, an amused grin spreading across his face. “Is that what you think of my former object of desire?”

Minnie shook her head as they reached the top of the stairs. “I do not know what you ever saw in her.”

Lawrence smirked. “If we find that statue you’ll see.”

That caused Minnie to burst into a wide smile as they neared their room. “I am determined to find your artwork, now more than ever,” she said, keeping her voice low. “And I no longer have even the slightest qualm in stealing it once we do. In fact, I think we should steal a few other things from these odious people while we’re at it. They certainly deserve it.”

Lawrence laughed as he stepped ahead and reached for their door handle. “Good gracious, woman,” he said, his eyes dancing with affection. “I’m beginning to wonder if I didn’t rescue the highwaymen from you instead of the other way around.”

Minnie laughed as they stepped into their room. “Either way, you were heroic,” she said.

Without thinking, she lifted to her toes and kissed Lawrence’s cheek.

The effect was scintillating. Lawrence twisted to face her, half catching her in his arms. Minnie didn’t pull back, which left them staring into each other’s eyes at close proximity.

More than that, Minnie was highly aware of the large, soft, well-appointed bed just behind him. It would take nothing at all for them to fall into that bed, where they

could enjoy each other immensely, all night long.

“We should make a plan to search the house while we still can,” she said instead, her voice rich and gruff with desire.

“You are right, of course,” Lawrence agreed, the heat in his eyes palpable. “We must act before it is too late.”

Minnie wondered if he was still talking about the statue.

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Eight

The only thing more difficult than breaking away from his sudden closeness to Minerva so that the two of them could begin their efforts to comb Tidworth Hall in search of his sculpture was when Lawrence had to share a bed with Minerva that night without touching her.

The search came first, of course. The two of them waited what they hoped would be a sufficient amount of time to allow Jessica and Lord Otho to retire for the evening before opening the bedroom door and poking their heads out into the hall, Minerva lower down and Lawrence a foot or two above as they peeked simultaneously.

They made a valiant first effort, but before they could do more than creep down to the end of the hall, near the top of the stairs, they were discovered by one of the upstairs maids who was intent upon her nightly duties.

“Is anything amiss, my lord?” she addressed Lawrence with wide, startled eyes. “Is there something I could fetch for you, my lady?” She turned her attention to Minerva.

“No, no, nothing is amiss,” Minerva replied, perhaps a bit too quickly, her voice pitched suddenly high.

“My dear wife finds it useful to take a brisk walk before bedtime,” Lawrence blurted nearly before Minerva had finished. “And since it has already grown dark and the weather is inclement, I’ve decided to accompany her on a stroll of the upstairs hallway.”

“Yes,” Minerva agreed enthusiastically. “I find that a walk before bed aids in my digestion.”

“As you please, my lady, my lord,” the maid said, curtsying awkwardly.

As she went about her duties, she eyed the two of them warily over her shoulder.

Lawrence swept Minerva along, proceeding to the end of the hallway, as if they truly were interested in a walk. They made an initial effort to search for the statue on that upstairs hallway as they did, but after opening doors into empty guestrooms and inadvertently startling two of the footmen in one of those rooms as they appeared to be about to engage in an activity Jessica and Lord Otho most definitely would not approve of, Lawrence deemed it too dangerous to continue the search.

“We will have to try again in the morning,” he whispered, disappointed, as he whisked Minerva back to their own guestroom. “I do not think it would be wise for us to be found out at this late hour.”

“Yes,” Minerva said with a hum. “We need more information before we can make an efficient search in any case.”

“Agreed,” Lawrence said as they reached their room and stepped back inside.

The night that followed was one of the longest and most painful of Lawrence’s life. It was easy enough for Minerva to undress in the seclusion of the dressing room, but because of the construction of her gown, Lawrence was required to loosen a few ties and help begin Minerva’s process of disrobing. That set his imagination off down a dangerous path.

Matters were not helped at all when he slipped out of his own clothing and into his nightshirt, which was entirely insufficient when it came to giving him the feeling of

still being clothed as he climbed into the large bed beside Minerva. Her own nightgown in no way made him feel like she was still dressed either.

“Goodnight, Lawrence,” Minerva said over her shoulder as she stretched to blow out the candle she had placed on the small table on her side of the bed. “Sleep well.”

“Goodnight, dear wife,” Lawrence replied, pretending that he was merely being silly and not giving voice to the niggling wish at the back of his brain. “Do not fall prey to highwaymen in your sleep.”

Minerva laughed aloud, then settled into the comfortable bed with her back to him.

Lawrence twisted to the side to turn down the lamp on the table beside him, then flopped to his back, willing himself to sleep. He needed to sleep. He needed the comfort of oblivion, where he did not remember the sound of Minerva’s laughter, or the mischief that had been in her eyes during supper, or the way she’d kissed his cheek in her excitement earlier. He needed to wrap himself in nothingness so that he did not think ahead to everything the future might hold, or so that he did not contemplate the immediate moment he existed in, where he lay in bed with Minerva.

He could not do any of that, though. Sleep eluded him almost entirely as the night wore on. Worse still, he did not even dare to toss and turn to relieve the growing aches in his body as he did not want Minerva to know he was still awake. She seemed so still and peaceful, her breathing low and regular, but Lawrence was convinced that the slightest twitch on his part would pop her to wakefulness, at which point he would be forced to confess every reason he could not so much as shut his eyes.

It occurred to him deep into the night, when Minerva coughed suddenly and shifted that she might be caught in the same sort of sleepless throes that he was, but Lawrence did not dare to ask Minerva if she was still awake. Instead, he turned onto his side with his back facing her, a position which felt far safer, and watched the

dying embers in the fireplace until his eyelids grew heavy and he drifted off.

It felt as though no time at all had passed when the maid came in to relight the fire in the early hours before dawn. Lawrence used the excuse of the domestic interruption to twist to his other side, where he found Minerva lying on her back, staring up at the ceiling.

A small smile touched the corners of his mouth. It was a comfort to see that he was not the only one suffering from an inability to let go of the waking world.

When the maid finally left and silence reigned again, Minerva turned her head to him and said, "I've had an idea," as if their conversation from the night before had never ended.

"I am all ears," Lawrence said, trying not to yawn or give any indication of how exhausted the sleepless night had left him.

Minerva sat up, hugging the bedclothes around her. "We ask Lady Jessica for a tour of the house," she said.

Lawrence sat as well, making certain the bedcovers on his side were tucked thickly around his waist just in case. "A tour of the house?" he asked.

"Yes." The light in Minerva's eyes said she had given the matter much thought and was excited for her idea. As always, Lawrence found that excitement contagious. "Your Lady Jessica is quite enamored of the efforts she's made to renovate Lord Otho's house," Minerva went on.

"She is not my Lady Jessica," Lawrence pointed out, feeling that fact keenly.

Minerva made a slight sweeping gesture with one hand, as if it did not matter. "I am

certain she will show us every room in this blasted house. If she has your statue on display, we will certainly see it. Even if she's placed it on a high shelf or behind a curtain or some such nonsense."

Lawence nodded. "I believe you are correct."

"Once we've seen the statue, it will be a simple thing to go back later, when we are given some time on our own, to take it away to the carriage for when we depart."

"Good thinking," Lawrence said, perking up a bit. "If necessary, we can employ Silas to assist us as well."

"We most definitely could," Minerva said, beaming. "I believe this mission will require minimal effort, once Lady Jessica has given us a tour of the house, and we will be in possession of our prize and on our way before nightfall."

Lawrence reached for Minerva's hand, then squeezed once she gave it.

Of course, that small gesture caused very large feelings within his chest, and a bit lower.

He ignored them all as he rose from bed and began his preparations for the day ahead of them, carefully keeping his eyes averted when Minerva did the same.

The trouble was, Minerva was in no way correct when she'd assumed that after a tour of the house, they would find the statue and be on their way.

"And this is the small library," Jessica told them three hours into the interminable tour, as Lawrence's stomach was beginning to protest with hunger, because the tour had delayed luncheon. "As you can see," Jessica went on, standing in the center of the room and gesturing to one of the walls, as if she were a guide in a particularly

stuffy museum, “no expense was spared to import the hand-printed paper from the finest manufacturers in Northumbria.”

“Yes,” Lawrence said with a stiff nod, “I have heard that Northumbria is known for its wallpaper manufacturing.”

“The Kingdom of Northumbria has been quick to employ many of the new manufacturing techniques that steam power has brought us,” Jessica said. Then, rather than launching into what could have been an interesting discussion of advances in industry over the last decade or so, she stepped over to one of the bookshelves and said, “Lord Otho has an immense collection of religious texts and books on moral improvement. I have found them quite edifying since our union several years ago.”

By the tone of Jessica’s voice, she found them, and perhaps Lord Otho, as dull and tedious as the entire, hours-long tour had been.

“Do you collect any artwork at all, Lady Jessica?” Minerva asked as they moved on into the large library, which was adjacent to the small one with a door between them. “Or have your and Lord Otho’s collecting interests mostly been of a literary ilk?”

Jessica paused to look at Minerva with a frown as they stopped in front of a huge, stone fireplace in the large library, over which was hung what appeared to be a larger than life portrait of Lord Otho as a young man. He’d looked just as dull in his youth as he did in his old age.

“I am not entirely certain I approve of art,” she said, sending Lawrence a short look. “In my experience, that which is tasteful has already been claimed by museums throughout the New Heptarchy, and that which remains for private consumption should never have been undertaken in the first place.”

Again, she sent Lawrence a look that had him flushing hot and wishing he hadn’t

dressed in so many layers that morning. Her words were clearly an admonishment for the very work of art he and Minerva were seeking out now. Though as he recalled, Jessica had had an entirely different opinion on the matter as she'd splayed naked across a settee for him while he sketched her form for the sculpture he later carved.

"I prefer landscapes myself," Minerva said, imitating Jessica's snobbish demeanor in a way Lawrence was certain Jessica did not catch onto. "Particularly rainy ones. Preferably with a graveyard in the scene."

Lawrence fought not to smile as he remembered the two of them standing in the graveyard near the inn more than a week ago. He had never seen the charm of the bleak until that moment, but now he craved grey clouds as much as he craved sunshine.

Minerva glanced to him with her chin tilted up and her mouth set in a straight line, like Jessica's was. That imitated expression melted away into something much warmer and more vibrant the moment their eyes met, however. Try as he might, Lawrence could not hide the giddy smile of delight at Minerva's playfulness, past and present.

The sweet moment was interrupted as Jessica's maid slipped into the library with them.

"If you please, my lady," the maid said, dropping an anxious curtsy.

"Yes? What is it, Prissy?" Jessica snapped.

The maid swallowed and said, "Cook would like to know when you plan to take your luncheon, as he's made soup and it's getting cold."

"When we are ready," Jessica said, as if the poor maid were trying her patience.

“Yes, my lady,” Prissy answered with a half sigh and another curtsy.

As she turned to go, Minerva stepped after her. “If it would not be too much trouble,” she said, glancing back at Lawrence with light in her eyes, “could you show me to a convenience or water closet of some sort, if Tidworth Hall has such a thing?”

Again, Lawrence fought not to smile. Minerva was most definitely up to something.

“Certainly, my lady,” Prissy said, smiling as she left the library with Minerva.

Lawrence watched until they were gone, then turned to Jessica with a happy smile.

That smile left him a moment later when Jessica reached for his arm to lead him over to a small couch, saying, “I am glad we have this moment alone, Lawrence. There is something I’ve hoped I would be able to say to you.”

Twin jolts of hope and dread struck Lawrence simultaneously, leaving him confused and easy for Jessica to lead to the couch. On the one hand, he hoped she might reveal the location of the statue if they were alone. On the other, which surprised him even more, he dreaded what might happen if it transpired that Jessica still maintained an affection for him and wished to pursue him.

That notion was proven false moments later, once they were seated, when Jessica fixed Lawrence with a firm look and said, “This may come as a strange question, but are you entirely attached to your lady wife?”

Lawrence blinked at Jessica, no idea what she meant by a question like that.

His startlement made him slow to answer, and as had happened many times in the past, Jessica lost patience with the time it took for him to gather his thoughts and pushed on before he could speak.

“Lady Minerva is extraordinarily odd,” she said, frowning as if she was sharing an important, if unfortunate, truth. “I do not believe you have done yourself any favors by attaching yourself to her.”

“I beg your pardon?” Lawrence asked, an iron knot forming in his stomach.

“She is strange, Lawrence,” Jessica said, as if she were speaking to a child. “I have been informed that she is in possession of a human skull that she treats as a pet.”

“Yes, Clarence,” Lawrence said with a frown.

Jessica blinked at him. For a moment, she eyed him as though he were a dangerous animal who might bite. Then she rested a hand on his forearm, and said, “You were never an adequate judge of character, but I think you may have done yourself a real harm by marrying a woman like that.”

The way she spoke, with such sourness and arrogance, twisted the knot in Lawrence’s gut. “Lady Minerva is unusual, to be sure,” he said.

Before he could continue to sing Minerva’s praises and to say she was the most beautiful and interesting woman he had ever known, Jessica rushed over him with, “Yes, precisely.” She patted his arm sharply. “You are a fool, Lawrence,” she said as if stating fact. “Everyone knows that you border on being simple. I did not think you would do something so foolish as to marry a madwoman, though. Is it a matter of income? Is she an heiress of some sort who has provided you with an ample dowry? Because the appeal cannot be in her person or appearance. Who is she mourning at any rate? A father? A mother? Her skin is so pale and there is nothing fashionable at all about her carriage.”

Lawrence was stunned speechless by the viciousness of Jessica’s observations. He could only sit there, gaping at the woman for being so catty.

Which, of course, only furthered Jessica's belief that he himself was mentally incompetent.

"Really, Lawrence," she said, shaking her head and withdrawing her arm. "I would have thought that your family would take better care of you. You are not so far gone as to be in need of an asylum, but surely one of your kinsmen would offer you a place in their house so that they could watch over you."

Lawrence merely stared at Jessica. He was as incredulous as she was, but for a drastically different reason. He could not believe that he had ever found the woman desirable in any way. Worse still, it was not as though he'd never noticed her unkindness and sharp dealings with others before. He'd known she was opinionated and prickly, but she had once been beautiful, and he'd let himself be swayed by that.

Now, however, not even Jessica's fading beauty could persuade him to have any feelings toward her but revulsion. She was nothing like Minerva, that much was certain. Minerva may have been approaching forty and no longer in the bloom of youth, but she was still beautiful. Perhaps more so for the touches of silver that had already found their way into her dark hair.

Minerva was lively and clever. She did not care what others thought of her or what the ton dictated a woman of fashion should be like. She was unapologetically herself, and Lawrence adored her for it. He adored her wild and sometimes macabre imagination. He found her conversation constantly surprising and filled with new ideas. He imagined that even were she twice as old as she was now, she would be one of those timeless beauties whose inner glow defied every wrinkle and whisp of silver that changed her appearance from what it once had been.

"I am happy," he said at last, forming the wealth of thoughts running riot in his head and heart into those simple words. "I am happier than I have ever been when I am with her."

It came as a gentle shock, but not an unwelcome one. His luck with love had always been terrible bordering on comedic, but somehow, he'd suddenly stumbled into perfection.

Jessica did not share his view of the situation. She fixed him with a sympathetic smile, as though he'd just admitted he was afflicted with consumption and his days were numbered. "Of course you are, dear," she said, patting his arm condescendingly.

Lawrence was spared from his impulse to say something rude to Jessica when Minerva swept back into the room, nearly running, a bright, triumphant smile on her face. Lawrence stood right away and turned to her, like a flower to the sun. Or perhaps the moon.

"Lady Jessica, I am to inform you that your cook simply will not wait and requests that we make our way to the dining room at once, as luncheon will be laid out, whether anyone is there to eat it or not," Minerva said, hurrying to Lawrence's side.

Jessica huffed and shook her head. "This is intolerable," she said, starting for the door. "I shall see to the matter at once. But it may be safe to say that we will have to continue this tour after our repast."

"Whatever you think best," Lawrence said.

He started out of the room after her, but Minerva tightened her grip on his arm, holding him back.

As soon as Jessica had left the library, Minerva spun to him and whispered, "I've discovered the location of your statue." Her entire countenance glowed with mischief.

"You have?" Lawrence asked, his heart beating wildly, not so much because of their mission, but because Minerva was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen when she

was up to no good.

“Yes,” Minerva went on, twisting to face him fully and gripping both his arms. “I thought to ask Prissy, since servants generally know everything about their masters, and I was correct.”

“Oh?”

“Prissy says that there is a wicked, lascivious statue in one of the attic storage rooms in the west wing of the house,” Minerva went on. “The servants think it is delightfully naughty, and it has become something of a jest in the house. I asked her to describe details, and she was quite clear that the female part of the statue is most definitely Lady Jessica in her younger years.”

“That is Primavera in Splendor,” Lawrence said, both embarrassed and elated.

“I knew it,” Minerva said, brimming with victory. “We’ve discovered it’s location. All we need to do now is sneak up there in the dead of night to steal it.”

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Minnie had to admit that she was not the most accommodating guest for the rest of the day. She lost her patience for Lady Jessica's drivel, and she found it impossible to smile and listen to Lord Otho's thinly-veiled attempts to flirt with her at supper. If the weather had been anything other than grey and dreary, she would have suggested that she and Lawrence take a turn around Tidworth Hall's gardens. But the rain was as relentless as Lady Jessica's tour, so that was not possible.

In the end, Minnie begged the pardon of her company, especially Lawrence, so that she could take herself up to her and Lawrence's room for a nap in the afternoon. She needed it after her mostly sleepless night. Sharing a bed with Lawrence had been more of a challenge than she'd thought it would be, mostly because all she wanted to do was flip over and snuggle up against Lawrence's warm, solid form.

She could not manage to sleep during the afternoon either, but for entirely different reasons. Her mind would not stay still. She followed her thoughts down the west hallway Lady Jessica had showed them briefly in the morning, wondering where the doorway to the attic might be located. Further, she attempted to mentally map out a route from said attic to the mews, where Lawrence's carriage was being kept during their stay, but seeing as she was not entirely certain where the mews were located, those thoughts were more frustrating than anything else.

"There must be a way to accomplish this feat quickly and without being caught," she said hours later, after the strained supper, when she and Lawrence returned to their room, presumably to rest after a busy day of touring the house and showering Lady Jessica with false flattery so that she would not grow suspicious of them.

“I was able to speak to Silas earlier,” Lawrence told her as they paced the length of their room on opposing tracks to pass the time until it would be safe to set out on their mission, Clarence positioned on the bed to watch them. “He can only go as far as the servants’ hall without arousing suspicion, but he is certain that if we can bring the statue there once we’ve secured it, he can assist us in concealing it within the carriage.”

Minnie nodded, buzzing with urgency to begin the entire endeavor.

“And assuming we are successful and the statue is secreted in the carriage tonight, we will take our leave from this stifling place in the morning?” she asked.

Lawrence nodded. “And not a moment too soon, if you ask me.”

Their pacing brought them face to face in the center of the room at that point, and Minnie paused to blink at Lawrence.

“You do not wish to spend more time reliving old days with your former lover?” she asked, speaking as if the idea meant nothing to her, when, in fact, it made her skin prickle with jealousy to think Lawrence had ever loved or wanted anyone else, particularly the odious Lady Jessica who was no longer Lady Wimpole.

Lawrence huffed a humorless laugh. “I have learned a valuable lesson here at Tidworth Hall,” he said.

“Which is?” Minnie prompted him.

“That one should never revisit the past,” Lawrence said. “Some things should remain in memory so that the shine of what one once thought can remain and not be damaged by the harsh truth.”

Minnie tilted her head to the side, curious about what he meant. “What has led you to this conclusion?” she asked.

The side of Lawrence’s mouth twitched. “Merely the discovery that Jessica is not particularly kind, and the understanding that she never was.”

Minnie smiled despite that not being the appropriate reaction for the revelation at hand. “You are a good judge of character, Lawrence,” she said, stepping forward to rest a hand against his chest, over his heart.

She could feel the furious beating of Lawrence’s heart, smell the salt of his skin, and practically taste the way his cheek had felt against her lips. It was scintillating, but not, perhaps, useful in that moment.

With a short intake of breath, she pulled back and glanced toward the door.

“The household must have settled by now,” she said, then turned slowly back to Lawrence, raking him with a look that was hungrier than it should have been. “Perhaps you should don clothing of a darker color so that we might hide in the shadows more easily, should it come to that.”

“Another brilliant idea,” Lawrence said with a smile, then headed to the dressing room.

Minnie was sorely tempted to watch him change through the keyhole once he’d shut the door. As tense as the air between them had become, and as desperate as she was to do something about it, they could not be distracted by their own wants when there was an infamous statue in the house that could improve Lawrence’s reputation as a serious artist to be purloined.

Fifteen minutes later, Lawrence emerged from the dressing room clothed entirely in

black. Minnie noted with a pleased smile that the two of them truly did make a macabre pair when dressed similarly. The silver in Lawrence's hair seemed to stand out in particularly handsome detail when the rest of him was all inky black and distinguished.

"Do I look the part of a nefarious housebreaker?" Lawrence asked, holding his arms out for Minnie's approval.

Minnie grinned. "You could not look more nefarious if you tried," she said in an incongruously tender tone, taking his hand and drawing him toward the door. "Mostly because you simply cannot look nefarious, no matter how you are dressed."

"What a damnable disappointment," Lawrence said just as Minnie opened the door.

She was deeply afraid that the loud peal of laughter she let out just as she stepped into the hall would wake Lady Jessica and Lord Otho, wherever their chamber was located. It was enough so that she slapped a hand over her mouth to stop the laughter. That gesture only made Lawrence giggle, though, and as that sound was so boyish and at odds with Lawrence's age and appearance, it set Minnie off all over again.

At least if they were caught, they would seem more like mischievous children than serious housebreakers.

The western wing of Tidworth Hall seemed to be far less lived-in than the eastern wing, where Minnie and Lawrence had been given a room. The house was enormous, and after climbing to the topmost floor they could reach and pulling open a few doors with creaky hinges to see where they led, Minnie became convinced very little of the west wing was used for anything besides storage.

"I'm surprised Lady Jessica went through the trouble of remaking this part of the house at all," Minnie said after the third door they opened led to another unused

guestroom. “It has the feel of a place that has not been used in decades.”

Lawrence hummed in agreement. “It seems to me as though Lady Jessica threw her efforts into renovating the house so that she could avoid being trapped in conversation with her husband.”

Minnie laughed as she poked her head into a fourth room. “That will certainly never be our fate,” she said before stepping out into the hall. When she found Lawrence looking at her with a combination of curiosity and hope, she added, “We will never run out of things to speak about.”

Lawrence’s uncertainty turned into a smile. “No, I believe we never will.”

It shouldn’t have, but the short exchange pinched something within Minnie’s heart. She was certain Lawrence meant that they would never grow bored, but a part of her knew that the truth was they would never have a chance to know, one way or another. There would be no future for the two of them. They would travel on, she would carry out her plan to make it appear as though she fell from a cliff, she would be declared dead, and he would move on.

Somehow, as they continued down the hall in silence, her grand plan did not feel as exciting or perfect as it once had. She would have an entirely new life in Sweden, but Lawrence would mourn her passing so. And while once she would have thought that a broken-hearted man who had lost his love was one of the most romantic things imaginable, now a deeper part of her felt as though a long, cozy life of mischief and storytelling was by far the more romantic option.

“Good heavens, this looks promising.”

Minnie pushed those troubling thoughts far to the back of her mind as Lawrence opened a door at the end of the hall that revealed a narrow staircase going up. There

would be time to agonize over the conflict in her heart later. For now, they had thievery to do.

“This must be it,” she whispered, holding her lantern high and peering up the cold, drafty stairs.

“There’s only one way to find out,” Lawrence said, taking the bold first step forward.

The stairs creaked horribly, and there were cobwebs and other signs of infrequent use all around, but Minnie followed Lawrence up into the attic regardless.

Once they reached the intimidatingly massive space, Minnie gasped in amazement, then coughed as she breathed in dust.

“It’s like something out of a novel,” she croaked as soon as she had the power of speech again.

The attic was everything she could ever have desired in creepy and disturbing spaces. The light of their two lamps was barely enough to illuminate masses of muslin-covered furnishings, old crates held together with rusted nails, and various piles of broken stair railings, bits of metal that might have been from destroyed chandeliers, and other items whose former use was a mystery.

Lawrence inched boldly forward and lifted the corner of one muslin covering to reveal a tattered couch of an antique design. Its cushions were clearly the home to some sort of undesirable creature that Minnie did not want to think about.

“As deliciously decrepit as this place is,” she whispered, “I should very much like to find your statue and be done with the place.”

“You do not like a spooky attic now and then?” Lawrence asked with all the

casualness of someone asking if she liked an anise biscuit on occasion.

“I much prefer a rain-soaked landscape to a stuffy room filled with someone else’s detritus that threatens to inflict some disease of the lungs if I stay too long,” she said.

Lawrence laughed, but that caused him to breathe in some of the dust in question, which caused him to cough sharply. Once he recovered, he said, “Perhaps you are right. We should find the statue and get out.”

They spent the next half hour pulling back coverings and moving stacks of crates in an attempt to locate the statue. Logic told Minnie that if Prissy and the other servants sometimes sought it out for a bit of ogling and fun, it could not be stored deep in the vast space. Their initial efforts to locate it didn’t come to much, though.

“Part of me is certain that I will knock my lantern over and begin a blaze that will burn the entire estate down,” Minnie said as she helped Lawrence push an old chair aside. “And as romantic as the notion of being rescued from a conflagration is, it also seems as though it would be a terrible bother.”

“Not to mention a waste of all Lady Jessica’s decorating efforts,” Lawrence said.

Minnie snorted with laughter, which caused her to breathe in dust that made her sneeze.

That proved to be a stroke of luck, however. When she reached for a nearby bit of muslin with which to blow her nose, she revealed the very thing they’d been searching for.

There, under the dusty muslin, was a shocking, white marble statue of a couple entwined in a passionate embrace. There was no mistaking what activity the two were engaged in, particularly in regard to the woman’s position. The man’s carved body

was firm and muscular, but his face was mostly buried in the woman's neck and hidden by her hair. The woman had her neck extended and her face contorted in a look of ecstasy...and she was unmistakably a young Lady Jessica.

"Good Lord!" Minnie exclaimed, reaching for her lantern and holding it up so she could get a better look at the sculpture. "Are you really that adept?"

Lawrence made a sound that was half laughter, half choking as he joined her by the lascivious carving.

"I, er, I do not wish to give myself airs," he said, face downturned and clearly red, even in the light of the lanterns, "but my familiarity with the female form through intensive artistic study means that I know where all the important things are located."

Minnie snorted particularly loudly, then clapped a dusty hand to her face. "I am afraid I know all too well what you mean by that," she said, sending him a sideways look.

"You do?" Lawrence asked, almost forlorn, as Minnie stepped around the statue to see if there was any way to recognize the man in the carving as Lawrence.

Minnie glanced at him from the other side of the statue. "Did you assume I was a virgin, my lord?" she asked with teasing formality. "At my age?"

"I, er, that is, I did not want to presume...."

Minnie laughed and shook her head, but made no further comment on the topic.

"It's larger than I thought it would be," she said, nearly laughing again at the potential double entendre of her words. Although when it came to the statue, she did not know about that particular appendage, as it was not visible, given the intimate position of the figures.

“Were you expecting it to be a desktop ornament?” Lawrence asked, setting his lamp on a nearby crate and reaching for the statue.

“Well, yes,” Minnie said.

In fact, the statue was easily as long as her arm and nearly a foot tall. It seemed to be the sort of thing one set on a pedestal in the hallway...of a brothel.

“I would imagine it is heavy,” she said with a frown, studying the carving as an object.

Lawrence sighed. “No doubt it is. I believe we could manage it together, but if we cannot, you must go and fetch Silas.”

Minnie shook her head. “No, I should be able to do my part in carrying it. I am more worried about how we might transport the lanterns and the statue at the same time.”

That proved to be the real challenge of their task. Between the two of them, they could manage the weight of the statue. Barely. Carrying lanterns while they moved it was out of the question, however.

In the end, they had to resort to a piecemeal process of Minnie carrying the lanterns to the attic door, then the two of them hauling the statue to the door and down the stairs. Then, when they reached the hall, Lawrence was forced to balance the statue against a small windowsill while Minnie ran back to fetch the lanterns and close the attic door, then take the lanterns to the end of the hall and place them on the floor. Once that was done, she returned to Lawrence to help him with the immense weight of the marble.

They carried it down the hall and as far past the lanterns as they dared before Lawrence was forced to rest again while Minnie fetched the lanterns and relocated

them to a spot farther along.

They proceeded in that manner until they descended to the ground floor and down the hall to the entrance to the servants' hall. It was a minor miracle that no one was stirring in the house and that they were not discovered.

Once they reached the top of the servants' stairs, Minnie descended into the hall to find Silas. Blessedly, Lawrence's driver was waiting there for them and rushed to take Minnie's place carrying the statue.

They made much better time carting the heavy thing through the servants' hall and past the few servants who were still up at that late hour—whom Silas had apprised of their plot earlier, and who were more than happy to keep silent about it at the expense of their master and mistress—and out to the courtyard behind the kitchens.

From there, Silas took over the task of securing the wicked thing within a trunk still strapped to the back of the carriage while Minnie and Lawrence returned to their room.

"I am in utter awe of the fact that we've succeeded at our mission," Minnie said from the dressing room as she peeled out of her dusty clothing and quickly washed away the grime that had managed to cover her. "I wish I had known the statue was as large and heavy as that. I would have devised some sort of carrying mechanism."

"No doubt you would have," Lawrence said from the main part of the room.

Minnie finished with her ablutions and stepped into the bedroom in just her nightgown.

She gasped a moment later at the sight of Lawrence slipping his nightshirt over his head. He was faced the other way, and she stepped into the room before he had

completely covered himself. The sight of his firm round backside and strong back sent a thrill through Minnie.

“I wouldn’t have been surprised if you’d’ve invented a way to lower the statue out the attic window and straight into the carriage,” Lawrence said, his voice loud enough to indicate he still believed her to be in the dressing room.

When he turned around a moment later and caught Minnie staring at him, he jumped slightly and sucked in a breath.

Whether it was the excitement of the night, the unguarded expression Lawrence wore, or the glimpse of his magnificent body Minnie had been treated to, something ignited inside her. She did not hesitate for a moment. She propelled herself forward, crossing the room to Lawrence in a few, swift, sure strides, and threw her arms around him.

“Minerva,” Lawrence whispered, catching her awkwardly at first, but moving smoothly into an embrace.

There was no hesitation at all in Minnie’s heart, mind, or in her actions. She lifted to her toes, pressing herself into Lawrence’s warm body, and slanted her mouth over his, demanding a kiss.

It was everything she’d dreamed it would be. Lawrence felt so strong and powerful as he tightened his arms around her, and his kiss quickly turned demanding and encompassing. He did not treat her like a sweet, fainting violet, but like a woman who demanded to be kissed well and pleased fully.

“I told you I was not a virgin,” she gasped, reaching for the hem of his nightshirt and pulling it up so that she could take her fill of his bare skin with her hands and her eyes. “I want you, Lawrence. You are my prize.”

“Darling.” It was all Lawrence said, but it was all he needed to say.

He pulled at her nightgown and bunched the thin fabric in his fists as he sought to uncover her the way she’d uncovered him. He stole another kiss as well, if it could even be considered stealing when Minnie wanted it so badly. She pushed her fingers into his hair and gripped tight handfuls so that she could pull him closer, thrusting her tongue unforgivingly into his mouth to taste him fully, and to show him that she was just as powerful as he was when it came to matters of the flesh.

Their kissing and touching turned desperate, and soon Minnie wanted more. She broke away long enough to tug Lawrence toward the bed, then swept Clarence to the bedside table and threw back the covers so that they could tumble there together. There wasn’t even time to pull her nightgown or his nightshirt off. They wanted each other so passionately that the fabric was merely pushed and bunched aside so that they could feel and stroke and entwine.

Lawrence proved everything he’d said in the attic about knowing a woman’s body when he shifted from kissing Minnie’s lips to using those lips to worship her breasts and more. The way he licked and suckled her had her moaning and squirming and arching into his touch. She’d had talented lovers before, but none who’d ever combined pleasure with affection in quite the same way Lawrence could.

She wanted to give everything back to him, to learn every inch of his body with her hands and her mouth and to lavish attention on his cock, which pressed hotly against her thigh, making her breathless with its size, as she actually liked to do, but Lawrence was too determined to be the one to give pleasure.

And he most certainly knew how to give it. Minnie cried out with far too much strength when he shifted lower, parting her legs and burying his face against her sex. She bit her lip in an attempt to keep quiet and whimpered as he pleased her with his tongue and his fingers. It was exquisite, and by far more potent than any other lover

she'd known. He was so adept at licking and stroking and penetrating in exactly the right way that it nearly brought her to tears.

Better still, he knew how to tease and prolong her pleasure, stopping just when she was close to kiss and nuzzle her thighs with the rough growth of his facial hair before diving back in to suckle her to towering heights of pleasure all over again. Minnie didn't even care that she ended up sprawled and open to him, mouth open with pleasure that she tried to keep silent and eyes rolled back as the coil inside her pulled tight, ready to release.

"Come for me, love," Lawrence murmured, like some dark, demanding prince in a fairy tale.

And, God help her, she did. Exactly as he commanded. Her body unfurled with the most powerful orgasm she'd ever experienced, as if he'd ignited it with the power of his will alone. It throbbed through her, filling her with thundering pleasure that threatened to send her heart and mind scattering in all directions.

As if that alone were not enough, with deft precision and timing, he stretched over her and drove his thick cock home within her, commandingly and without apology. He worked himself deeper and deeper as Minnie's body tremored around her, pulling him in, even as he stretched her to the brink of it all being too much. His girth and movements prolonged her orgasm, making her feel as if she might lose her mind entirely to the pleasure of it.

Hard on the heels of that, Lawrence's own sounds of pleasure turned pitched and needy, and his body tensed in her embrace as he emptied himself within her. The significance of the act was as beautiful as the pleasure she felt. Her heart sang with the knowledge that they were one. She absolutely understood the ecstasy of the woman in the statue. Mere marble could not convey feelings like the ones she felt.

They were slow to come back down from their pleasure, moving together even after their orgasms subsided just so they could be together. Even when Lawrence pulled out and fell to the side, Minnie still felt enveloped in pleasure. She also felt thoroughly wrung out and more exhausted than she'd ever known herself to be.

It did not matter, though. All that mattered was snuggling against Lawrence's hot, damp body and closing her eyes as she reveled in him. Sleep pressed down on her, and she didn't try to fight it. She didn't want to fight it. She wanted this moment with Lawrence to last forever...knowing that it couldn't.

Ten

The sleep of utter exhaustion took Lawrence as soon as he settled into post-orgasmic bliss, Minerva tucked against him. It had been a long day with a restless night before that, and if he was honest with himself, it had been a very long time since he had found satisfaction in the arms of a woman.

He'd found so much more than satisfaction with Minerva. He'd found joy and connection. He'd found someone whom he was confident genuinely cared for him, which, in his experience, was a rare thing. He'd found a beautiful woman with no inhibitions, one who enjoyed his every touch and kiss fully, without any artifice or hesitation.

In short, Minerva was perfection, and as sleep fell heavily on him in the aftermath of their lovemaking, Lawrence couldn't remember himself ever being happier.

The night passed in wonderful oblivion. If Lawrence dreamed, he was certain those dreams had been about the magnificent goddess in his arms. He didn't remember any of those dreams, so desperate were his body and mind for sleep, but he was certain they'd consumed him all through the night.

When morning finally did come, Lawrence was awakened by the shuffle of someone else in the room. He assumed it was the maid come to rebuild the fire and turned to his side, reaching for Minerva.

The bed beside him was empty.

Still sleep-groggy, Lawrence opened his eyes and looked for Minerva. She was not there. All he saw was Clarence grinning back at him from the bedside table. He stretched his arm farther and swept it under the covers just to be sure, though it was a silly gesture, since the covers lay flat. He was not overly worried, but the seed of the sense that perhaps all was not right lodged in his gut.

“Minerva?” he asked, his voice a bit thick and his body slow to move as he shifted to his other side and sat up a bit. The need and pull within him for her was a touch alarming, since every time he’d become so emotionally attached to a woman in the past, he’d been sorely disappointed. But he would not allow himself to panic yet.

The shifting sound he’d heard earlier had moved to the dressing room. It was clearly Minerva, but what she was doing in the dressing room instead of lying in naked splendor with him in bed for as long as possible was beyond him.

“Minerva?” he asked again, slightly louder, but also sounding needier, at least to his ears. He cleared his throat and frowned seriously, willing himself to be the strong sort of gentleman he should be.

While his brow was still creased, Minerva stepped out from the dressing room, fully dressed and with her hair already up. She paused abruptly and glanced at Lawrence with a frown.

“Is something amiss?” she asked, moving forward again.

Lawrence noted that she had a folded pile of fabric that was very likely some of her underthings, and that she’d brought her traveling bag out. She was packing to leave.

“I, er, no,” he said, pushing himself to sit up even more. He only worried slightly about the way the bedcovers slipped down to bare his chest down to his hips. “I missed you is all.”

He winced at the weakness of his statement and at the way his heart pounded against his ribs with eagerness for just a crumb of acceptance from her.

Minerva straightened from where she'd just tucked her underthings into her bag. Her expression was serious, as usual, but Lawrence ached to believe there was a spark of mischief in her eyes and that the slight twitch of her mouth was amusement with him instead of annoyance.

"How can you miss me when I am no more than ten feet away from you?" she asked.

Lawrence shrugged one shoulder as she abandoned her packing and came to sit on the bed with him, just out of arm's reach. Dammit, why did he feel so vulnerable and pathetic with her? It was just as Jessica and all the others had said. He was weak when he should be strong, dull when he should be scintillating, and desperate where he should be confident.

"It is only that..." He blew out a breath. Now he could not even form his thoughts into adequate words.

Minerva stared at him for several long moments that made his insides pinch. Then she scooted closer, caressed the side of his stubbly face, and leaned into kiss his lips lightly.

"I am right here, Lawrence," she said. "I am merely packing my things, as I believe we would like to make a swift departure as soon as possible this morning."

Lawrence forced himself to let out a breath and as much of the tension of fifty years of romantic disappointment with it. "Yes, of course," he said. He leaned in to kiss Minerva gently, deeply conscious that his breath was likely not in a state for kissing. "I should do the same."

Minerva smiled at him, then stood so that he could climb out of bed. Lawrence noted the way she raked an appreciative glance over his naked form, almost teasing him with her eyes, before returning to her packing.

The saucy look should have made him laugh. It should have cheered him and confirmed that all was well between them and that their friendship had only been strengthened by a moment of unbridled passion instead of damaged by it.

That was what he should have thought, but the sheer volume of horrific luck that he'd had with women in his life, the pain and scars left by women like Jessica, and the crushed hopes within him that had never fully restored themselves made it a difficult slog.

It did not help matters in his mind that Minerva seemed to be in a hurry to quit Tidworth Hall. As Lawrence dressed, she completed her own packing and went straight into helping him with his. It was a task that a maid should do, but she determinedly took it on herself with stalwart efficiency.

Did she wish to flee from the site of their passion because she regretted the moment? She had not commented upon their activities nor hugged and cuddled him, gracing him with sweet words and sharing how much she'd enjoyed his attentions. Perhaps she was simply not the sort of woman who needed to fawn over her partner to appreciate him. Perhaps her method of showing her approval of him was assisting him with his baggage.

Or perhaps she regretted everything, including their acquaintance.

He was being ridiculous. Lawrence decided that much by the time they were dressed and finished packing, as they made their way downstairs to the breakfast room. He was allowing past defeats to tarnish his current victory. He could not be so sensitive. That was precisely the reason the majority of his past lovers had ended up laughing at

him instead of, well, marrying him. Though now that he had Minerva in his life, he was rather glad they hadn't.

"There you are," Lord Otho greeted them when they entered the breakfast room and took their seats at the table. "We were worried that the demons in the attic carried you off."

Minerva was halfway through sitting, and at Lord Otho's words, she plunked ungracefully into her chair, her face pinking. "I beg your pardon?" she asked, her voice high and wispy.

"Did you not hear the awful racket from the upper floors last night?" Jessica asked, her glance to Minerva disapproving. She turned her attention to Lawrence as he pushed Minerva's chair in, then walked around to take his own seat. "There was so much banging and jostling that I was convinced the highwaymen you mentioned the other day had descended upon us."

Lawrence caught the slight movement of Minerva's mouth, but when he tried to meet her eyes to share the jest, Minerva was not looking at him. She seemed intent on pouring tea for herself and on smiling for the footman who presented her with a selection of pastries.

Lawrence cleared his throat, fighting down the useless worry that he could not seem to shake. He smiled at Jessica and said, "I am afraid my lady wife and I were far away in the land of sleep. Your excellent tour of the house yesterday left us both exhausted from awe and so deeply content with the state of the house that we could not help but sleep soundly."

It was too much. Even Lord Otho coughed and sent him a sly look. "I believe we all know what that truly means," he said.

“Otho,” Jessica scolded him, her face flushing as well. She shifted to address Lawrence, not quite meeting his eyes. “The servants heard nothing, as their rooms are in the other wing. I sent Prissy to look for damage at first light, but she has not returned with her report as of yet.”

Minerva caught her breath, and for the first time since sitting, her gaze snapped up to meet his. There was a sparkle in her dark eyes, but it could have been alarm as much as camaraderie.

“I had it on good authority that those chaps who came to repair the roof last year secured it from all manner of creatures,” Lord Otho said, turning most of his attention to his breakfast. “I shall have a word with them and demand my money back.”

“Do not offend the tradesmen, dear,” Jessica said in a tight voice. “One never knows when they will require further service. I think it far more likely that some of the servants were up to mischief.”

“We do have mischievous servants,” Lord Otho said, winking across the table at Jessica.

Jessica blanched, which made Lawrence wonder what kind of rapport the two of them had when they did not have guests around.

“It was most likely Gavin and Ezekiel,” Jessica went on. “The two of them have been as thick as thieves since Gavin was hired. Prissy has reported suspicious behavior by the two of them to me in the past. I would not be at all surprised if they have been secretly stealing the spoons or other valuables and fencing them behind our backs.”

Minerva nearly choked on the gulp of tea she’d just taken. Lawrence would have done the same if he’d been drinking or eating. No doubt Gavin and Ezekiel were the two young footmen whom he and Minerva had interrupted in the unused guestroom.

One of them, Lawrence was not certain of names, stood right there, attending them at the table. The poor young man looked suddenly terrified.

Considering the artistic circles Lawrence was a part of, he did not care one whit what sort of amorous activities two men shared. But he was loath to think the two footmen might be sacked for thievery because of someone else's actions.

"I do not think any among your most excellent staff would be so irresponsible as to wander the house at night," he said, sending the footman a reassuring smile. "They have been kind and attentive to my wife and I since we arrived. In fact, if anything should ever happen to them, I would be happy to employ them at Godwin House in London."

He met and held the young footman's eyes until he was certain the offer of employment, should Jessica sack him and his friend under false pretenses, was understood. The look of utter relief in the young man's eyes, followed by what had the potential of turning into tears of gladness, convinced Lawrence the message had been received.

"Either way," Jessica said, "it was a tumultuous and disturbed night."

"In more ways than one," Lord Otho muttered, winking at Minerva.

Minerva had been picking at her breakfast, but she set her fork down with a loud clink against her plate. Her face was flushed to a degree that alarmed Lawrence. Not only did she look offended by the cheeky comment, she looked a bit feverish.

"Lady Jessica," she said, using the excuse of speaking to Jessica to turn away from Lord Otho. "Lawrence and I have enjoyed your hospitality so much these last few days, but I believe it is time for us to continue our journey."

“Oh?” Jessica asked, making the single syllable sound both disappointed and incredibly relieved.

“Yes,” Lawrence jumped in, more anxious to leave than he’d thought he would be. “My dear heart and I discussed it last night, and we are eager to make our way onward to Wales.”

“Are you certain you do not wish to stay another night?” Jessica asked with the falsest of kindness. It was clear to Lawrence that his former lover wanted them gone.

It would be good riddance on both sides.

“Time is of the essence,” Lawrence said. “The sooner we are on our way, the more secure I will feel with Minerva’s condition.”

“Yes, she does look a bit piqued,” Lord Otho said. “And it’s no wonder.” He wiggled his eyebrows at her.

“Shall I have your carriage brought around?” Jessica said with a harsh edge to her voice.

“Yes, please,” Lawrence said.

The rest of the meal continued with as much awkwardness as Lawrence had ever known at a breakfast. Jessica continued to make false attempts to convince him and Minerva to stay longer, even though it was obvious she did not want them there. It was as if she needed to convince herself that she was a good hostess and a good woman, though Lawrence doubted both with every minute that passed.

Once the meal was over, Silas brought the carriage around, and the footmen carried Lawrence’s and Minerva’s things down, loading them on the back. Lawrence noted

the way the two footmen whispered and sent grateful and adoring looks in his direction. It was enough for Lawrence to believe that the two of them would arrive on the family's doorstep in London within a week, one way or another.

As if to convince Jessica that she had done the correct thing in allowing them to leave, Minerva emerged from the house last, cradling Clarence in her arms.

“Oh, good heavens!” Jessica jumped with fright at the sight of them.

“Lady Jessica, I should like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for your kindness and care these last few days,” Minerva addressed her, keeping an utterly straight face as she deliberately behaved like the madwoman Jessica had told Lawrence she was. “Clarence has enjoyed your hospitality as well and would like me to convey to you that your upstairs maids are among the finest he has ever observed, and counting his living years, he has been observing maids for two hundred years.”

“Oh! I...that is...please give my thanks...oh, no....” Jessica quivered with upset, clearly at a loss as to how to engage with a skull.

“Thank you,” Lawrence said succinctly, resting his hand on the small of Minerva's back as he steered her toward the carriage.

He sent Minerva an approving look, but the smile she gave him in return died quickly. That did not settle Lawrence's nerves where the state of their relationship was concerned one bit.

At last, once everything was loaded, Clarence was settled in the carriage, and Lawrence and Minerva had donned their traveling cloaks again, it was time to depart.

“I say,” Lord Otho said, squinting at the carriage. “You need to have someone take a look at your carriage, someone with more skill than your driver. It seems to have

become unbalanced.”

“Has it?” Lawrence asked, feigning only mild interest.

In fact, the entire back of the carriage sagged dangerously low. The heavy statue was packed away under everything else now and could not be reached easily, but the evidence that it was there was on display for all to see.

“Yes,” Lord Otho said. “Perhaps my wife was correct in inviting you to stay a few more days. You should not travel when your carriage is in such disrepair. Especially with the amount of rain we’ve had of late. I can have the footmen bring your things back inside, and your driver could take the carriage into the village to have it?”

“No!” Minerva blurted, her face bright red. She cleared her throat and schooled her tone to say, “No, no, all will be well. I am certain of it. We need to continue on with all haste.”

She pressed a hand to her stomach to further the effect of her words.

“Yes, you must be off,” Jessica said, sending Lord Otho a stern look.

“I suppose, if you insist,” Lord Otho said, gesturing to the carriage.

Minerva wasted no time stepping forward and allowing one of the footmen to hand her into the carriage.

“I cannot thank you enough for your hospitality, Lady Jessica, Lord Otho,” Lawrence said goodbye for both of them, bowing to Lord Otho and kissing Jessica’s hand. “I am grateful for what has been a truly lovely visit.”

“Yes, yes,” Jessica said with a sigh, clearly ready for him to go. “You must visit us

again soon.”

Lawrence smiled at her, but the moment he'd turned his back to head for the carriage, he rolled his eyes. If he never saw Jessica again, it would be too soon.

“I am more than glad to be done with that,” he said once he was settled in the carriage and they were on their way.

Minerva merely hummed as she looked out the window, one hand rested on Clarence's pate.

Lawrence frowned, his heart quivering with worry again. Had the bloom already gone off the rose between the two of them? Had Minerva taken what she'd wanted from him and immediately lost interest? It would most definitely not have been the first time he had lost the good favor of a woman so quickly.

“Minerva, are you quite well?” Lawrence asked, feeling as though voicing the question was taking an immense risk.

Minerva pried her eyes away from the rolling countryside to look at him. “I thought we were moments away from being found out,” she said, her expression grave. “I believe it has unsettled me.”

Lawrence did his best to smile. He even reached out to rest a hand on her knee as she sat opposite him. “All is well,” he said. “We have endured the awkward visit and obtained what we came for.”

“Yes, I am happy for that,” Minerva said stiffly, then cleared her throat and swallowed awkwardly.

“And now we can continue on with our intended journey,” Lawrence said, his smile

difficult to keep in place for some reason. “The rest of the road lies ahead of us, and our destinations are secure.”

For some reason, that simple statement caused Minerva to pinch her eyes closed for a moment with a look of what Lawrence could only describe as despair. Perhaps it was regret. It made him sick to think that Minerva, the most magnificent woman he’d ever met, regretted a moment of their acquaintance, especially those particular moments last night.

But he feared that was the case. By the time they were a mile away from Tidworth Hall, things were back to what they had been at the very beginning of the journey. The two of them sat in silence across from each other, each lost in their own thoughts, as much strangers to each other as they’d ever been.

Eleven

Minnie had never regretted gloomy weather and prayed for sunshine as much as she did for the rest of the day, as the overburdened carriage made its way back toward the main road to Wales.

At least, she hoped they were traveling toward the main road to Wales. At one point in the afternoon, Silas stopped the carriage and Lawrence stepped down to have a word with him.

“Is all well?” Minnie asked when Lawrence rejoined her five minutes later and the carriage started forward again. In a different direction.

“All is perfectly well,” Lawrence said with a tight smile. “Silas is unfamiliar with the roads in this part of the country, and with the sun hidden behind such thick clouds, he was having difficulty ascertaining our direction.”

Minnie sucked in a breath, then nodded. She had to fight the feeling of dread that had steadily been growing in her gut since she awoke that morning.

She’d awakened with the first rays of dawn light, tucked cozily against Lawrence, an arm and a leg thrown over him as if he were a pile of pillows...feeling decidedly off. Her body felt too warm, and her throat, while not sore per se, was noticeable. Even though she had not engaged in any such activity focused around Lawrence’s manhood that might cause such a thing.

The odd feeling had propelled her out of bed to fetch a glass of water from the small

table in the corner of the room. Once she was up, she felt compelled to move rather than to rejoin Lawrence in bed. As much as she might have wanted to rejoin him. She'd dressed, busied herself packing, and been entirely too aware of her body not feeling right.

It could not be the unintended results of their nightly activities, she was certain. She had just finished dealing with her monthly courses, and she was educated enough to know she would not be immediately fertile. Aside from which, at her age, though most definitely not impossible, she believed an actual pregnancy to be less likely.

That did not prevent her from feeling slightly feverish and most definitely out of sorts as the morning progressed, however. As dear and sweet as she found Lawrence to be when he awoke and missed her, a niggle at the back of her head warned her not to transfer whatever malady seemed to be creeping up on her to him. She remembered the fever that had closed the inn across from where they'd stayed a few days before. If she had somehow contracted that, she did not want to pass it along.

And then came Lady Jessica and Lord Otho's offensive statements and behavior at breakfast. By then, Minnie had been feeling worse, and while Lawrence had handled the awkward interaction expertly, all she wanted to do was be gone from Tidworth Hall. Teasing Lady Jessica with Clarence had been the final act of defiance she'd managed before she began to feel decidedly unwell.

"We can stop at the next inn we pass to inquire after our direction," Lawrence reassured her with a tremulous smile when Minnie failed to make conversation about the possible waywardness of their journey. "If the hour is late, we can rest there for the evening."

Rest sounded like the loveliest thing Minnie had ever heard of. She tried to smile at the idea, but doing so drew further attention to the increasing tickle in her throat.

Several more minutes passed as they rattled on at a slower pace than ever before. Minnie stared out the window, wishing that the rain would hold off as long as possible to make their journey swifter. She was eager to reach Bristol and the culmination of her plot to disappear.

At least, that was what she told herself.

She writhed in her seat, pulling her thick cloak around her to ward off the chill that was beginning to seep through her, threatening to make her shiver. The appeal of creating the fantasy of her own death had waned so much in the last week, and yet, she hated second-guessing herself and changing her mind about something that had been so thrilling when she'd planned it.

"Minerva, are you certain all is well?" Lawrence asked in a careful tone as patters of rain began to beat on the roof of the carriage.

"Yes, of course," Minnie snapped, fighting off a chill as she hugged herself tighter. "Why would anything be unwell?"

Lawrence seemed to shrink at her words, though for the life of her, Minnie could not fathom why. His reaction made her want to shift to the seat by his side, hug his arm, and rest her head against his shoulder, both for her own comfort and to allay whatever fears he seemed to be having.

That impulse aggravated Minnie to no end. She should not want to be closer to Lawrence when she was a mere week away from dividing herself from him forever. She should not long for him so and ache to cling to him when she knew that was not the path life had in store for her. Wanting something she could not have was as irritating as whatever illness seemed to be creeping up on her, like a phantom stretching its icy fingers over her shoulder and into her heart.

“It is just that you have not been your usual self today,” Lawrence said, squirming in his seat. “And I thought, perhaps, just perhaps, it was something that I, unknowingly and unwittingly, without any sort of malicious thought to begin with....”

He seemed to lose his train of thought and turned silent for a moment.

Minnie swallowed hard, the sensation like that of raking hot coals down the inside of her throat. She wanted to smile at Lawrence and reassure him of her affection for him, but the pain of knowing it was all about to end, and the discomfort of her body at that moment, had her tongue stuck as though it were in a clamp.

“I mean,” Lawrence went on, squirming more than ever, “I know I should have been more forthright in asking whether you wanted...if it was acceptable to...I would not wish you to think that I took liberties where I should not, and....”

Minnie’s gaze had drifted outside the carriage, but she snapped, “I told you I was not a virgin. Do not fear that you have ruined me or offended my person in some way. I can assure you, you have not.”

It was a horribly wrong thing to say, and her words were made harsher by the scratchy peevishness of her tone.

“Oh,” Lawrence said, his shoulders sinking and his head lowering in response. “I was worried for nothing, then.”

He made a valiant attempt to smile, as if the whole thing were a jest, but the effect was devastating to Minnie. Her heart nearly broke at Lawrence’s sweetness and gentle manner. Her increasingly sore throat felt even tighter, and every swallow was agony with tears that threatened to burst out of her.

What had she done? What sort of fool was she to let her heart break free from her ribs

and run toward a man as wonderful and unattainable as Lawrence? She was neither free to love nor prepared to. Even if she did abandon months of planning and years of blessed independence for Lawrence's sake, there was still the matter of Owen to contend with. He still had a claim on her, according to the laws of the Kingdom of Wales. She would have to convince him to let her go before she could turn to Lawrence. Either way, her parents certainly would not approve of her marrying an artist.

Marrying Lawrence. Good God, she had gotten ahead of herself!

The afternoon grew more gloomy and unpleasant by the moment. Minnie managed to sleep fitfully for a short time as the beating of the rain on the carriage roof lulled her to oblivion. It was neither restful nor productive, though.

She was awakened by a sickening crunch and a jolt that nearly threw her from her seat. The carriage had stopped entirely.

"What is it?" she asked in a hoarse voice, dragging herself out of her stupor. "What has happened?"

"I do not know," Lawrence said in a tired, defeated voice.

He stood as much as he could, reached for the door handle, and opened it to peer outside. The rain was steady but light, but it had clearly been heavier in that area a short while before.

"Silas, what appears to be the problem?" he called up.

Moments later, the carriage dipped, and the angle of Lawrence's gaze indicated Silas had jumped down. Minnie heard a squelch of boots in mud, then Silas's sodden form appeared in the doorway.

“We’re stuck in a rut, my lord,” Silas said gravely. “The roads are all but washed out. I’ve a bad feeling that the extra weight we’re carrying might have bogged us down more than we would have been otherwise, and I heard a crack I didn’t like on top of that.”

“We heard it as well,” Lawrence said.

Silas nodded gravely, then said, “The best we can do for now is to push the carriage out of the rut and ride on. At best, we’ll need to find shelter soon so’s I can check the carriage over.”

“And at worst?” Lawrence asked.

Silas glanced warily to him. “You let me worry about that, my lord. Let’s pray for shelter before we pester the Almighty with anything else.”

Lawrence sighed, then nodded. “I’ll do whatever you need me to,” he said, stepping down from the carriage.

Minnie rushed to step down after him. Sense said she should wait where it was dry, but stubbornness kept her from being left out of whatever self-rescuing efforts needed to be made.

“I’ll guide the horses to pull,” Silas said, heading toward where the exhausted horses were bobbing their heads as the rain picked up while pointing to the back of the carriage. “You try pushing from behind.”

“Will that work?” Minnie asked, her throat feeling as though it were on fire.

“It will work better than no effort at all,” Lawrence said without looking at her.

When he headed around to the back of the carriage—which was very deeply sunk in the muddy road—Minnie followed him.

“Tell me when to push and I will assist you,” she said, bracing herself against the baggage strapped to the carriage’s back.

“Minerva, no,” Lawrence said firmly. “You do not need to tax yourself like this.”

“I am as much a part of this journey as you are,” Minnie insisted, even as slippery, wet mud seeped its way through the seams of her boots to dampen her stockings. She glanced down and noted that her feet were already an inch deep in the mud.

“While I admire your courage and determination,” Lawrence said, speaking far more formally than usual, “I insist that you return to the carriage. An effort like this will take a great deal of effort and strength, and?—”

“Are you saying that I am weak?” Minerva asked, narrowing her eyes at him.

Lawrence sighed and wiped the increasing rain from his face. “I am merely saying?—”

“Ready, my lord?” Silas called from the front of the carriage.

Minnie shifted to push her shoulder against the trunk at the back of the carriage, then called out, “We’re ready!”

Lawrence growled, frowned, and braced his hands against the trunk with her. “You do not have to do this,” he said. “I’m convinced that you are not as well as you have told me you are, and?—”

“Shut your gob and push, man!” Minnie shouted at him.

It was a bad idea in several regards. Her throat was in such a state that it felt as though she'd scraped the blade of a serrated knife down its length. In addition to that, the hurt in Lawrence's eyes was evident immediately.

His hurt only exacerbated all the feelings of hopelessness in Minnie's heart, which had her near the verge of tears once more. She could not bear the thought of leaving him, but she could not see any way that she could stay.

"Heave!" Silas shouted from where he stood at the front, holding one of the horses' bridles.

Minnie threw all her weight against the carriage, doubting it did any good. Her feet sank deeper into the mud, and if anything, she moved backwards. Beside her, Lawrence pushed with all his might as well, but the most they were able to accomplish was to slide the carriage half an inch deeper into the mud.

"Heave!" Silas shouted again.

Minnie growled as she put more of herself into her efforts. If only she could budge the impossible situation she found herself in. Her life was a carriage stuck in the mud. Her parents and their marital schemes were the rain that poured down with increasing strength, making everything so much worse. She burst out with a sob as she shoved the carriage harder, hoping Lawrence interpreted the sound as one of effort and not hopelessness.

"Once more!" Silas called from what felt like miles away. "Heave!"

Minnie growled and strained with effort as mud filled her boots and hopelessness filled her heart. It was woefully unfair to be born a woman! Even with the advantages that an Oxford education afforded her, she had escaped marital incarceration as long as she could. She would either have to submit to Owen and her parents' wishes or die,

for real or not. The one thing she could not have was the wonderful, passionate, entertaining, and, as it happened, strong man beside her.

The carriage jerked forward as it lifted up over whatever hidden obstacle had been holding it in place. Minnie was certain it was Lawrence's might that had done the job. But as it raced suddenly forward, both she and Lawrence lost their grip on the carriage and their footing and fell face-first into the mud with a sickening splat.

At first, Minnie was too stunned by the turn of events to do more than lie there, arms extended, face suddenly coated in the foul mud. There was no telling what sort of refuse from horses and carriages that had come before them was mingled with the natural earth. It certainly smelled as though anything might be seeping through the wool of her coat and the muslin of her gown.

A moment later, she heard Lawrence's groan beside her and turned her head to find him pushing himself up onto his hands and knees, and then standing. Mud coated him from head to toe. He attempted to wipe his eyes to clear them, but his hands were so filthy that all he did was smear the mess across his cheeks.

"My God, my lord!" Silas called out, racing toward them as swiftly as he could across the sodden ground. "My lady! Are you well?"

"No," Lawrence said. The single word held more gravity than Minnie had ever heard from him.

Silas wheeled to a halt halfway to them as the horses took it upon themselves to start forward without his direction. Silas was forced to turn around and jog up to the front so that he could prevent them from running off with the carriage and all their belongings.

That meant that Lawrence was the only one there to reach down and scoop Minnie

out of the putrid mud. He did more than simply offering her a hand as well. He slipped his arms around her and lifted her as if she were a sack of particularly large potatoes.

Minnie was already sobbing from the bitterness of her thoughts, so she had no qualms at all about continuing her tears. It was the most wretched day she had ever known, and she felt so awful that she did not care who saw her misery.

“Sweetheart, you’re a mess,” Lawrence said, softly and with heart, as he tried to brush mud from her cloak.

That was almost as vain a task as preventing Minnie from crying over every wrong that had ever been done to her. She pushed Lawrence’s hands away, then in a motion that was almost contradictory to that, she flung herself against him. Without a drop of shame, she threw her arms around his neck and wailed as she buried her face against the exposed crook of his neck.

Lawrence hugged her tightly, but instead of comforting her with more soft words or, perhaps, stroking her mud-soaked head, he said, “My God, Minerva. You’re burning up!”

The words barely penetrated Minnie’s brain. She was too bone-weary and defeated to think of anything but the support of Lawrence’s body against hers. She did not want to stand on her own or move a single muscle. She didn’t even protest when he shifted to sweep her into his arms, carrying her like a child. She just wanted to cry until every last drop of her life had bled from her.

“There’s a small church with a parsonage just over the rise,” Minnie heard Silas say as Lawrence carried her forward. “Perhaps they’ll be able to provide you both with a bath and a meal. Or even lodging for the night.”

“I fear we’ll need more than that,” Lawrence said, carrying Minnie on. “Lady Minerva seems to have a fever. I do not know why I failed to notice it before.”

“A fever?” Silas asked, his voice worried. “Like the kind at the inn we passed a few days back?”

Lawrence didn’t reply to the question. Minnie felt his body tighten as he carried her on. He walked past the carriage, surging forward, as if he would carry her all the way to the parsonage on foot. That made sense, considering the difficulty of cleaning mud from a carriage’s interior, but there was something more desperate to Lawrence’s mien as he moved onward in the rain.

“Hold on, my darling,” Lawrence said, almost as if he were speaking to himself. “I’ll get you to safety soon. The parson must have some sort of medicine to treat a simple ague. It won’t be anything more than that, I’m certain.”

Minnie sucked in a breath through her tears as the pieces fell together in her mind. The inn they’d passed had been quarantined because of a dire illness, not an ague. Illnesses of that sort took a few days to manifest. They also took only a few days to kill.

Perhaps she would die in earnest after all.

Twelve

Damn the mud, damn the rain, damn the carriage, and damn that blasted statue and everything that had led to its creation. Lawrence did not have enough damns inside him to express his anger, frustration, and fear at the situation he found himself in. As he clutched Minerva tightly to him and rushed down a slope, then up a small rise to the small, sad church and the drenched parsonage beside it, he was ready to damn his entire life.

“Where are we going?” Minerva asked in a small, breathless voice as she clung to him. “Could we not return to the club so that I might bathe?”

Lawrence nearly missed a step. He glanced quickly down at Minerva as he sped forward. Her eyes were closed, and her already pale face was splotched with fever. She had seemed cognizant of their surroundings in the carriage, and even after, when she’d foolishly helped him and Silas move the damnable thing, but the strain of that effort and her subsequent fall must have been too much for her. Her eyes were closed now, and it was only a miracle that helped her maintain her grip on him.

“We’re going to try the parsonage,” he explained to her, attempting to keep his voice light, but knowing he failed. “With any luck, the parson will have a wife with competent healing skills. She’ll have you out of these muddy clothes, bathed, and tucked away in a nice, warm bed with a bowl of broth in no time.”

Minerva made a sound that might have been an attempt at an answer to his statement, but which came out sounding more like a pained wail of desperation.

That sound caused Lawrence to pick up his pace, despite the difficulty of running in the mud and rain with Minerva in his arms. Everything depended on him finding help for her at the cottage he raced toward.

He was relieved at least to see the parsonage appeared clean and well-kept. It seemed somewhat dark to his eyes, but the thought occurred to him that Minerva would most likely enjoy that.

With a quick shuffle of her increasingly heavy form in his arms, he freed a hand enough to knock on the door. When no immediate answer came, he knocked again with more force.

“Hello?” he shouted, all too aware of Minerva shivering as she pressed her body into him. “Hello? Is anyone at home? We need help.”

His calls went unanswered, and he knocked again before cursing under his breath. The parsonage was not so large that its inhabitants could not hear him. He was either being ignored or, as was more likely, no one was home.

A twist of panic filled his insides. Minerva needed immediate attention. She needed to get out of the rain and into a warm, dry bed as swiftly as possible. He considered kicking at the door until it caved in, but that would only compromise the warmth and protection of the house once they were able to enter it.

Minerva made another plaintive noise in his arms that nearly broke Lawrence’s heart.

“There, there, my love,” he said, forgetting for a moment that they were not married, not even courting. “I’ll think of something.”

He turned away from the parsonage door, glancing around for a moment. In one direction, he spotted Silas working to convince the horses that they wanted to pull the

damaged carriage the rest of the way to the parsonage. In the other was the church.

He hurried down the small lane that connected the parsonage to the church. If the parson was not at home, perhaps he was within his church, writing the week's sermon or taking care of other spiritual matters.

The church door was unlocked, which was a relief, but the entire building felt as empty as the tomb on Easter. It contained two small rows of pews, and for a moment, Lawrence considered laying Minerva on one of them while he continued his search, but he found himself deeply unwilling to let her go.

A short search of the church proved that it was empty as well. It had not been abandoned entirely, however. The air still held the scent of wax candles and woodsmoke. The linens on the altar were all in place and in good repair. The parson's small office off to one side of the sanctuary contained books, vestments, and even a teapot that still held some water. But no parson.

What it did hold was a set of keys hanging on a hook attached to the end of the room's bookshelf.

"I hope the good parson can forgive me for taking these and testing them in his own door," Lawrence said, grabbing the keys, then hefting Minerva in his arms to restrengthen his grip on her. "Desperate times and all."

By the time he stepped back out into the driving rain with the keys, Silas had brought the carriage all the way up to the top of the rise. He'd steered it toward a tiny stable behind the house so that the poor horses could have a modicum of shelter.

"Is she better?" Silas called as he worked with the horses.

"No," Lawrence shouted back as he headed for the parsonage's door to try the keys.

“We need help.”

Silas nodded, then continued his work to secure the carriage.

Lawrence adjusted Minerva in his arms once more, alarmed at how much his muscles ached, but unwilling to let her go just yet. He tried key after key in the front door lock, and when he found one that worked to turn the mechanism and open the door, he shouted in victory.

His shout was met with a weak groan from Minerva that killed any sense of triumph he had.

“We’re inside now, love,” he said, barging into the house as if it were their own.

“Housebreaking again?” Minerva said in a suddenly lucid voice.

Lawrence laughed with relief, but that relief was short-lived. Minerva lapsed into a swoon as soon as he tried to set her on her feet.

“Ups-a-daisy,” Lawrence said, catching her and pulling him against her. “I’ve got you.”

His efforts to remain light-hearted and to project that all would be well, now that they were in the house, continued as he looked around the tidy space.

“Someone has kept this place looking nice,” he spoke the sweetest variation of his still anxious thoughts as he glanced around. “We should find everything we need here.”

“Can I go to bed?” Minerva asked on a heavy sigh, leaning her face against his shoulder.

“Absolutely,” Lawrence said.

He continued to glance around for a moment, then finally decided to pull out one of the chairs from the small dining table and seat Minerva there, in the middle of the floor, so that he could peel her out of her muddy cloak without making too much of a mess.

He removed his coat as well, and his boots and stockings. Really, to preserve the cleanliness of the parsonage, he needed to remove his clothes entirely, and likely toss them in the midden heap, but he settled for stripping down to just his shirt and breeches. His shirt had avoided most of the mud, at least.

Undressing Minerva was another conundrum. After the night they’d spent together, he did not think she would balk at being naked in his presence. There was Silas to consider, though, and if the parson and his potential wife should return home and find two naked people and a pile of muddy clothing waiting for them, their troubles could increase tenfold.

The imminent return of the parson did not seem likely, however, when Lawrence considered that both the fireplace and the small iron stove in the corner of the house’s main room were both cold. Wherever the parson was, he had not been home for days. It was a potential boon in some ways, but Lawrence did not like the chill in the house, nor the effort he knew it would take to warm it again.

“It will just be a moment, love,” he called over to Minerva, who slumped in her chair, eyes closed, as he flitted around the room, trying not to splatter mud everywhere as he moved his clothing. “I just need to light the fire and this cozy house will be warmed right away.”

Minerva snorted some sort of laugh, then lolled her head to the other side. “It always takes hours to warm an empty house,” she said.

Whether that was meant to be an admonishment or not, Lawrence smiled at Minerva's returned lucidity. He doubled the pace of his work as he took wood from a basket to the side of the fireplace, and thanked God it was there, along with kindling and matches, and set to work building the fire.

Time slipped into a space where it had no meaning as he worked to get both the fireplace and the stove burning. He was single-minded in his mission to warm Minerva and to protect her from the elements and whatever illness had beset her. As soon as the logs in the fireplace caught, he returned to Minerva, lifting her to her feet so he could move her chair closer to the growing warmth.

"You should remove these wet, muddy things immediately," he said, sinking to his knees in front of her once he had her reseated and pulling at the waterlogged laces of her traveling boots.

"Lawrence," Minerva said in a groggy, scolding voice. "Now is not the time for such things."

Lawrence glanced up at her warily. Perhaps she was not as rational as he thought.

"Believe me, my love," he said, throwing caution to the wind as he pulled off one of her boots and the ruined stocking she wore with it, then worked on the other. "When the time comes that we are both well and safe once more, I should like nothing better than to be as inappropriate and wicked with you as we were last night. But for the moment, my attentions to your person are entirely practical, I can assure you."

Minerva made a sound that might have been disbelief, but then fell into a coughing fit before she could say anything.

The fit frightened Lawrence down to the marrow of his bones. He yanked her second boot off, but waited on removing her stocking until he had straightened and held his

arms out to her, as if she might need him to catch her as she fell.

The fit passed, though, and Minerva whined with discomfort.

“Is there any tea?” she asked. “My throat feels awful.”

Lawrence pulled off her remaining stocking, then stood, pulling her to her feet as he did.

“I shall check in a moment,” he said, reaching behind her to tug at the ties of her gown. “But it will be some time before the stove is hot enough to boil water.”

Minerva groaned her discontent at that, then shrugged and flailed as Lawrence continued to undress her. Lawrence couldn’t tell whether she was attempting to help him remove her soiled and heavy clothing or if she was fighting against him.

“At least the rain has washed some of the mud from your hair,” Lawrence said once he had her sodden gown and petticoats in a pile around her feet. Her underthings were clean enough to stay in place, but they were soaked through, leaving nothing to the imagination.

Lust was the farthest thing from Lawrence’s mind in that moment, however. He sat Minerva on the chair again, pushed her dirty things closer to the hearth, then rushed into the cottage’s only other room, the bedroom, to tear the thick quilt away and bring it to her.

“Up you come,” he told Minerva as he helped her to her feet once more, then wrapped her snugly in the quilt. “Right this way, madam,” he went on, still trying to keep things cheery, though his heart beat harder and his insides quivered with fear more and more with each passing moment. “I saw a nice, warm bed in the other room. I’ll have you tucked in and off to sleep in no time.”

“No!” Minerva protested, using more strength than she should to resist him when he tried to pick her up. “I have no wish to go to bed. I want to stay near you.”

Lawrence’s heart nearly melted in his chest. Instead of picking Minerva up and carrying her into the other room, he indulged in a moment of hugging her tightly. She sagged against him, as if huddling into his warmth, and rested her cheek on his shoulder once more.

“I have you, love,” he told her in his gentlest voice, kissing the side of her damp head. “Nothing is going to happen to you while you’re in my arms. I’ll keep you warm and safe for as long as we’re together.”

To his surprise, Minerva sobbed at those words. “I’m going to die,” she wailed softly, shivering slightly despite his embrace. “I’ll be dead and gone to Sweden, and you’ll never see me again.”

The corner of Lawrence’s mouth twitched. “Sweden?” he asked, moving closer to the increasingly warm fire with her. “Not heaven?”

“A whole new life is waiting for me,” Minerva mumbled.

“Not while I have you,” Lawrence said.

He eased her back onto the chair, wishing the room had a softer armchair that he could tuck her into. She really should have been in the bed, but until the whole cottage was warm, the wooden kitchen chair was the best they could do.

Minerva seemed to flag for a few moments as Lawrence rushed around the house, preparing the kettle for when the stove was hot enough for tea, then lighting the smaller fireplace in the bedroom. As he worked, he opened cabinets and pulled out drawers, searching for anything that might be medicine to stave off disaster.

He found plenty of bottles with stoppers that looked as if they could be medicines, but the labels were all handwritten, and he had enough trouble with letters that were printed. Handwriting was completely beyond his abilities.

And yet, he had to do something.

“Do you know what cherry syrup smells like?” he asked, pulling open one of the bottles whose label began with a “C”. That was all he could make out of it.

“Cherry syrup is good for coughs, not throats,” Minerva answered, surprising Lawrence. Even though he’d spoken out loud, he believed her to be asleep sitting up. “I need honey.”

“Oh?” he said, returning the bottle to the small cupboard where he’d found it. “Is that good for throats?”

“Yes.”

Lawrence found a small jar of honey and turned to take it to her, only to find Minerva staring at him.

“You cannot read,” she told him, her brow knit in thought.

Heat rushed up Lawrence’s neck to bathe his face. “I can read,” he said stiffly. “Only...only not all the time.”

Minerva’s frown deepened as he approached her with the honey. “What do you mean by that? One either reads or they do not.”

“The letters move,” Lawrence said, crouching in front of her and dipping his finger into the honey pot, then holding it to her lips.

“Letters do not move,” Minerva said, looking more than a little comical with her imperious expression, swaddled in a borrowed quilt, her dark hair matted with rain and some mud. “They stay put on the page, like sensible little soldiers.”

“Not for me, they do not,” Lawrence said, touching his honey-soaked finger to Minerva’s lips.

Minerva sent him a stern look of doubt, then parted her lips to suck the honey from his finger.

The jolt that shot through Lawrence defied his determination to remain completely immune to his baser needs as he cared for Minerva. His cock jumped to life as the suction Minerva employed on his finger reminded it of other ways she could take part of him into his mouth.

Minerva seemed to feel it as well. Her eyes went suddenly wide, and the movement of her tongue across the sensitive underside of his finger slowed to something sensual. He could feel that, given different circumstances, she would be quite adept at that particular form of pleasure.

The moment was fleeting, however. As soon as Minerva swallowed, her face pinched with pain once more.

“Perhaps I should lie down,” she panted once she released Lawrence’s finger.

“Yes, I believe you should,” Lawrence said, standing and returning the honey pot to the counter.

He came back to Minerva and lifted her into his arms. This time, she made no attempt to push him away or protest. Lawrence was able to carry her into the bedroom, unwind the quilt from her still hot, shivering body, and to tuck her properly between

the sheets. He spread the quilt atop her as she sighed out and closed her eyes, then he searched the chest at the end of the bed, thankful to find more blankets there to cover her with.

When all that was done, he stood back, leaning against the doorframe, and simply watched her as she drifted off to sleep. He had never known the fear of watching someone he loved so much fall so ill so quickly. His mind danced with images of Minerva dying, as she'd insisted she would. She might fly off to her heavenly Sweden, but he would sink deep into the hell of Wessex if she left him so soon after they'd found each other.

He didn't know how long he'd been standing there when the parsonage's front door opened, then closed again, and Silas stepped gingerly across the main room, as if he were trying not to drip rainwater everywhere.

"The carriage's axel is cracked," he reported with a grim sigh. "We won't be able to travel any farther until it's repaired."

"Do you have the tools to repair it?" Lawrence asked quietly, turning away from the bedroom and gesturing for Silas to move closer to the fireplace.

Silas shook his head. "Not only do I not have the tools, I don't have the skills either, my lord. But there's a village in the distance," he added. "I can go there and see about hiring a wainwright to make the repairs."

Lawrence nodded. "You do that. And perhaps you could determine the whereabouts of the parson while you are there? Or ask about cures for whatever ails Lady Minerva?"

Silas must have seen the worry in Lawrence's eyes. He smiled compassionately and placed a hand on Lawrence's shoulder. "I'll do that, my lord. Don't you worry. Lady

Minerva will be well in no time.”

Lawrence returned the kind smile with one of his own. “Thank you, Silas.”

Silas patted his shoulder, then turned to be about his new mission. As soon as he was out of the cottage, Lawrence turned back to Minerva, his heart filled with worry. She needed to recover. She simply must grow well again soon. He had only just found her, but now he did not think he could live without her.

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Thirteen

The rain would not let up, the cottage seemed to take forever to heat, and time became Lawrence's enemy as he waited for Silas to return from whatever village he'd seen in the distance. Lawrence was loath to let Minerva out of his sight, even though she'd fallen into a deep sleep, but he was desperate enough, in his bare feet and minimal dress, to don his things again so that he could walk out to the carriage to retrieve some of his and Minerva's baggage.

It was a terrible idea. The rain pounded mercilessly down. Without Silas there to help, he had to struggle with the trunk that contained their smaller trunks and bags on the back of the carriage. He dropped his small trunk into the mud of the insufficient stable structure and nearly spooked one of the horses into bolting in the process. The only thing that prevented the horse from fleeing in disgust was what Lawrence assumed was its own exhaustion and misery.

He did eventually manage to bring enough baggage into the house to strip down and wash completely, including his hair, dry himself, and dress in fresh, dry clothing. It was bliss.

That momentary relief faded quickly when he returned to sit by Minerva's bedside. He'd fetched Clarence from the carriage along with his things, and with more seriousness than he supposed he should have used, he set the skull on the bedside table to watch over her along with him.

Minerva was so pale, and yet fever painted her beautiful cheeks. Her breaths were long and deep, but they had the strain of someone who was not well to them. She

coughed a few times without waking, and Lawrence could tell that her throat was still very sore.

It was agony to have nothing to do but watch as whatever malevolent spirit that had ahold of Minerva tortured her. He adjusted her blankets and tested her skin in an attempt to determine whether she was too hot several times. He paced back and forth in the main room, finally setting the kettle to boil when the stove was hot enough, but then returning to watch Minerva a bit longer rather than staring at the water.

The afternoon wore into a gloomy evening, and Lawrence's patience wore so thin that he set himself the task of washing Minerva's hair for her without waking her. He carried a basin he'd found with clean, warm water to the side of the bed, lifted Minerva enough to layer towels under her head, then attempted to sponge and comb water through her hair until the mud came out and the water ran clean.

He succeeded in improving her condition a bit, but not in allowing her to sleep on.

"What are you doing?" she asked, her voice decidedly scratchy, when his ministrations disturbed her.

"Attempting to wash your hair," Lawrence said, smiling at her and stroking the backs of his fingers across her face. He could not help but touch her, although, should she ask, he would say he was testing for fever.

"You've changed," she said, struggling to push herself to sit.

"No, no, I am the same ridiculous oaf I've always been," Lawrence said, attempting to smile.

Minerva let out a breath and sent him a sideways half-grin that nearly had Lawrence's heart beating out of his chest.

That moment of elation was dampened when she began to cough, then groaned and clutched at her throat to indicate the pain she was in.

“I brought Clarence in to nurse you, and I made tea,” Lawrence announced, leaping frantically up from the bed, desperate to do whatever he could to ease her suffering. If there was a dragon outside the cottage that needed battling, he would have rushed to defeat it. “I’ll make you some more with honey.”

Minerva nodded, but rather than resting and letting him get on with things, she pushed and struggled to get out of bed.

“I beg your pardon, madam,” Lawrence said, turning back and blocking her way. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Getting up,” Minerva croaked. Lawrence opened his mouth to protest, but Minerva countered him with, “I wish for more than my hair to be clean. You’ve obviously taken a bath, so I would like one as well.”

Lawrence blew out a breath and let his arms drop, defeated. He could not very well deny her the same pleasure he’d given himself. Not when he could see how musty she still was from the mud.

Against his better judgment, but eager to please her as well as protect her, Lawrence helped Minerva rise and return to the cottage’s main room. It was considerably warmer than before, and although Minerva was still shivering and unsteady on her feet, the room was more comfortable for her.

Even ill, Minerva was stubborn. As much as Lawrence tried to hover and assist her, she insisted that she was fully capable of bathing herself. She batted away Lawrence’s every attempt to help her undress or soap up the sponge he’d used earlier on her hair. He conceded defeat when she asked him to turn around while she

accomplished the actual bathing, but unbeknownst to her, he watched her reflection in the cottage's windows to make certain she did not struggle unduly.

He insisted on helping Minerva to dry off, though he still kept his eyes averted, and then put his foot down and carried her back to bed.

"This is all entirely unnecessary," she croaked as he fed her honeyed tea and broth he'd made from a jar of bouillon paste he'd found in the pantry, along with a bit of bread that had gone stale, but was not yet moldy. "I can feed myself."

"Can you?" Lawrence asked, one eyebrow arched scoldingly. "Clarence doesn't think so."

He glanced to the skull, then nodded, as if Clarence had stated his agreement.

Minerva merely looked at him with a stare that would have made evil spirits shudder in their boots, but that quickly dissolved into a sigh.

"The two of you have joined forces against me," she said.

Worryingly, she only finished half her meal, then settled down to sleep without a fuss afterwards. Her slumber was heavy right from the start, though she continued to cough and shiver, even as she snored.

Lawrence returned to pacing, consumed with the desperate need to do something. He felt very much as if he would go out of his mind if Minerva did not turn a corner soon.

A small bit of relief came when Silas returned to the house about an hour after dark.

"There's a wainwright in the village," he announced, his voice thick with exhaustion,

as he removed his coat and hat. “He’s happy to repair the carriage, but he requested that I bring it there on the morrow.”

“Will the carriage make the journey?” Lawrence asked.

Silas nodded, but without confidence. “If we unload it to put as little strain on the axle as possible,” he said. “It’s merely cracked, not broken yet.”

“We’ll remove the statue before you leave,” Lawrence said. A half-smile flitted across his face before he said, “We can store it in the church until we’re ready to move on.”

Silas laughed at whatever picture that suggestion created in his mind.

His expression lightened for a moment before he went on to say, “Oh, you’ll be pleased to know, my lord, that I asked about the parson at the village. He’s away visiting relatives in Winchester until the end of the month. He only just left the day before yesterday.”

“Which explains why there is still bread and a bit of milk in the house,” Lawrence said, grateful for it.

Silas nodded. “I’ll fetch more provisions in the morning, when I take the carriage to the village. And I was told there’s a village wise woman who might be able to dose Lady Minerva with some sort of healing tincture as well.”

“Thank God,” Lawrence breathed out. “I’d prefer a London physician, but between you and me, it is often these village healers that do a better job of it while causing less damage to their patients.”

Silas agreed with a nod, and the two of them set to work making pallets for them to

sleep on for the night. Lawrence supposed he could have attempted to share the bed with Minerva, but he did not want her to wake in the night and fear he had undertaken any sort of impropriety with her.

Not that Lawrence had much rest that night. Every time Minerva so much as sniffled, he leapt up and ran to her bedside to see what was the matter. He went running so much that halfway through the night, he moved his pallet into the bedroom to sleep on the floor by her side.

In the morning, the rain had gone, but Minerva's fever was hotter than ever. So much so that she barely stirred when Lawrence hovered over her, pressing the back of his hand to her forehead.

"I wish I'd paid more attention to whatever malady that was at the quarantined inn we passed," Lawrence worried aloud as he stood over her.

"Er, it was a putrid fever, my lord," Silas answered from the other side of the bedroom doorway. "Some of the others in the stable, where I passed the night, said three or four people had already died of it."

Lawrence caught his breath. That was not what he wanted to hear.

"Fetch the wise woman, then, Silas, if you please," he said.

"As soon as you help me unburden the carriage, my lord."

Lawrence winced. He hated leaving Minerva's side, but the quicker they managed to complete the task, the sooner Minerva would have help.

The rain had stopped, but the roads and paths around the parsonage and the church were still muddy and slippery. On any other day, Lawrence would have laughed

uproariously at the way he and Silas struggled with his lurid statue as they carried it from the carriage to the church. Silas only dared to drive the carriage as far as the road, rather than all the way to the church door, which meant the two of them had to struggle through the mud before carrying the heavy carving into the church.

As it happened, some of the mud splashed to a particular spot near the backside of the male figure in the arrangement, giving the appearance of the whole a completely different connotation. Lawrence prayed that Minerva would recover soon enough to come view the statue where they placed it, atop the baptismal font, with the mud lodged in its current crack.

As hopeful as Lawrence was once Silas drove away with the carriage, being without conveyance in a strange place, while the woman he was willing to admit he adored above all others lay abed with an affliction that was known to have ended lives, had Lawrence feeling restless and anxious.

He did whatever he could think of to combat his anxiety, bringing firewood into the house to dry after the night's rain, searching the cupboards for anything resembling food and attempting to cook, and even fetching one of Minerva's books of poetry and submitting himself to the extreme pain of attempting to read it.

All of his activities did nothing to ease his troubled mind, so when the grey-haired old matron who professed herself to be the village healer arrived at the parsonage door, Lawrence nearly wept with relief.

"How long has she been like this?" the old woman asked as she leaned over a fitfully sleeping Minerva, pressing her hand to Minerva's face.

"I believe she began to take ill yesterday morning," Lawrence said, "then progressively became worse throughout the day. She washed up before bed last night, but she has not truly been sensible at all yet today."

That worried him enough, since he was sure it was close to midday, but when the old woman made a dire sound, his nerves all but shattered.

“It’s the wasting fever, to be sure,” she said, turning away from the bed and shaking her head. “It’s been scourging the countryside these last few weeks, taking young and old indiscriminately. I am sorry, my lord.”

Lawrence had to fight not to yelp. “Is there nothing you can give her for it?” he asked. “No tea or tablet or tincture?”

The old woman shrugged, then gestured for him to follow her into the main room. “I’ve got herbs for a tea, if she’s well enough to drink it. Otherwise,” she shrugged, “it’s up to the will of God.”

“But there must be something that could help,” Lawrence fretted.

“Not with a fever like this,” the woman said.

Lawrence was in no way satisfied with that answer. Someone somewhere must have had the ability to do something.

A flash of inspiration hit him. “My father will know what to do,” he said, speaking more to himself than the old woman. “He has lived a long time and suffered more than his fair share of illness. He would know what the cure for this particular fever might be.”

“I could have him fetched,” the old woman said.

Lawrence winced. “He’s all the way down at Godwin Castle, on the Isle of Portland.” He paused, then said, “Truly, we should travel there, to him. I would feel far safer if my Minerva could convalesce in my family home.” He would most certainly be able

to find a more competent physician to attend her there.

“You could write to him, explain the situation and tell him you and your lady are on your way, though whether she lasts that long is up to God, not us,” the old woman suggested. “I’ll see that the letter is delivered.”

A deeper sort of distress struck Lawrence. Of all the times for the one skill he had never mastered to be the singular one he needed, it had to be now.

He was too desperate for Minerva to be well to hold onto his pride, so he admitted to the woman, “I cannot write.”

The old woman stared at him for a moment before saying, “Then you’re lucky I can.”

She toddled off to the side, to a desk in the corner, as if she’d been in the parsonage before and knew where things were. She helped herself to the chair, then produced a piece of paper from one of the cubbies and a bottle of ink from another.

Lawrence paced behind her as she wrote. He wondered if he had just fallen victim to the Curse of Godwin Castle. Surely, that was the devilry behind Minerva’s illness. It was the curse, he was certain, that had led to him being so unlucky in love thus far in his life. The curse had thrown him together with Minerva precisely at the point when something as pedestrian as a fever would take her from him.

If it was the last thing he did, as soon as Minerva was well enough, he would marry her and...and doom Dunstan to suffer with the curse alone?

He could not worry about his cousin just yet. In the moment, Minerva was the only one he could have a care for.

“There,” the wise woman said, finishing the letter, then presenting him with the pen.

“Can you sign your name or make your mark?”

“Yes, I can,” Lawrence said. He rushed forward, took up the pen, and scribbled his name across the bottom of the paper.

Only after the wise woman sanded and blotted the letter, then folded it and wrote the address of Godwin Castle as Lawrence dictated it did Lawrence consider that he should have at least made an attempt to read the letter’s contents first. He’d instructed the old woman to plead the necessity of sending help, as he figured that was all that was needed.

“Make certain that reaches Lord Gerald Godwin as quickly as possible,” he charged the old woman as he escorted her out of the house. “And if you can think of anything at all that might aid Lady Minerva in her recovery, please return and share it.”

“I will, my lord, but I think it’s best that you prepare yourself.”

Lawrence wanted to rage with frustration at those words. How could Minerva be so close to death already when less than two days ago, they were creeping through Tidworth Hall’s attic, then tangled up in the throes of passion? It made no sense at all to him.

At least the old woman was sympathetic, even if she was a harbinger of doom.

“I’ll have one of my girls come by with a basket of provisions for you,” she said, patting Lawrence’s arm sympathetically as she stepped out of the cottage. “You won’t have to leave her side until the end.”

Lawrence huffed in annoyance, then immediately felt guilty and schooled his expression to one of thanks. “I cannot express my gratitude,” he told the woman with a smile as she turned to walk off.

He could not express it, because he was not convinced he had any. At least, he was not convinced the old woman had done anything but worry him needlessly.

Minerva would not perish. He would not let something as mundane as a fever take her. Minerva was strong and imaginative. If she were to die at all, it would be because she was struck by lightning or lost at sea, or some other means of shuffling off her mortal coil that would be worthy of the sort of tale she liked to read.

There had to be something he could do.

Lawrence shut the cottage door, then returned to the bedroom, where Minerva continued to slumber. He sat on the edge of the bed, aching with exhaustion himself, and sought out her hand as it lay on the covers.

“All will be well, my darling,” he said, stroking the back of her hand as he held it in one of his. “This is just a passing fever. You will be right as rain, standing in the cemetery, making up macabre tales of its inhabitants again in no time.

Minerva gave a short, sniffling breath, then coughed without waking. Lawrence’s heart squeezed, threatening to break within him. He glanced to Clarence as if appealing to a friend. This could not be the end, it simply could not.

Fourteen

All Minnie wanted to do was sleep, so sleep she did. She wanted to sleep away the misery of the rain and falling in the mud. She wanted to embrace oblivion rather than examine her increasing feelings toward Lawrence. But perhaps most of all, she wanted to hide away under the counterpane in the tiny parsonage Lawrence had found for her so that she could avoid the reality of the fate that awaited her.

She did not know what she would do. She did not know what she could do. What she thought she'd wanted taunted her in her fevered dreams as she imagined herself standing on the cliffs near Bristol, gazing out over the sea that would take her to Sweden. What she knew she did not want taunted her as the ghostly shapes of her mother and father and Owen chased her through the fog of her nightmares.

What her heart longed for waited for her, sitting beside her bed when she sneezed herself awake some indeterminate amount of time after she'd taken to bed.

Her entire body felt as heavy and limp as a rag that had been used to scrub the muddy carriage, then wrung out over and over, until it was a brown and threadbare mess. Nearly as soon as she opened her eyes and became aware of the world around her, her head filled up with congestion that made her pinch her face in upset.

At least her throat was no longer sore. That was a small blessing, but a welcome one. Minnie truly did not like the sensation of knives slicing at her poor throat from the inside.

“Yea...thou I...walk th-thr-though the...valley?—”

Minnie turned her head and scowled at Lawrence. He sat in a chair beside her bed, frowning sharply at the old, heavy Bible in his hands. His entire face was screwed up with his efforts to read aloud from what was supposed to be a comforting psalm.

Minnie had never liked the cheery picture that psalm was supposed to paint. Then again, as she pushed her tired body in an effort to sit, she considered that the valley of death might not be as thrilling and romantic as she had once imagined it to be.

“My God, you’re awake!” Lawrence cried out as soon as he noticed her movements. He snapped the Bible aside and tossed it on the bed beside her, nearly knocking Clarence to the floor.

Minnie reached out to steady Clarence before he could fall, pulling him closer to her. “What are you doing here?” she asked, her voice thick and miserable.

Lawrence laughed and answered for Clarence. “I retrieved him from the carriage before Silas took it to the nearby village for repairs. I did not think the wainwright would find it a good omen to have Clarence staring back at him when he opened the carriage door to look around. And I thought you might miss him if he were gone for too long.”

Minnie smiled and patted Clarence’s head. “He has always been a comfort to me, and a dear, dear friend.”

Her heart inserted Lawrence in place of Clarence in her mind. Minnie could not think of many, outside of her most intimate female friends, who would have taken such care of her at such a distressing time, and with so little promise of reward. Lawrence had his statue now. It would have behooved him to return directly to London with it so that arrangements for his German exhibition could continue.

“Did the parson ever return?” she asked, dragging her eyes up to meet Lawrence’s.

The worry and joy and affection she saw, all bundled up together in his expression, melted her heart. The way he almost reached for her hand, then held back, as if he did not feel he had a right to touch her nearly broke it.

“Silas learned that the parson is away in Winchester, visiting relatives,” he said, clearing his throat and assuming a stronger presentation. Instead of grasping Minnie’s hand and perhaps twining their fingers together and kissing her with heartfelt gratitude that she was still alive, he gave her hand two, quick pats. “A local wise woman has been by a few times in the last few days to visit you and prepare healing teas.”

Minnie’s eyes went wide. “The last few days ?”

“Yes,” Lawrence said. He cleared his throat and squirmed nervously on his chair. “She, er, believed that you are afflicted with the same putrid fever that has, um, killed several people in the county in the last few months. She...she told me to prepare for the worst.”

Minnie blinked at him, then pushed herself to sit against the pillows piled behind her. “It’s been days?” she whispered, then sniffed as her nose began to leak, then sneezed at the sensation that caused.

Lawrence quickly fetched a handkerchief from the table beside the bed and handed it to her, saying, “Just three days. I have taken it as a good sign that you have slept so well and so deeply. Sleep is healing, as my father always used to tell me. And you were somewhat lucid at times. Enough to drink the tea.”

Minnie blew her nose, too wobbly still to be embarrassed at making such sounds and producing such fluids in Lawrence’s presence. Now that she thought about it, she did vaguely remember waking long enough to drink something. There had also been a mortifying discussion between Lawrence and an old woman about how to manage

soiled sheets and linens because Minnie could not get out of bed.

Thinking of that made her too aware that she needed to find a chamber pot right at that moment.

“I could use more tea,” she said once she’d finished blowing her nose, which left her with a sodden handkerchief in her hands. She glanced at Lawrence with a look that, on anyone else, would have been coquettish. “Would you make me some?”

“Yes, of course, my?—”

Minnie’s mouth twitched slightly at the endearment Lawrence bit off.

“Yes, of course,” he repeated in a more serious voice.

Minnie smiled gratefully at him as he rose and took himself into the other room.

Her smile died as soon as he was out of her sight, however. Her heart longed for him so desperately. Now more than ever, as he had clearly been the most perfect nurse and caretaker for her.

She simply did not know what to do about the predicament she found herself in.

She knew enough to push herself to rise from bed, at least. It was alarming how weak and groggy she felt, despite so many days of sleep, as she pushed the Bible aside to swing her legs around to the edge of the bed. She paused once she was in position, then pushed with a tremendous amount of effort to rise to a standing position.

As soon as she was supporting her own weight, Minnie closed her eyes and frowned. No, walking through the valley of the shadow of death absolutely was not romantic at all. As she shuffled to the screen in the corner where a chamber pot was located, she

shook her head at the silly version of herself that would even consider that expiring of a fever would be a poetic way to die.

She used the chamber pot with great relief, then made it halfway back to the bed before Lawrence returned to the room with a plate of some sort of tarts. As soon as he saw her, his eyes widened.

“Gracious, Minerva, what are you doing?” he demanded. He set the plate aside, then moved to sweep her into his arms and carry her back to bed.

Minnie scowled, but every other part of her aside from her face sang with relief and begged her to cling to Lawrence. It felt so good to be in his arms once more, even though the circumstances were very different to the last time.

“I cannot lie abed forever,” she said, sounding far more peevish than she felt. “I feel much better now and should be up and about.”

Her traitorous head sent her into a sneezing fit as soon as she said the words. With no handkerchief immediately at hand, she accidentally sneezed directly onto Lawrence’s waistcoat.

It was mortifying, but Lawrence did not seem to notice.

“You are not yet well, my—” He cleared his throat as he lay her in the bed again. “Your fever has broken, but you have a long way to go yet along your road of recovery.”

Perhaps it was wicked of her, but Minnie did not want to be out of Lawrence’s arms yet. So she clung to him, grasping at his waistcoat as if she were concerned for the mess she’d made, and generally doing whatever she could to make it more difficult for Lawrence to put her down.

After a few, vain attempts, he gave up the exercise and sat on the bed with her. From his expression when Minnie peeked up at him, he knew her game, but was perfectly willing to be complicit in it.

What Minnie wanted to do was to sigh and sag gracefully into Lawrence's embrace, closing her eyes and resting against him, like the picture of a delicate maiden relying on her prince. What she actually did was sneeze again, sending snot dribbling over her upper lip.

"Here," Lawrence said, half laughing as he twisted to retrieve another handkerchief from the bedside table. "I believe you require this."

"Are you making fun of me?" Minnie asked as she took the handkerchief, then adjusted so that she leaned her back against Lawrence's side before blowing and cleaning her nose.

"No," Lawrence said, laughing harder and seeming to contradict himself. "I am merely grateful that you are still alive. I would have had quite a conundrum on my hands, had you expired in my care."

"Yes," Minnie said, feeling slightly better once her nose was marginally cleared. "There would have been inquiries."

"No, I mean that I would have had a devil of a time digging a hole to dispose of you in," he said, still far too cheerful for the topic. "Granted, the church has a small graveyard attached to it, so there must be shovels and other tools for the job nearby. And perhaps one of the current graves is new enough that the soil is still loose. I could have buried you atop someone else, I suppose."

"You wouldn't dare," Minnie said with mock horror in her eyes. In actuality, her poor, weakened heart danced and twirled at the ridiculous situation Lawrence had

concocted.

“I would have to dare,” Lawrence said with a nod, not to Minnie, but to Clarence, who had been moved to one side so Minnie and Lawrence could sit together in the bed. “I would need to avoid those authorities, after all. I cannot blame your death on highwaymen this time.”

“This time?” Minnie raised her eyes to him, using the handkerchief to catch a few more drips from her nose.

“Yes, well, you have faked your own death before,” he said, as casual as you please. “You blamed those blasted highwaymen. Do you not remember?”

Minnie’s insides twisted with guilt. It was as if Lawrence had come to know her too well. Or as if he could read her thoughts to know what she’d had planned for the end of their journey.

It occurred to her with a start that she could not carry on with her original plan at all now. Not with Lawrence so near to her, both in terms of proximity and so near to her heart. He would suspect at once that her demise was not real, and he would come after her.

Minnie sucked in a breath, but hid her excitement by blowing her nose again. Lawrence would come after her. He would search for her, picking up every clue that she left along the way, and he would find her. Perhaps he would travel all the way to Stockholm and find her in her new life. He would inquire after a Welsh spinster with raven hair living alone in the city. He would appear on her doorstep late one evening, declaring that he had found her at last. She would feign fright at first, then invite him in for the welcome of all welcomes once he?—

“I say, Minerva, are you certain you are recovering? Your face has just flushed

deeply,” Lawrence said.

Minnie pursed her lips to remove every last trace of a smile, then blew her nose again, though she desperately needed a dry handkerchief.

“I can assure you, I am quite well,” she said in a stuffy, wet voice once she had schooled her expression back to neutrality. “In fact, I am feeling so much better that I believe I can fetch that tea you promised myself.”

To prove it, she squirmed over Lawrence, perhaps more than was strictly necessary, in an attempt to get out of bed.

“No, you don’t,” Lawrence said, resisting her efforts and manhandling her to keep her where she was.

The result was a short wrestling match in which she was most definitely overpowered. Lawrence rolled her to her back and pinned her against the sheets. After a few more seconds of struggle, Minnie gave up and switched to enjoying her defeat. She certainly enjoyed the sensation of Lawrence’s large, warm body pressing down on her.

“My lord,” she said, congested, “this is not the moment for such attentions.”

Lawrence seemed to realize what position they were in and how close his face was to Minnie’s. He pulled up a bit, fire and affection dancing in his eyes.

“You are quite right,” he said with a mock serious nod. “With the cannon of your sweet nose loaded the way it is, I would not wish to risk further damage to my clothing.”

He dipped down to kiss her forehead quickly, then pushed back and stood.

“I shall fetch your tea,” he said, as gravely as any parson, “and as many more handkerchiefs as are necessary.”

With a final nod, he turned and left the room.

Minnie sank back against the pillows, trying her best not to laugh. She failed miserably, though her burst of laughter set off a coughing fit that masked her true feelings.

How was it possible to be so blissfully happy when she felt so utterly awful? Her body still ached, her head felt as thick as a post, and the coughing fit left her feeling as exhausted as if she had not slept in weeks instead of doing almost nothing but sleeping for days. All the same, she could not recall a single time in her life when she felt as warm and happy as she was with Lawrence.

“This is a decidedly dangerous turn of events,” she lamented to Clarence as she burrowed back under the covers, glad for their warmth.

Clarence merely smiled back at her, as if he had known things would unfold this way all along.

The rest of the afternoon was spent with Minnie in bed, periodically dozing and blowing her nose, while Lawrence made what she knew was a Herculean effort to read to her. She knew it was nearly impossible for him to make out the words, after his confession. As much as she loathed the idea of someone reading the Bible to her while she foundered with illness, she let Lawrence continue with his psalms, because he knew many of them by heart already, which helped him to make out the words.

Minnie was also grateful for the food that the woman from the village had sent along, since the parson had left little behind when he’d left for Winchester, and she doubted Lawrence could cook. It was a strong sign that she was recovering that the stew

provided by the old woman tasted like heaven to her and she wanted to devour all of it.

She slept well that night on top of everything, which was a surprise and a godsend. Lawrence attempted to sleep on a pallet on the floor beside her, which he had done for the last few nights, apparently, but Minnie insisted that he share the bed with her, resorting to fussing when he refused, until he gave in.

“I will stay well to this side of the bed,” he said as they settled in for the night. “I fear what might happen if you decide to use my nightshirt as your new handkerchief.”

Minnie laughed, marveling all over again that a moment which could very well be considered a low point was, instead, turning out to be so wonderful.

In the morning, Minnie felt marginally better. She awoke before Lawrence and slipped out of bed on the opposite side from him as he continued to slumber away. It was obvious to her that he needed the rest after days of caring for her. She was able to use the chamber pot and wash a little before wrapping one of her shawls, which Lawrence had fetched for her the day before from the baggage that had been brought into the house, and creeping into the main part of the cottage.

It was a sign of how much better she was feeling that she was able to dress in one of her plainer day gowns before Lawrence woke up, and that she could tend to the fires, set the kettle to boil, and slice a few pieces of bread from the loaf someone had left on the counter so that she and Lawrence might break their fast.

She was able to do so many things before Lawrence awoke and rushed into the main room, as if he thought Minnie had fled, or possibly been kidnapped by pirates, that the expression that came over him when he saw she was well and breakfast was ready was one of amazement.

“You should not be out of bed yet,” he said, stepping farther into the room and looking around.

He had slept in his clothes from the day before, and looked much the worse for wear because of it. His hair stood out in all its silver glory, and his face was still pink and creased from where his cheek had been pressed against the pillow, but he was still the most beautiful thing Minnie had ever seen.

“Lord Lawrence!” she admonished him. “Do you not realize I am an invalid and should not be taken to bed in such a manner?”

Lawrence made a face at her, then they both fell into pure, affectionate laughter.

That laughter was stopped abruptly by a slam, a clattering, and a female scream that came from just outside, in the direction of the church.

Fifteen

The sheer gratitude toward every divine power that he felt, seeing that Minerva had been spared an untimely death, made Lawrence giddy. He was well aware that Minerva was toying with him, seeking to be closer to him and to draw him in to a degree of intimacy that he should not be considering in their current predicament, but he was helpless against her pull.

He wanted her. He needed her. And as he emerged from the bedroom to find her dressed and preparing toast, while the two of them jested with each other as though all were well in the world, he vowed that he would marry her, come what may. It was only a shame that the parson was away, because he would have insisted the man marry them at once, were he there.

He was scrambling for some way to express that sentiment in reply to Minerva's impertinent question when a racket sounded from the direction of the church. Never one to ignore a woman's screams, and despite his horrific state of dishabille, Lawrence marched straight for the door.

"Stay here," he cautioned Minerva as he turned the handle and pulled the door open, letting the crisp, November air into the otherwise cozy cottage.

"Stay here?" Minerva yelped indignantly, grabbing her shawl and charging after him. "Are you mad?"

Yes. Lawrence was convinced that he had gone utterly mad to give his heart so thoroughly to a woman who would never let him have a moment's peace for the rest

of his life. In the best possible way.

“You are still recovering, Minerva,” he scolded her as they walked out into the frosty morning together. “You should stay secure in the cottage.”

“I am not the one who has just ventured out in stocking feet,” she fired back, as feisty as ever, despite the soggy congestion in her voice.

Lawrence glanced down with a sigh, feeling the cold, hard-packed dirt of the path that led from the parsonage to the church a bit too keenly. There was nothing to be done now, however. Minerva had become the embodiment of determination as she hugged her shawl tighter and inched ahead of them in their race to reach the church.

Lawrence had only just begun to imagine what might be the matter when they stepped into the sweet building to find a middle-aged, slightly tattered woman, with her arms wrapped around his statue. At first, Lawrence thought the woman was trying to embrace it, but he quickly realized the woman was trying to move it from the baptismal font.

“Oh, dear,” Minerva blurted at the sight, then clapped a hand over her mouth to prevent whatever other words or sounds wanted to escape from her at the sight.

Lawrence sent her an embarrassed, sideways look. He had not yet had the time to explain to Minerva how he and Silas had removed the statue from the carriage and put it inside the church for safekeeping.

He did not have time to explain to her now as the woman straightened with a jerk, her eyes going wide, and screamed so loudly at the sight of him that Lawrence was certain his ears would never recover.

For a heart-stopping moment, Lawrence was afraid his statue would shift off the font

and crack on the church's stone floor as the woman leapt back, removing her arms from his work. Lawrence only just managed to leap forward to steady the marble, using his entire body to hold the statue and the font in place.

His sharp movements only made the woman scream louder.

"Villains! Brigands!" she shouted, dashing into the closest pew. She came out again, brandishing a hymnal, which she used to attack Lawrence. "What devilry is this? What brand of witchcraft have you cursed this house of God with?"

Lawrence ducked his head as the woman rained thudding blows down on his head and shoulders. She did not have the strength to do any real damage, but that did not stop him from cowering...with laughter.

"Stop! Stop, please!" Minerva called out, stepping closer to the woman.

Lawrence did not think the woman would stop, if not for Minerva sneezing loudly at just that moment. The woman was so taken aback that she stumbled back several steps, then held the hymnal in front of her, as if it were a shield.

"You're the plague-carrier," she gasped, holding the hymnal, with its etched cross on the cover, toward Minerva, as if she were a vampire. "Old Lucy said you were here and that you'd brought your foul disease with you."

"She said what?" Minerva balked, pulling herself up to her full height.

It did not help the situation at all that she sneezed and then coughed directly after. The village woman took another step back, her eyes wide with horror.

Satisfied that the statue would not tumble off the font, Lawrence stood and sighed.

“Lady Minerva does not have the plague,” he said, trying for his most reassuring voice as he spoke to the woman, but mostly sounding irritated. “As you can see, she is well on her way to recovery.”

The village woman continued to look askance at her, still holding the hymnal up. “Old Lucy said you would most likely die. She said the fever had taken you. It’s all over the village that you’ve brought the plague to us.”

Again, Lawrence sighed. This time he pinched the bridge of his nose as well. “Lady Minerva is recovering from a head cold,” he said, downplaying the severity of her illness over the last few days. “She will recover quite soon.”

The woman relaxed a bit, but still eyed Minerva suspiciously. In a way, Lawrence could not blame her. Dressed in black as she was, her black hair with its silver streaks long and flowing around her shoulders and her face a bit sallow from her illness, aside from her bright red nose, Minerva did look very much like a witch.

She sounded more like the noblewoman she was when she asked, “I beg your pardon, but if you are so afraid of contracting the plague, why have you come all this way?”

The woman shifted a bit, finally lowering the hymnal. “I’m Mary,” she said. “I clean the church once a week, rain or shine, summer or winter, even when Pastor Cleverley is away.”

“I see,” Minerva said, then pulled out the handkerchief she had stuck up her sleeve to blow her nose.

“I came to clean,” Mary went on, “and then I saw this abomination desecrating the church!” She flung a hand out to point accusatorily at the statue. “What bit of Satanic filth is this? How did it come to crush the holy baptismal font?”

Lawrence's shoulders relaxed a bit as he shrugged them and said, "Um, er, you see, the thing is, this statue belongs to me. It's Primavera in Splendor."

The woman's eyes widened. "Devil worshiper! Spawn of Satan!"

Lawrence sighed and rolled his eyes. Although he supposed he did look less than holy in his current state of undress.

"This is all a terrible misunderstanding," he said, trying to smile and present himself as kind and gentlemanly instead of half-dressed and deranged. "My driver found it necessary to unburden our carriage of all it contained so that he could take it to a wainwright in your good village, you see. He left two days ago, and I bade him stay in the village until the carriage was repaired rather than be bored to tears here by myself and Lady Minerva."

"Lies!" the village woman said. "All lies and deceit."

"Lord Lawrence does not lie," Minerva said, glaring fire at the woman.

The woman flung her arm out again, this time pointing to one of the church windows. "Is that not your carriage and your driver now?"

Both Lawrence and Minerva turned to gaze out through the window. Sure enough, Silas was just stopping the horses as the carriage, looking much more balanced and sound, rolled to a stop.

"How fortunate," Lawrence said, forcing a smile as the woman continued to glare at him. "He has returned."

As glad as Lawrence was to see Silas and the carriage back and in good condition, he was immediately on his guard as he watched Silas jump down from the driver's seat

to open the carriage's door.

Worse still, at the sight of a gentleman of middling years stepped down and looked around with a scowl, Minerva gasped and ducked, as if someone had thrown something at her.

"Minerva?" Lawrence asked.

"Owen!" Minerva hissed in return.

At first, Lawrence thought her fever had returned and she had called him by the wrong name. But when Minerva kept her stance low and hurried quickly to the window so that she could peek out while exposing as little of herself to outside view as possible, another possibility came to mind.

"He is your intended," Lawrence said, uncertain whether he should have been angry or alarmed or jealous about the turn of events as he walked over to join Minerva. "We saw him at that other inn. You believed he had been following us since London."

Minerva sighed, then sank to lean against the wall beside the window. She stared at Lawrence for several heavy seconds before pinching her face and nodding.

"It appears as though he has," she said thickly, then took a moment to blow her nose.

Lawrence frowned at the sticky turn of events as he glanced out the window. Silas was arguing with the man, Owen. Lawrence had not informed him of the problem of Lord Owen Scurloch, but Silas was clever and loyal enough to have puzzled things out, he guessed.

"It seems Owen has caught up to us again after Tidworth Hall," Minnie said once her nose was clear. "And it seems we can no longer count on the hope that he was merely

returning to Wales by the same route as us.”

“He is most definitely searching for you,” Lawrence said, his frown darker still.

To the side, Mary from the village was still looking on, as though she were suddenly more interested in the drama playing out in front of her than her fear of demons and witches. Lawrence did not trust her not to dash out of the church, calling out to Lord Owen that Minerva was hiding inside the church. The only way he could be certain such a thing did not happen was if he got rid of Lord Owen as quickly as possible.

“I have an idea,” he said, marching for the church door. “Stay here,” he told Minerva firmly, then charged Mary with, “Watch over her. If she dies, I will hold you responsible.”

It was most definitely too much, but Mary’s eyes went wide and the color drained from her face, as if Minerva might drop dead at a moment’s notice. “Yes, my lord,” she said, dropping into a curtsy.

Lawrence caught a brief scolding look from Minerva before he pulled open the church door and stepped out into the yard. He was careful to shut the door behind him.

Silas and Lord Owen were still arguing as Lawrence paused for a moment to throw together a quick plan.

“...know that she is here,” Lord Owen argued, gesturing toward the house. “It is all over the village. I have tracked Lady Minerva’s whereabouts from London to this place. You cannot deny me my bride.”

Lawrence clenched his jaw and his fists at the man’s audacious assumption. If Minerva was anyone’s bride, she was his.

He stepped forward with a mind to pummel the arrogant toad into the ground, but a second idea flashed into his head as he closed the distance to the carriage. Lord Owen had heard all about Minerva from the village, which meant he'd probably been told she was dying of plague.

Silas noticed Lawrence's approach first and leaned away from Lord Owen to gape at him. A second later, Lord Owen turned toward him as well and practically jumped in shock.

"Good God, you're the man they said was escorting Lady Minerva," Lord Owen said. He raked Lawrence with a glance, lip curled in distaste, then said, "What is the matter with you?"

His appearance. Lawrence knew he could use it. He pinched his face, staggered toward Silas, and did his very best job of acting as he collapsed against his friend's shoulder.

"She is gone," he wailed, sobbing for good measure.

"My...my lord?" Silas asked, genuine worry in his voice.

"She is gone," Lawrence repeated, lifting his head and staring at Silas, willing him to see the subterfuge. "My dearest Minerva has succumbed to the fever."

"Oh God, my lord!" Silas gasped, believing the lie.

Lawrence regretted it, and he would have to make it up to Silas later, but there was a chance that Silas's belief would help convince Lord Owen to go away.

"Lady Minerva died of the plague?" Lord Owen asked, the picture of suspicion and disbelief.

“Yes,” Lawrence said, pretending to marshal all his strength to stand and face the world as a man should. “Yesterday. I knelt by her side and held her hand as she breathed her last. I suppose it was a peaceful death, but I do not know what I will do without her now.”

Lord Owen narrowed his eyes. “I wish to see her body.”

Lawrence pinched his face. He hadn’t accounted for that.

“You cannot,” he sniffled. “I...I have already buried her.”

Lord Owen’s expression turned even harder, and he looked around. “Where?” he asked, infusing the single word with doubt. “I do not see any freshly turned earth.”

Dammit, he had not thought this through.

“In the crypt within the church,” he said, praying the church actually had a crypt. Then again, how would Lord Owen know one way or another.

“I wish to see her,” Lord Owen said, starting toward the church.

Lawrence leapt forward to grab his arm, holding him back. From the corner of his eyes, he caught a flash of movement in the window that he assumed was Minerva ducking out of sight.

“You cannot go in there,” Lawrence said, assuming an expression of doom. “She died of the plague. The entire church may be infected now.” He gasped for good measure and said, “Heaven help me, I may be carrying the dread disease myself. I may have infected you with my very touch!”

Rather than inspiring Lord Owen with fear and the immediate need to flee to safety,

Lawrence's words only caused the man to shift back towards him, arms crossed.

"You are telling me that Lady Minerva has died," he said flatly.

"She has," Lawrence said, still trying desperately to be the picture of a grieving lover, but finding that ruse harder by the moment.

"Lady Minerva. Died," Lord Owen said, utterly unconvinced.

Lawrence straightened and looked down his nose at the man. "Do not mock the dead, sir."

Lord Owen stared at him like he thought Lawrence was a dolt. "My lord, in my recent investigations into my bride's whereabouts, I spoke to not only her acquaintances, but also to others she has interacted business with in the last several months."

Lawrence said nothing, but prickles of dread began to race down his back.

"That included a group of fishermen in Bristol," Lord Owen continued.

Lawrence merely blinked.

Lord Owen went on. "Are you aware, my lord, that it was my bride's intention to stage her own death by fall from a cliff and to seek passage with these fishermen to Ireland, from whence she intended to carry on to Stockholm?"

It took every ounce of control in Lawrence's power not to burst into wild laughter, or to gape in shock. Of course Minerva planned to fake her own death so that she could escape the binds of a marriage she did not want. Which explained why she'd thought Sweden was Heaven before.

But that only complicated the predicament they were in now.

“How dare you suggest that Lady Minerva, whose fever scourged body lies swaddled in quilts under the stones of that church, would do anything as wicked as pretend to have left this world?” he hissed, jabbing a finger toward the church.

He advanced on Lord Owen, who stepped back in alarm, continuing with, “How dare you insult my grief at losing the most wonderful woman I have ever known, a woman with whom I wished to spend the rest of my life, by insinuating that I did not sit by her bedside as I watched her fail, that I did not whisper psalms over her as she breathed her last? How dare you tell me that I did not weep bitterly as I wrapped her delicate form in whatever sheets I was able to find, or that I did not carry her to the church, where I have been praying over her ever since? Do you not see the state of me, man?”

He gestured to his own rumpled appearance while simultaneously advancing on Lord Owen even more. He had the advantage of height over Lord Owen, and he was well aware that, even in playacting, he’d worked himself into a state that would frighten even the most stalwart of men.

“I...I am not...I cannot say....” Lord Owen scrambled for words as he tried to put as much distance between himself and Lawrence as possible.

“Silas!” Lawrence shouted, making his appearance as wild as possible. “Take this man back to the village! I want him out of my sight. He is a blackguard for inflicting deeper wounds on me in my hour of grief!

“Yes, my lord,” Silas said, nodding. He immediately turned to gesture for Lord Owen to enter the carriage through the already open door.

“This is not right,” Lord Owen said, inching toward the carriage, more out of fear

than because he was convinced Lawrence was telling the truth. “None of this is right. I will leave so that you might compose yourself, sir,” he went on, pulling himself up into the carriage, “but I will return on the morrow to bring an end to this farce. Lady Minerva is mine,” he called out, as if he thought Minerva could hear him...which she most likely could. “She might have escaped one ceremony, but she will not escape another. I carry a special license with me, and the moment I find her, I will have the nearest holy man marry us, whether I have to hold a knife to her back to force her to say the words or not!”

With that, he snapped the carriage door behind him. It was a good thing, too, because the callous way he spoke of Minerva made Lawrence want to wring the man’s neck.

“Get him back to the village and then return here as swiftly as possible,” Lawrence told Silas in as quiet a voice as he could as he walked his friend to the front of the carriage. He whispered, “Lady Minerva is alive, but I fear we will need to make a hasty escape from this place as quickly as possible.”

Silas’s eyes went wide, then he burst into a smile. “The two of you will be the death of me, my lord,” he said as he climbed up into the driver’s seat. “And not from plague.”

Lawrence gave him the slightest of smiles before stepping back and assuming a posture of utter grief again.

He maintained that posture as he watched the carriage retreat, just in case Lord Owen glanced out and saw him. As soon as he was convinced it was safe, he dropped his sad look and turned to march toward the church. Minerva owed him answers and the entire story of her flight back to Wales, and he would have those answers now.

Sixteen

Minnie sniffled and wiped her nose on the handkerchief she'd brought with her, then breathed through her mouth as she watched the scene between Lawrence and Owen unfold outside the church. If she had not felt so utterly miserable, she would have thrilled at the confrontation, and at Lawrence's incomparable acting abilities.

She could only just hear what was being said between the two men across the distance and through the glass of the church window, but she was able to make out the essence of the conversation.

"Is that man your husband?" the woman from the village asked as she watched from the other corner of the window, as eager to keep abreast of the situation as Minnie was.

Minnie sent her a sidelong look. She was uncertain which man the woman referred to.

"Neither are my husband," she explained, earning a shocked look from Mary. She sniffled, dabbed at her nose, then said, "One attempted to marry me against my wishes, and the other...."

She stopped, the truth snagging on the part of her that valued her independence and strength. The other had not offered for her hand as of yet, but if he ever did, she would be hard-pressed to deny him, or her own wants.

She was spared having to explain as much to a woman she did not know, one who believed her to be a witch, by Owen suddenly shouting out, "I will return on the

morrow to bring an end to this farce. Lady Minerva is mine! She might have escaped one ceremony, but she will not escape another. I carry a special license with me, and the moment I find her, I will have the nearest holy man marry us, whether I have to hold a knife to her back to force her to say the words or not!”

“Oh, gracious!” Mary gasped as Minerva sunk below the bottom of the window once more to stay out of sight. “He is a nasty sort. I would choose the other one myself, even if he is a madman.”

Minerva fought a smile as she let herself sink all the way to sit on the floor with her back against the wall. As soon as she heard the carriage roll away, she deemed it safe to give her nose a thorough blow.

Lawrence was rather mad, she thought to herself as she worked to clear her head as much as she could while Mary glanced on with a queasy look. He’d been mad to agree to escort her to Wales when all the rest of the ton was engaged in politics in London. He’d been mad to humor her with silly stories and games throughout their journey. And he’d most definitely been mad to sit by her bedside all through the worst of her fever when to do so meant a risk to himself.

He was mad, but it was becoming abundantly clear to her that she loved him for it. She loved Lawrence’s strangeness and almost childlike moods. All the things that Lady Jessica had despised about Lawrence were precisely the things she adored about him. He most certainly was not stupid, he merely saw the world differently from others. But so did she.

“Minerva?” Lawrence whispered as he strode back into the church moments later.

Minnie sucked in a breath and pushed herself to stand, frustrated that her body was still weaker than it should have been and that the movement took effort.

Mary rose as well as Lawrence spotted them and marched toward them, looking intimidated, but with her eyes shining.

“Did you hear?” Lawrence asked as he picked up his pace so that he could help Minnie the rest of the way to her feet. He kept his arms around her once she was upright, either because he did not believe she could stand on her own or because he simply wanted to hold her.

Minnie hoped it was the latter, but there was something unusually stony and veiled in his eyes.

“I heard much of it,” she said, suddenly uncertain. “Mostly when the two of you had your voices raised. I could not hear some parts.”

Lawrence looked as though he would say something. Indeed, he hesitated for so long that Minnie wondered if some part of his mind was stuck on a point and could not let go. Something about that hesitation had her quivering with the feeling she had done something he disapproved of.

At last, Lawrence shook his head and said, “We must be away from here as swiftly as possible.”

“I agree,” Minnie said, grasping onto one area where they could be in accord. “Owen clearly will not back down. His pride and the pride of his family are at stake. And it is likely that my parents would stand behind him in his efforts to force me to the altar.”

“He’s got a special license, he has,” Mary commented unhelpfully from the side, inching closer, like she could be a part of the magnificent drama before her.

Both Minnie and Lawrence glanced to her with slight frowns, and Mary stepped back.

Minerva sniffed thickly, then released herself from Lawrence's hold so that she could turn to Mary. She coughed, blew her nose, then said, "I am most appreciative of your help in remaining concealed from Lord Owen just now and I thank you, but your assistance is no longer required."

"Thank you," Lawrence echoed, paused, then added, "You may go now."

Instead of doing as she'd been told, Mary pulled her shoulders back stubbornly. "I still have to clean the church," she said.

Minnie sighed and rubbed her congested head. "Very well, then," she said with a wet sigh. "Go about your business. But we ask for your discretion in this matter, for obvious reasons."

"I won't say nothing," Mary told them with a nod. She then scooted to the side, then turned and hurried toward the opposite end of the church, where a broom and bucket waited.

Minnie turned back to Lawrence, giving him a wary look. "We should pack our things and be off," she said.

Lawrence still had the sharp, almost calculating look in his eyes. It took him longer than it should have, once again, to answer, "Agreed."

Packing their things in preparation for a flight took longer than Minnie would have liked it to. They returned to the house, where their abandoned breakfast was waiting for them, then decided it would not be a waste of time to consume that small meal.

Afterwards, Minnie found herself exhausted from the morning's efforts. She began the process of rearranging the contents of her valise, but when she began to flag, Lawrence insisted she return to the bedroom to lie down for a spell.

That spell turned into hours. Minnie was forced to admit to herself that she needed rest. Her fever might have broken, leaving her well on the way to recovery, but she was not well again by any means. If she had been at home at the Oxford Society Club, she would have spent the entire day in bed reading, and possibly several days after that.

There was not time for lying abed, however. She forced herself to rise, then was startled to discover it was well past midday. Lawrence had prepared a small luncheon from the supplies left by the old woman, and he'd also laundered several of her handkerchiefs and dried them in the cold, November sun.

"I only regret that I will soil them all again within minutes, the way my head is," she apologized amidst blowing her nose post-nap.

"There will be other opportunities to launder then and other handkerchiefs to be had," Lawrence told her, rather stiffly.

As soon as Minnie was temporarily satisfied with the state of her nose, she frowned at Lawrence and asked, "Is something amiss? Did Owen say something I could not hear that has upset you?"

The length of the silence that followed her questions told her she was right and Lawrence was, at the very least, disquieted.

"It can wait," he said, stepping past her to one of the cottage's windows.

Minnie was not satisfied with the answer, but as Lawrence's reason for looking out the window was that Silas had just returned with the carriage, there was nothing more she could do.

Silas reported that Owen had left the carriage willingly in the village and returned to

the tiny inn where he was staying, but he was still deeply suspicious. Silas, too, glanced at Minerva as if she had committed some sin, but after a quick look from Lawrence, he said no more.

The remainder of the afternoon was spent loading the carriage once more. That, of course, involved replacing the heavy statue in the trunk at the back of the carriage, which Lawrence and Silas accomplished together. Minerva remained in the warm cottage, her shawl hugged around her, shaking her head and wondering how the marble remnant of Lawrence's past heartache could cause so much trouble in the present.

Once everything was loaded, they consumed the remainder of the food that the old woman had brought to him, packed up the last of the medicine she'd provided for Minnie which, somewhat miraculously, seemed to actually be doing some good, then as soon as dark fell, Lawrence and Minnie, with Clarence placed carefully beside her, seated themselves in the carriage.

"It is a small blessing that night falls so early at this time of year," Minnie said, one hand on Clarence's parietal bone, hoping that her efforts to make conversation as they jostled onto the road would help Lawrence to confess whatever troubled him. "Our escape will be better concealed this way."

Lawrence merely hummed and nodded, then crossed his arms and frowned out the window.

Minnie was desperate to know what had dampened Lawrence's previously jolly mood. She was not fool enough to think it was not about her. Owen was precisely the sort of man who would attempt to undermine her in order to capture her. She merely needed to discover the right opening to bring the truth from Lawrence without hurting or offending him in any way.

Nothing came to her, they rattled on for a good half hour in silence, but Lawrence said nothing and Minnie did not know what to say.

And then the carriage suddenly pulled to a stop as Silas called out, “Hold!” to the horses in a rather loud voice outside the carriage and above them. Minnie was puzzled as to why he would be so vocal with the horses until he continued with, “Lord Owen, what are you doing here in the road in the dark?”

Minnie sucked in a breath so precipitously that it would have left to a coughing fit if she did not employ all of her powers of control to silence it.

“Damnation,” Lawrence grumbled, shifting forward a bit and attempting to peer out the window. “He’s not alone, either,” he said. “I cannot see much, but he might have a parson of some sort with him.”

“No!” Minnie gasped, searching around, as if some means of escape might show itself to her. She knocked Clarence off the seat as she did.

Something did reveal itself, though it was not escape.

“Stand,” Lawrence ordered her, moving forward and grasping the edge of the seat upon which Minnie sat.

Minnie made a sound of confusion, but sensing that speed was of the essence, she did just that.

A second later, she gasped as Lawrence yanked the seat forward...and the cushion moved to reveal the seat itself was hollow.

“Get in,” Lawrence ordered calmly.

Minnie's heart thundered in her chest, and she nearly laughed as she picked up her skirts and did exactly as she was told.

"I am not going to ask why this is here," she said, stepping into the concealing space and crouching down, pulling her skirts in around her. "At this moment," she added. "I should like a complete explanation later, however."

The moment was too fraught for Lawrence to give her any reaction other than the thinnest of smiles as she hunkered down, making herself as small as possible. A moment later, he slid the seat back into place, leaving Minnie in complete darkness, but also fully hidden.

Her concealment was completed just in time. Lawrence shuffled a bit, then the carriage creaked slightly as he opened the door, then stepped down.

"What is the meaning of this?" Minnie heard him say from just outside the carriage.

"Where are you going, Lord Lawrence?" Owen asked, his voice coming nearer to the carriage. "It is too late for travelers to be out on the roads."

"When and where I travel are no business of yours," Lawrence said gruffly.

"They are when it means you are abducting my bride," Owen said.

Minnie frowned at his audacity, then panicked a bit as her nose began to drip without her being able to do anything about it.

"How dare you?" Lawrence growled, still near to the carriage. "Lady Minerva's remains lay moldering in that church, and you would accuse me of abduction?"

"Lady Minerva is no more dead than I am," Owen snapped in reply. "I'll prove it."

Minnie gasped as the carriage door was wrenched open, then squeezed herself to be as small as possible, and to prevent any sneezing or coughing, as, she assumed, Owen looked into the carriage, expecting to find her.

Her heart nearly burst with fright when Owen called out, “Ha! What is the meaning of this?”

She was certain her hiding spot had been discovered, particularly since she heard shuffling very near her head. But instead of pulling the seat cushion aside to reveal her, Minnie heard a very slight scraping, then Owen’s voice from outside the carriage saying, “This wicked thing belongs to Lady Minerva.”

Minnie winced. Clarence. Lawrence must have put him back on the seat above her.

“It does,” Lawrence admitted, his voice slightly farther away, as if he were attempting to draw Owen away from her. “Or at least it did. I...I kept it as a reminder of the lady I have lost.”

Owen snorted, his voice also slightly farther away. “It is an abomination,” he said. “I destroyed the rest of that macabre skeleton she insisted on keeping. I will destroy this now.”

Minnie sucked in a breath and did end up coughing, but Lawrence’s shout of, “You will not do anything to damage the memorial of my love,” covered the sound. That and Silas pretending to cough somewhere nearer to her.

A small silence followed in which Minnie thought perhaps she heard a struggle. She hoped and prayed it was Lawrence wrestling Clarence back from Owen.

“You will leave me be!” Lawrence bellowed at last. “If you wish to do anything, take this man of the cloth you have brought with you and give him your confession for all

the sins you committed against the dear, late Lady Minerva. Ask for his forgiveness, and say prayers for Minerva's departed soul."

"You are being false with me," Owen shouted. "The village woman said Lady Minerva was alive. What have you done with her? Is she concealed in the village?"

A dozen curses for Mary hovered on Minerva's lips. Neither she nor Lawrence had noticed when she'd left the church earlier. Minnie should have known she would reveal all.

"The woman was mistaken," Lawrence continued to lie for her. "How much money did you pay her to tell you precisely what you wanted to hear?"

"I—"

Minnie's eyes went wide at Owen's stilted answer. Thank God he had paid Mary. It was a thin straw, but it was something she could grasp onto. That sliver of doubt might just convince Owen to go away.

"Leave me be now, sir," Lawrence snapped. "I am returning home to my family at Godwin Castle to mourn in peace. Silas!"

"Yes, my lord," Silas answered Lawrence's order.

A moment later, the carriage jostled as Lawrence climbed back in. It continued to move as Silas climbed up to his place. A few seconds after that, they were on their way once more.

It was another minute or so before Lawrence pulled the seat back so that Minnie could breathe deeper and emerge from her concealment.

“He’s let us go?” she asked, her head and nose full, as Lawrence helped her climb from her place. Minnie noted Clarence sitting on the seat beside him with a rush of relief.

“He has,” Lawrence said, still frowning.

She slumped to sit on the forward-facing seat with him, moving Clarence to the floor, as Lawrence replaced the seat cushion. She would have been content to stay there, pressed against Lawrence’s side, perhaps even hugging him, but Lawrence immediately moved to the seat opposite her. He regarded her with a frustrated frown that she could only just see in the light of the moon shining through the window.

A different sort of worry filled Minnie as she searched for a clean handkerchief and blew her nose. She wanted Lawrence to come out and tell her why he was suddenly so cold, but it seemed as if the cat had his tongue, even though something that required much discussion had just taken place.

“It was a good thing you told Owen we were heading to Godwin Castle,” she said once her nose was adequately clear. “He will travel in the wrong direction.”

“We are going to Godwin Castle,” Lawrence said stiffly.

Minnie blinked at him in the dark. “You cannot be serious,” she said. “Owen will continue to pursue us. He will follow and follow until he has me cornered.”

“And what will you do then?” Lawrence asked. “Feign your own death and sail away to Stockholm?”

Minnie snapped her mouth shut and sank back against the seat. She felt as though she’d been hit in the chest with a crossbow bolt, or perhaps a silver stake.

“How did you know?” she whispered.

“Lord Owen discovered your arrangements with the fishermen in Bristol,” Lawrence said. “They revealed that you planned to stage your own death, then take passage with them to Ireland before continuing to Sweden.” He paused, then asked, “Is it true? Were you truly planning to leave me and make me believe you were dead?”

The way his voice faltered with the question told Minnie that her duplicity and possible disappearance was, indeed, the reason he was now out of sorts with her.

“I made those plans before I knew you,” she said quietly.

“And did you intend to follow through with them after you knew me?” Lawrence asked. “After we?—”

He grew suddenly silent, and if the light in the carriage had been brighter, Minnie would have been certain he was flushed. She knew full well he was referring to their night at Tidworth Hall. They had not spoken of what happened between them since then. They had not had a chance.

It suddenly occurred to Minnie that Lawrence must have thought their night of passion meant nothing to her. She had already felt ill that morning, which had taken her thoughts. With her illness and everything else in the last few days, she had almost forgotten the deep change in their acquaintance.

Lawrence was hurt...and Minnie found it to be the most endearing thing she had ever known. Too many of the men of her acquaintance had been brash and uncaring. Whether or not they even had feelings was questionable. Lawrence, however, wore his heart on his sleeve. It was, perhaps, the reason why shallow women, like Lady Jessica, had rejected him and thought him simple.

Lawrence was not simple, he was caring. He was not stupid, he was sensitive.

He was still, and would always be, the most wonderful man of her acquaintance.

“I am sorry if I’ve hurt you,” she said, lowering her head, then scowling at herself as the necessity of clearing her nose once more ruined the sentimentality of the moment. “I trust your judgement, Lawrence. If you feel it is best we go straight to Godwin Castle, then I will not question you, I will simply go with you. Anywhere. Always.”

The silence that followed her soft declaration was heavy. It was clear that a simple apology was not enough to soothe Lawrence’s bruised heart. And perhaps they were both too exhausted and wrung out from the events of the day in any case.

There would be time for Minnie to make a deeper apology ahead of them. She clung to that belief as she settled in for a long drive. Whatever was needed, she would find a way to repay Lawrence for his kindness and prove to him that she was neither silly nor fickle. She was beginning to understand that what she truly was was his.

Seventeen

It was unseemly for a man of Lawrence's title and stature to be mired in the depths of emotional confusion, but that was where Lawrence found himself for the next three days as he and Minerva traveled to Godwin Castle. His heart and his mind were at odds, and the upsets of his past were throwing their weight into the argument, causing everything within him to be in constant turmoil.

He was hurt by Minerva's plot to feign her own death, and even more by the fact that she had not confided in him with her plan. One part of him argued that she could not have known he was trustworthy when they set out on their journey, therefore she would have had no reason to inform him of her plans sooner. Another part of him groused that she should have said something as soon as the bond between them began to form.

Overall, he was deeply concerned for Minerva's health. They'd made the potentially disastrous decision to continue driving through the night, into the early hours of the next morning, before stopping at a wayside inn. While that decision put much-needed distance between them and Lord Owen, it could not have been good for Minerva's recovery.

When they continued on the next day, Minerva was still in a terrible state of discomfort, between her thick head, her bright-red nose, and her increasing cough. Despite the fact that she insisted she felt better than she had days before and that she sounded worse than she felt, Lawrence was left with images of Minerva dying in his arms in earnest by the side of the road somewhere in the middle of the country.

Minerva would have enjoyed dying in his arms at twilight, near the seaside, with Godwin Castle in sight on the horizon. She would have found that to be the most romantic death possible.

Lawrence forced those thoughts out of his head as well. There was not room for them. Because he was also desperately worried for what might happen to them, should Lord Owen catch up to them on the road.

He'd ordered Silas to take a somewhat winding route to Godwin Castle in case of such an occurrence. When they stopped at inns along the way, he chose the largest and busiest ones he could find, obtained a room under a false name, and pretended once again that Minerva was his wife so that they might share a room. It was wicked of him, he knew, but it was much safer for him to keep Minerva within his sight rather than leaving her to her own devices in a room of her own.

"I am beginning to think you do not wish me to have my own lodgings because you are afraid I will run away from you and continue with my original plan," Minerva told him with a tired sigh as she sat at the tiny table in what Lawrence hoped would be the last of their stops before reaching the Isle of Portland, Clarence perched between them.

"Whatever gives you that idea?" Lawrence asked flatly as he placed the meat pie from the tray one of the inn's maids had brought to them for supper in front of Minerva.

Minerva did not answer with words. She merely glanced askance at him as he took his seat across from her, blew her poor, sore nose—an activity that had become much less frequent in the last day—and picked up her fork.

Several minutes of silence followed before she said, "I am sorry for making you feel put out."

The battle within Lawrence pitched to full emotion. He forgave her. Of course he forgave her. He was hurt.

He should not forgive her. She had frightened him with the specter of losing her. Surely, she should do some sort of penance for causing him such difficult feelings.

He covered his awkward state of mind and bought himself time to formulate the best answer by reaching for one of the mugs of ale that had been delivered with their supper.

“Did you truly believe you could execute your plan?” he asked once he’d gulped the ale down.

Minerva glanced morosely at him over their suppers. “At the time the plan was formulated, I believed I could. I did not expect to have anyone with me at the moment of initiation who would care one way or another what happened to me.”

The sadness in Minerva’s eyes shot straight to Lawrence’s heart. All bitterness, most of which was merely a reflection of his storied past anyhow, fell aside. He reached out and placed his hand over Minerva’s smaller one as it rested on the table.

“I would have cared, Minerva,” he said quietly. “I do care. I care very much.”

Minerva’s tired eyes were glassy with unshed tears as she twisted her hand to hold his. “You could come with me,” she said, hope joining those tears. “We could escape to Sweden together, you, me, and Clarence, and live happily in Stockholm for the rest of our lives.”

A bittersweet ache struck Lawrence’s stomach. From the sound of things, she still planned to carry out her plan in some way.

“I cannot go,” he said, not without compassion. “I am known in Stockholm. I had an exhibition there several years ago.”

“We could go somewhere else?” Minerva suggested, appearing closer to weeping than to hatching an entirely new plot.

Lawrence shook his head. “I have a life here. I have family whom I love, who need me.”

He should not have said that. Those words tipped Minerva over the edge, and she wept.

“I did not mean to hurt you with those words,” Lawrence said, setting down his fork so he could take both of her hands in his. “We will be at Godwin Castle by tomorrow evening. You will see how kind and loving my family is, even though we are a passel of eccentric misfits. I am quite certain that they will envelop you in their love, and their madness, as well.”

Minerva wept louder, then snotted, then coughed. She was a beautifully pathetic sight, and he loved her more than he could possibly say.

“All will be well, my dear,” he said. “You will see. Even Clarence thinks so.”

They were sweet words, but Lawrence worried that he would not be able to make them come true.

They set out the next day in a driving rain. Minerva had slept surprisingly well through the night, but Lawrence was half convinced that was because her body was still in the throes of illness, despite what Minerva insisted, and it needed the sleep to heal.

She dozed in the carriage as well as they jostled on over more muddy, rutted roads, Clarence by her side, Lawrence watching her. If he never traveled again, it would be too soon. Or he would travel by boat alone from that point forward. Minerva might have thought rain and gloom were delightful, but Lawrence craved sunshine and dryness. If Minerva wanted to run away with him anywhere, he might consider fleeing with her to the deserts of the Levant.

At last, in a moment when the rain let up just a bit but fog hung low, with lanterns already lit and a chill breeze blowing in from the sea, they reached Godwin Castle.

“There you are,” Lawrence nodded out the window at the grey, stone edifice as they drove nearer. “Godwin Castle. My family’s ancestral home.”

Despite the curse hovering over it, Lawrence felt the warmth of familial affection in his heart at the stony sight.

Minerva, who had been quieter throughout the day, both in terms of conversation and a decrease in sneezing and coughing, inched forward on her seat, one hand remaining on Clarence’s pate, and peered out the window. Lawrence felt a certain sense of satisfaction in her gasp and in the light that came to her eyes. He hadn’t seen that light in days.

“That,” she said, “is a cursed castle.”

Lawrence chuckled before he could stop himself and remember he and Minerva were supposedly at odds. “Yes, unfortunately, it is.”

He had never been so glad that the castle was cursed. In fact, thanks to the light in Minerva’s eyes alone, he almost wished that they would march into the great hall and find that Dunstan had already married so that he was the sole inheritor of the blasted place. Presenting Minerva with a cursed castle as a wedding gift seemed somehow

fitting.

That was not what happened once they arrived, however.

Silas drove the carriage into the cobblestone courtyard on one side of the castle, Lawrence alighted and helped Minerva down, Clarence held carefully in her arms like a pet and a shield, and the castle footmen rushed forward to help with the baggage.

It would have been an unremarkable arrival, had not Mrs. Weatherby spotted them as they made their soggy way into the front hall.

“Good Lord!” Mrs. Weatherby exclaimed, clapping a hand to her heart, her eyes going wide. “Lord Lawrence, is that...is that Lady Minerva Llewellyn with you?”

“Yes, it is,” he replied.

Lawrence’s casual thought that the castle’s housekeeper looked as though she’d seen a ghost was proven startlingly accurate when Mrs. Weatherby continued to gape and said, “But, my lady, we all believed you were dead.”

All three of them stood stock still, gaping at each other. Lawrence suddenly wondered what the old woman from the village had written in the letter he’d signed. It must have been dire, judging by the way Mrs. Weatherby blinked at Minerva.

More importantly, Minerva stared sharply at Lawrence, a puzzled frown on her wan face.

“How would they believe that I was dead?” she asked, shaking her head slightly.

“I, er, I wrote a letter to my father, telling him you were ill and advising him I would

bring you here for your convalescence and asking him for healing advice,” Lawrence said, trying not to mumble his answer. “At least, that is what I thought I said. The old woman from the village actually wrote the letter.”

“And you did not read it?” Minerva asked.

Her expression changed to sheepishness a moment later as she must have realized what she was asking.

“That is not what the letter said,” Mrs. Weatherby informed them. “It stated that Lady Minerva had taken ill with a putrid fever, one that had killed many people in the area, and that she was not expected to survive.” She paused, glancing between the two of them, then told Lawrence, “The letter did say you were coming here, however. We have been anticipating your arrival. Your room is ready and waiting, but I will need more preparation to make a guestroom available for Lady Minerva.”

“I will be grateful for whatever accommodation you could provide,” Minerva said, sounding weak and tired.

That must have appealed to Mrs. Weatherby’s deeply caring nature.

“My lady,” she said, as if saying “my poor dear”. She stepped forward to slip one arm around Minerva like a sister. “You are clearly still unwell. Come to the duchess’s sitting room with me and I will prepare a healing tea for you. As soon as a guestroom is ready for you, I will have a nice, warm bath drawn, and then you can rest for as long as you’d like.”

Minerva looked as though she might melt with gratitude at the kindness Mrs. Weatherby was offering. She glanced questioningly to Lawrence, though.

“Go,” Lawrence charged her with a nod. “I will explain to everyone here.”

A few instructions were given to deliver baggage to the proper rooms, arrangements were made to move the statue that had caused so much trouble into the castle, and Mrs. Weatherby vowed to see that everything was thoroughly laundered, as she supposed it was not in the best condition after their journey.

Once that was taken care of, Lawrence braced himself, then headed up to the great hall, where he was certain his father and anyone else in the family would be.

As expected, not only was his father there, sitting in his usual chair by the fire, Dunstan was ensconced in the window seat he favored, and to Lawrence's horror, Waldorf and his new bride, Lady Katherine, were there as well. Not only that, they leapt up as soon as Lawrence entered the room.

"Is it true that Minerva is still alive?" Lady Katherine asked, radiating anxiety and hope.

Lawrence felt himself flush even before he said, "Er, yes, there seems to have been some sort of misunderstanding."

Lady Katherine exclaimed wordlessly in surprise and relief, then asked, "Where is she? What condition is she in? I must go to her at once," as she marched across the room.

"Mrs. Weatherby has taken her to the duchess's sitting room," Lawrence said. "She is still suffering the remnants of a particularly bad head cold, but she will tell you that she is well."

Lady Katherine made a noise that might have been thanks, but her attention was already elsewhere entirely, and within seconds, she had fled the room to be with her friend.

That left Lawrence to face his father, brother, and cousin alone.

“We had your letter,” Dunstan said as he got up to join them as they crossed to the fireplace.

“You said that Lady Minerva was on death’s door,” Lawrence’s father called out to him even before their group made it to the sacred space where his favorite chair was located. Lord Gerald did not, of course, deign to rise to greet his son. “You wrote that it was not likely she would recover.”

“Hello, Father,” Lawrence said, smiling as genuinely as he could, under the circumstances, and leaning over to kiss Lord Gerald’s cheek.

“Do not ‘hello’ me,” Lord Gerald said gruffly, though he hugged Lawrence and patted his back as he did. “A maid has just told us you have arrived with a very much alive Lady Minerva Llewellyn. Explain yourself.”

Lawrence sighed as he straightened. He glanced to Waldorf, then Dunstan, then focused on his father.

“Lady Minerva was, indeed, taken ill along our journey. She was quite ill indeed with a fever for days. I was deeply worried about her.”

“So that is why you wrote that she was dying,” Dunstan said, seemingly satisfied with the explanation.

“Er, I did not write the letter,” Lawrence confessed, lowering his head.

The three other men suddenly seemed to understand. They had known Lawrence for most of his life and theirs. They were all well aware of his struggles with the written word.

“Did you not think to have whomever penned the letter for you read it aloud so that you were aware of its contents?” Waldorf asked, frowning at Lawrence as if he were a dolt.

Then again, for most of their lives, Waldorf actually did think he was a dolt. More so than the others, at least. But then, Waldorf had never been very good at expressing his affection, which Lawrence knew was there, or holding his tongue when the words coming out of his mouth were sharp.

“I was distressed over Lady Minerva’s health,” Lawrence explained, perhaps a bit more forcefully than was necessary when he glanced to Waldorf. He then added, “I love her.”

That caused another round of surprise and incredulity from the others.

“Do you hear that, Dunstan?” Lord Gerald asked with a broad smile. “It seems as though you are to be the heir to this castle after all.”

Dunstan sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. “I suppose I always knew my fate would be a terrible one,” he said.

Lawrence wanted to console his cousin, but at that moment, Silas and one of the castle footmen came through the door, carrying the statue.

“Good God. What is that?” Waldorf asked, breaking away from their group to investigate.

Lawrence jumped after him, pointing to one of the tables in the room as a repository for the statue. Dunstan followed, and even Lord Gerald stood, cane supporting him, and shuffled over to see what all the fuss was about.

“Lawrence!” Waldorf huffed once the statue was put down and they all gathered around it. “What have you done?”

“That’s not...that’s not Lady Jessica Wimpole, is it?” Dunstan asked, trying not to snort with laughter.

“She’s Lady Jessica Bellinger, wife of Lord Otho Bellinger now,” Lawrence said, his face heating to ridiculous degrees.

“You stupid man,” Waldorf said, shaking his head.

“I beg your pardon, brother,” Lawrence snapped, suddenly feeling the urge to stand up for himself against his unthinking brother. “I am not stupid. I am an artist. This work came from the heart a long, long time ago. And it is currently wanted for an exhibition of my work to take place in Hamburg. I have brought it inside so that it might be packed into a crate and shipped to my art broker, Mr. Loesser, in London.”

Waldorf and Dunstan both turned surprised looks to him. Even Waldorf looked impressed.

“If it’s supposed to be in the German Confederation, why is it here in Godwin Castle?” Lord Gerald asked.

“It needed rescuing,” Lawrence said. “Just as Lady Minerva needed, or should I say needs rescuing.”

The abrupt change in conversation did precisely what Lawrence intended for it to do. The lurid statue was forgotten, and his male kinsmen turned to him in surprise once again.

“From whom or what does Lady Minerva need rescuing?” Dunstan asked.

“Probably from this one,” Waldorf said with a sly smirk.

Lawrence sent his brother a withering look, then cleared his throat and said, “Lady Minerva recently escaped an unwanted marriage. Her parents attempted to force her into what would essentially have been a cold business alliance with a friend of her father’s son. Minerva fled Wales for London to avoid it, but it seems as though her intended, Lord Owen Scurloch, is determined to track her down and force the marriage to continue.”

“Ah. So Dunstan here still stands a chance of marrying before you after all,” Lord Gerald said with a lopsided grin, slapping Dunstan’s back.

“No, Father,” Lawrence said, losing patience. “Minerva does not wish to marry Lord Owen. But the blackguard has been chasing her, and he almost caught up with her. Despite my best efforts, there is a fair chance that he may appear at Godwin Castle, demanding that Minerva continue with the marriage.”

“Then you’d best wed and bed her as soon as possible,” Lord Gerald said.

As much as he loved the man and was amused by his wily ways, in that moment, Lawrence could only roll his eyes.

“I have every intention of marrying Minerva,” he said. “But we have not discussed the matter yet. We had a...a small falling out in the last few days. The subject has not been broached yet. And I should like to give Minerva the sort of wedding she deserves rather than snatching her from another man and marrying her too quickly for anyone to do anything about it.”

“And what’s wrong with grabbing the prize and running with it?” Lord Gerald asked.

“Minerva is not a prize,” Lawrence said. “She is a woman. A bright, clever, self-

possessed woman. I've no wish to insult her by treating her as an object I've outsmarted another man to claim."

"Good for you," Dunstan said with a smile. "I'm certain she would be happy to have you that way."

"Yes, well, there is one small problem with your noble intentions," Waldorf said, looking suddenly grave.

"What is that?" Lawrence asked.

"After receiving your letter, Father here wrote immediately to Lord Dilwyn Llewellyn, apprising him of the situation and inviting him and his wife to Godwin Castle so that we all might discover more together," Waldorf said.

"He did what?"

The gasped question came from Minerva herself as she walked into the great hall, flanked by Lady Katherine and Mrs. Weatherby.

"Oh. Good afternoon, my dear," Lord Gerald said, breaking away from the others with a smile to greet the woman he believed would be his newest daughter-in-law. "I invited your parents to join us here at Godwin Castle."

"Please say you did not, my lord," Minerva said, sending Lord Gerald a dire look, then appealing to Lawrence.

"There is no need to worry," Lawrence reassured her, crossing the room to her so he could take her hand. "The Kingdom of Wales is miles away. Surely, in this weather, it will take weeks for them to arrive."

“It would,” Waldorf said, looking guilty, “except that I had received news the Llewellyns were staying with friends in Salisbury. And the letter was sent days ago. It is very likely that they could arrive here at any moment.”

Eighteen

Minnie could hardly believe her ears.

“My mother and father are coming here?” she asked, too shocked to worry about whether her nose was too red or her voice too stuffy. “Coming here to Godwin Castle?”

The men, who had all gathered around Lawrence’s statue to discuss her fate, or so it seemed, glanced to her with expressions that ranged from Lord Dunstan’s worried alarm to Lawrence’s sheepishness. Lord Gerald Godwin, the patriarch of the family, looked more amused than anything else.

“Ah. There she is now,” Lord Gerald said. “Your would-be corpse bride.”

Minnie didn’t know whether to laugh at Lord Gerald’s wicked humor, to take him to task for inviting her parents to Godwin Castle to seal her doom...or to gasp in astonishment at being referred to as Lawrence’s bride.

As felt most comfortable to her, Minnie chose the path of indignation, since contemplating the possibility of Lawrence wishing to marry her was more than her nerves could handle at the moment.

“Did you not think to consult with me before inviting the very people who would wish to end my life as I know it through a commercial marriage to join me under your roof?” she demanded, marching forward to stand with the men. Kat moved with her, and Mrs. Weatherby inched forward to stand at the ready.

Lord Gerald laughed, which did not improve Minnie's mood one bit. "I like her," he told Lawrence. "She has fire in her and life, though that seems a bit ironic."

Lawrence sent his father a look as though he was not being helpful, then shifted to stand by Minnie's side.

It was Lord Waldorf who spoke, saying, "My dear Lady Minerva, we believed you to be dead when the invitation was sent. It was not done as a means of insulting you."

Immediately, Minnie deflated, feeling foolish and out of sorts. Of course they had sent for her parents before knowing she was not dead. All they had received was a strange and uncharacteristic letter from Lawrence, one that Mrs. Weatherby and Kat had told her about while attempting to settle her in the duchess's parlor, saying that her death was imminent.

"Can you not send another letter telling them not to come?" she asked with a heavy sigh, rubbing her head slightly in an attempt to clear the throbbing ache that had formed there.

Lawrence glanced to his father as though he seconded the idea, but Lord Gerald shrugged and said, "I doubt it. Even if a second letter were to be sent, Lord and Lady Llewellyn have most likely departed Salisbury already and would not receive it."

The impish old man had a devastatingly good point.

"There is nothing to be done, then," Minnie sighed, wishing she had a settee to sink dejectedly into. "My fate is sealed. My parents will arrive at Godwin Castle and see that I am alive and whole. They will send for Lord Owen, wherever he might be, and I shall be forcibly married to him after all."

A beat of silence followed her gloomy proclamation before Lord Gerald burst out

with, “What a load of nonsense!”

Minnie snapped straight, her eyes widening at the man. Lawrence, and everyone else, quickly looked to him as well.

“And here I thought you had fight in you,” Lord Gerald said, tsking and shaking his head.

“Father, Lord Owen has prior claim over Lady Minerva,” Lawrence explained. “Her parents have arranged the marriage, which I believe means something under the laws of the Kingdom of Wales. And Lord Owen is in possession of a special license.”

“What does that signify?” Lord Gerald snorted, still indignant. “We are not in Wales, we are in the great and mighty Kingdom of Wessex. And we are at Godwin Castle, my home. If you do not wish to marry this Lord Owen fellow, then you will not.” He shrugged. “It is as simple as that.”

For the first time in what felt like ages, hope stirred in Minnie’s breast. She tested the strength and practicality of that hope by saying, “Lord Gerald, you realize that if my parents do arrive, and if they bring Lord Owen with them somehow—” She stopped and turned to Lawrence as a thought struck her. “Do you know, I would not put it past Owen to have had a hand in my parents being so close by. In fact, I would wager the reason he did not pursue us on our heels all the way to Godwin Castle is because he, perhaps, went to rendezvous with them.”

Minnie paused, blinking for a moment as that idea sunk in, then shaking her head, as there was not a thing she could do about it.

She returned to the original course of her words as she glanced to Lord Gerald again. “If you stand up as my defender and contest the marriage claim already made by Lord Owen, there will be a legal challenge. The dispute could even be dragged into the

courts in London for resolution, as matters of conflicting laws from kingdom to kingdom generally are. Would you wish to endure that sort of public display?"

Lord Gerald grinned impishly and said, "Try me."

It was absurd in so many ways, but Minnie's heart immediately swelled with love and gratitude for Lord Gerald. For all the grief he might have caused Lawrence in the past, although that seemed mostly to have come from Lawrence's brothers and cousins, Minnie immediately counted Lord Gerald as among the very best of men.

"You know that I will stand by you," Lawrence said, moving closer to Minnie and resting his hand on the small of her back. That gesture was more powerful even than his words. "Whatever you need from me, I will give it."

"You have already given so much," Minnie told him with a grateful, affectionate smile. That smile turned clever a moment later as she said, "What I truly need now is a warm, soft bed where I can sleep for a week, nourishing food of a higher quality than we have been given for the last several days, and perhaps some balm for my poor nose."

Lawrence smiled, Lord Gerald laughed, and even Lord Waldorf and Lord Dunstan smiled.

"I can provide you with those things, my lady," Mrs. Weatherby said, stepping forward. "If you would but come with me."

Minnie smiled sheepishly at the spritely woman's request. Mrs. Weatherby had already attempted to settle her once, but Minnie's curiosity had gotten the better of her as soon as Kat informed her of Lawrence's odd letter. She felt as though matters were now as settled as it was possible for them to be for the moment, so she stepped away from Lawrence, squeezing his arm quickly as she did, and turned to Godwin

Castle's housekeeper.

"I commit myself to your care now, madam," she said, pretending to be penitent. "If you lead me to a cozy chamber, this time I will not attempt to escape."

Matters seemed to be settled for the moment. Minnie was content to leave the great hall and to follow Mrs. Weatherby through the magnificent castle and up to the guestroom that had only just finished being prepared for her. Kat came with them, Napoleon following her, though Minnie sensed she was eager to return to her new husband.

"I could have the footmen bring up a tub and have the maids prepare a warm bath for you," Mrs. Weatherby said once she had introduced Minnie to her room.

"Yes!" Minnie breathed out in relief. "I believe a bath would rid me of the lingering effects of this cold right away."

"Have you been very ill?" Kat asked with all the worry of a friend who was like a sister as she helped Minnie go through the contents of her valise. Napoleon leapt onto the bed and came face to face with Clarence, who had been settled on one of the pillows. The two of them eyed each other suspiciously.

"Unfortunately, yes," Minnie said. "Though I do not think I was at death's door."

"I am sorry I was not there to nurse you," Kat sighed, then made a face as she pulled the blue, Scandinavian gown from among Minnie's things. "Are you considering a change to your style of dress?" she asked.

Minnie laughed and took the bright gown from Kat. She opened her mouth to say no, she would never leave off wearing the inkiest of black gowns, but something stopped her.

“Perhaps,” she said, running a hand over the cheery, blue fabric. Lawrence would like it. “Perhaps it is time for quite a few things to change.”

Kat hummed knowingly, reaching for Napoleon and stopping him from batting Clarence off the pillow and onto the floor. “I believe I know that sentiment well.”

“Everyone must change eventually, I suppose,” Minnie said with a sigh, setting her blue gown aside. “It appears as though the entire heptarchy teeters on the verge of change, so why not the members who make it up?”

“Why not indeed,” Kat said.

She assisted Minnie with sorting her things and sending the bulk of her clothing to Godwin Castle’s laundry as the tub was brought up and filled. Filling a tub for a bath took some time, but once it was all ready, Kat took her leave to give Minnie the privacy she needed.

Minnie was so grateful to sink into the tub that she sighed aloud in a way that would be seen as scandalous to nearly everyone she knew. Lawrence would be amused by her sounds, though. And perhaps, were she not a sniffly, dripping mess, he would wish to do something about it.

Minutes ticked by, and just as Minnie was rinsing her hair with water from the pitcher that had been provided along with her bath, Mrs. Weatherby returned to the room with a tray of tea things.

“Forgive my intrusion, my lady,” she said, keeping her eyes averted as she placed the tray on a small table. “I thought you would enjoy this medicinal tea to help speed your recovery. I’ve included several clean handkerchiefs as well, and a few lemon tarts, which are some of Cook’s best work.”

“Thank you,” Minnie smiled at her, sinking luxuriously lower in the tub.

When Mrs. Weatherby turned to go, Minnie stopped her with, “Before you leave, could you tell me something?”

Mrs. Weatherby turned back, smiling at Minnie without looking at her too closely. “Anything, my lady,” she said.

Minnie gestured for the woman to come closer and to sit in the chair beside the tub, then, instead of asking what she really wanted to know, she said, “I have never liked the subservience of one woman to another. Tell me your given name, and I will call you that instead of this Mrs. Weatherby nonsense.”

Mrs. Weatherby sat with a laugh. “You sound very much like Lord Gerald in many ways. No wonder he immediately approved of you. And my name is Carys,” she added. “Carys Weatherby.”

“And what happened to Mr. Weatherby?” Minnie asked.

Mrs. Weatherby, Carys, sent Minnie a sly grin. “I believe you are well enough versed in the ways of these things to know there is no Mr. Weatherby, aside from my father, and there never was. ‘Mrs.’ is a courtesy title for the position I hold.”

“Interesting,” Minnie said. “And how long have you held that position?”

“Since I was five-and-twenty, when my mother passed, handing it down to me,” Carys said, her expression slightly sad.

Twin feelings of shared sadness, but also curiosity, flared in Minnie’s breast. “I am sorry for the loss of your mother,” she said. Leaving the briefest of pauses, she went on to ask, “I take it your family has served the Godwins for quite some time?”

“Oh, for ages, my lady,” Carys said. “Long before my grandmother’s grandmother’s time. Godwin Castle belongs to the Weatherbys as much as to the Godwins.”

Minnie sucked in a breath and sat as straight as she dared in her current state of undress. “If I am to call you Carys, I ask that you call me Minerva,” she said. “Or Minnie, though I only let my closest friends call me that.”

“I am honored, my—Minnie.” The clever sparkle in Carys’s eyes told Minnie that she was precisely the sort of woman she liked to have as a friend.

“I am curious about the Curse of Godwin Castle,” Minnie said, twisting so she could lean her arms against the edge of the tub and rest her chin on her hands. “I adore curses and tragic stories of all sorts. I have been meaning to ask Lawrence about the curse, since he seems haunted by it, but it strikes me that someone who has lived and worked in Godwin Castle, and whose family has inhabited the place for ages, would know more about it than him. Is it true? Is the curse real?”

“It is,” Carys said, though she did not look happy or mischievous in reporting as much.

That had Minnie as curious as ever. “Is it truly?” she asked.

Carys sighed and clasped her hands together on her lap, over her apron. “Alas, it truly is. The Godwin family has seen generation after generation of tragedy because of it. Why, in this current time alone, not only was Lord Gerald’s beloved wife taken from him at an early age, but his brother and his wife perished as well, leaving Lord Gerald to raise all of the children.”

“That is sad,” Minnie said, tilting her head to rest her cheek on her arm.

“It extends farther than that as well,” Carys said. “As you have noted, all of the

Godwin males have been terribly unlucky in love until only just recently. Lord Dunstan was treated abominably by his first, late wife, and none of the others were able to settle on women who loved them until this year.”

Minnie hummed and nodded. She recalled everything Lawrence had said about his failed love affairs. Perhaps that truly was the Curse of Godwin Castle.

“How long has the family been afflicted?” she asked, wondering if she still found the idea of a cursed castle romantic, since it had caused so much distress to people she cared for.

“As the legend goes,” Carys said, “it began at the time of the building of the castle, in the nine-hundreds.”

Minnie’s brow went up. “So long ago? And the family has survived the curse for this long?”

“They have, by the grace of God,” Carys said.

“How did it begin?” Minnie asked.

Carys smiled, her expression turning mischievous again. “Apparently, as the legend goes, it began with cruelty on the part of Aethelbore Godwin, the first Duke of Amesbury. He was betrothed to a local woman, Morgana Whitney, who loved him very much. He gifted her with an amulet as a token of their betrothal. But then he was offered the hand of the king’s daughter, which came with the title, and he threw Morgana over for personal gain.”

“How wicked!” Minnie gasped, loving the story.

“Morgana was devastated,” Carys went on. “She rent the amulet in twain, throwing

half at Aethelbore in her fury, and cursed the family and the castle.”

“That must have been a sight to see,” Minnie said, loving the Godwin family even more for their legends.

“I’m told it was,” Carys said, grinning. “Aethelbore’s half of the amulet still exists, you know. It lies in a small, jeweled casket in the castle dungeon.”

“That is amazing!” Minnie said, forgetting her exhaustion, her thick head, and her propriety as she sat straighter in the bath. “Could it be used to break the curse, do you think?” she asked. “In legends such as this, usually, if the halves of the amulet are reunited, the curse can be ended.”

“You are correct,” Carys said, grinning. “There is a way to break the curse. It is said that if a Godwin marries a Whitney and the two halves of the amulet are reunited, the curse will end and the combined families will experience nothing but good fortune and happiness for the rest of their days.”

“The solution is simple, then,” Minnie said, beaming. “Why has a Godwin not married a Whitney sooner?”

Carys’s clever look faded. “Because the Whitney family died out centuries ago,” she said with a sigh. “And it is believed that their half of the locket was thrown into the sea in Morgana’s fit of rage, where it has been lost forever.”

“Oh, dear,” Minnie said, sinking back into her bath. “That does not ease the situation at all.”

“It does not,” Carys admitted. “Which means the Godwin family is doomed to be cursed for all eternity.”

As romantic a notion as that would have been to Minnie only a few weeks before, it only seemed sad to her now.

“Poor Lawrence,” she said, sighing and leaning back against the edge of the tub. “Poor all of them. The Godwins seem like such good people.”

“They are better than many, my lady,” Carys said. When Minnie glanced sideways at her, she corrected herself with, “Minerva.”

The two of them shared a smile.

Then, as if she’d decided she had permission to be bold with Minnie, Carys asked, “Do you have plans to marry Lord Lawrence?”

Minnie’s smile faltered. “To be honest, I would like to.”

She stopped and let out a breath. The bath had grown cold, and with Carys’s help, she rose and wrapped herself in a towel before moving closer to the crackling fireplace.

“I never thought I would wish to marry,” she confessed. “But Lawrence is so good and kind and funny.” She smiled at her memories of him. “I like him, which, in some ways, is even more important than loving him.”

Carys met that comment with a mysterious smile. “Yes, I believe I know what you mean,” she said.

Minnie’s smile grew. “Do you?” she asked, feeling as though Carys could be a great friend.

Carys cleared her throat and did not answer, keeping her smile mysterious. “Would you like something more substantial than lemon tarts to eat?” she asked. “I could

have supper sent up to you, if you feel the need to rest and recover from the last of your illness, rather than joining the boisterous family downstairs in the dining room.”

Minnie laughed. “Ordinarily, I would want to join the family,” she said. “But I think it would be wise to rest at last.”

“I believe so as well,” Carys said, winking for good measure. “I will leave you to it, then.”

A few more arrangements were made, particularly to inform Lawrence of her decision to rest, before Carys left.

Minnie wasted little time before climbing into bed, foregoing her nightgown, as it had been sent to be laundered with most of the rest of her things. Clarence and her blue gown still sat on the bed, though, and as she tucked herself between the sweet-smelling sheets, she turned to her side and addressed Clarence.

“Well,” she said, “I believe we might have found a safe place to land at last. We must rest now and regain our strength. I have a feeling that as soon as my parents arrive, the final battle will begin.”

She was certain of it, but knowing the end was coming did not prevent her from falling asleep almost as soon as she blew out her lantern, then sleeping as if she was safe in the arms of family throughout the night.

Nineteen

It would have been so easy for Lawrence to breathe a sigh of relief and think himself and Minerva safe, now that they had made it safely to Godwin Castle. He should have been deeply happy that Minerva chose to go straight to bed so that she might sleep off the lingering effects of her head cold. Being home should have resolved everything and settled his troubled spirits, particularly now that he had the statue with him.

Instead, Lawrence walked around the castle for the next two days jumping at shadows and mistaking every distant creak in the house for someone knocking at the door, announcing the arrival of Minerva's parents, Lord Owen, and a parson.

"I do not know why you're so worried," Dunstan attempted to console him on the morning of their third day of being home. "Godwin Castle may be cursed, but Uncle Gerald is correct, it is our home territory. We are Godwins, and we will defend ourselves."

Lawrence smiled affectionately at his cousin and clapped a hand on his arm. "You are the very best of men, Dunstan," he said. "If there is any one of us whom the curse would not dare to affect, it would be you."

Dunstan grew suddenly sober. "The curse has already destroyed my life," he said, clearly believing that. His spirits seemed to immediately return to his prior cheer, and he added, "So perhaps it has already wreaked its havoc on our generation and will allow us to rest now."

Lawrence huffed. "I very much doubt it. I have a terrible feeling deep in my bones

that the moment the Llewellyns arrive with Lord Owen in tow, we will all experience the curse's full effect."

There was nothing anyone could do to convince Lawrence otherwise, even though his family attempted to assuage his worry with lively conversation, entertainments, and even parlor games.

Even Clarence was involved in the parlor games. Minerva was finally feeling more herself after two full days of rest and good care. She brought her skull down to the great hall with her after luncheon on the third day, much to Lord Gerald's delight, and once introductions were made, the entire company fell into a game of hide-and-seek, where Clarence was hidden somewhere in the castle and everyone had to search for him.

It was childish, really, but the game also served the purpose of allowing the couples in the family to steal a few moments with each other away from the others without accusations of impropriety flying about. Lawrence suspected his father had arranged things specifically for that purpose.

He was beyond grateful when his and Minerva's paths met in one of the tall, narrow towers at the northwestern corner of the castle, where archers had once fired out onto interlopers approaching from the mainland.

"Oh! Lawrence! I did not expect to find you here," Minerva said, sounding far less stuffy and drippy than she had when they'd first arrived. "Alas, Clarence is not resting at the top of this small tower."

"Oh, bother," Lawrence said, his words sounding disappointed, but his expression as he continued the rest of the way up the spiral staircase to stand on a small landing one step down from her anything but.

Minerva's responding laugh as she swayed toward him was low and throaty. The sound of it and the glint in her eyes as she slipped her arms over his shoulders was invigorating. He threw caution to the wind and circled his arms around her waist, standing flush against her. With Minerva one step up, it meant their faces were at exactly the same level, perfect for kissing.

He held back just a bit, though, smiling at her and enjoying the feeling of her in his arms.

"I trust your recovery is progressing well?" he asked in a soft, deep voice.

"It is," Minerva said, keeping her voice at a rich, sonorous level to match his.

"And my family's hospitality has been to your liking?" he continued, rubbing his hands across her back and pulling her closer.

"Your family has been magnificent," Minerva said, bringing her sweet lips to within kissing distance of his.

"I see you have foregone your usual black today in favor of this delectable blue creation," he said, using the excuse of brushing his hands across some of the more interesting details of the gown's construction to touch her more fully. "Is it my imagination, or is this a Scandinavian style?"

Minerva's cheeks flushed with desire, and she sucked in a breath as Lawrence traced his hand around some of the embroidery over one of her breasts. "I have determined that a change is in order," she said with a catch in her voice as Lawrence's tracing turned to gentle caresses.

"No more black?" Lawrence asked, dragging his eyes from the part of her he wanted to look at, particularly since the Scandinavian style involved low-cut bodices with

only a thin fichu to cover the almost dangerous swell of her breasts, to her eyes.

Minerva laughed in a way that was so free it made his heart light and his groin tight. “I think I have dressed in black enough,” she said. “From henceforth, I shall have my seamstress construct all of my future gowns in the Swedish style. I think blue and silver would be attractive colors for me.”

Lawrence smiled, moving his hand to caress her heated face. “Any colors would be beautiful on you, my love,” he said, then arched one eyebrow. “Or no colors at all.”

Minerva laughed again, and at last, Lawrence slanted his head to take what he really wanted from her.

She moved easily into his kiss, tightening her arms around him as their lips played together, lightly at first, then with more insistence. That was not enough, and as soon as he was confident that Minerva wanted their kiss as much as he did, he parted her lips to slide his tongue against hers.

Minerva sighed and sagged into him even more, giving him the opportunity to use his strength to keep her upright and to stop the two of them from falling. He had never considered himself a strong man, in body or in character, but Minerva made him feel as though he could challenge Atlas himself. She had made him strong, and she had made him clever. With her, he felt as if he could either conquer the world or at least make up an amusing story about it.

“Minerva,” he sighed, shifting her to the side so that he could push her back up against the wall next to the arrow-slit.

“Lawrence,” she echoed, lifting one of her legs to hook around his hip.

Within moments, they were enjoying more than a simple kiss. The way their mouths

mated turned ravenous. The sounds that both of them made echoed through the tower, most likely shocking the spirits of his ancestors. Lawrence did not care a whit for any of them. He tugged at Minerva's leg to bring it higher and pushed up the soft fabric of her skirt so that he could slip his hand over her stocking and up her thigh.

Minerva let out a plaintive sound as his fingers stretched across the flesh between the top of her stockings and her thin drawers. He didn't stop there, though. As his mouth continued to tease and tempt hers in possessive kisses, he delved his fingers under the cotton of her drawers to find her already wet sex.

"Dear God, yes," Minerva sighed, rolling her head back against the stone wall behind her.

Lawrence growled in victory at her wanton manner, loving every wicked moment of it. He pulled aside her fichu with his teeth so that he could kiss and savor her breast. While one hand continued its work between her legs, his other tugged at the top of her bodice enough to expose one pebbled nipple.

He went right for it, kissing and suckling her and teasing her with his tongue as he slipped two fingers into her channel and used his thumb to rub her clitoris. The effect was stunning, and in no time, Minerva was writhing and panting and moaning as she rode his attentions hard and fast toward her pleasure.

She erupted with a deep cry, her head thrown back and her eyes closed. Her sex squeezed around his fingers, causing him to smile against her breast. If she thought his ability to bring her to orgasm in a drafty tower was exciting, she would be even more surprised and delighted by what he could do when they had the luxury of a soft bed and time to play.

As soon as Minerva began to relax and come down from the heights of pleasure, Lawrence recaptured her mouth, kissing her with a gentler insistence. Minerva melted

into that, kissing him in return.

It was a beautiful moment, and Lawrence would have made the cheeky suggestion that they return to either her room or his and abandon the search for Clarence if the sound of a carriage arriving in the courtyard below had not drawn his attention.

“What the devil?” he muttered, pulling partly away from Minerva with a frown.

Minerva was still swimming in the aftermath of her pleasure and took a moment to return to the world, but as she shifted to stand on her own feet again and to tidy her fichu, she turned to peer out through the arrow-slit along with Lawrence.

The moment Lawrence had been dreading since they arrived at Godwin Castle was upon them. He and Minerva both watched with varying degrees of horror as the carriage stopped, the castle footmen stepped forward to assist, and as Lord Owen stepped down onto the cobblestones. Behind him came a grey-haired couple who looked around as though they had instantly decided Godwin Castle would be better off at the bottom of a bog.

“My parents,” Minerva said, suddenly anxious when she was crying in bliss just moments before. “And Owen.”

Lawrence reached an arm around her waist, holding her close. “They will not touch you,” he said. “I will not let them lay a hand, or a claim, on you.”

Minerva pushed away from the window and stared at him with wide eyes. “I do not know if you will be able to stop them,” she said. “Owen has the prior claim on me, and he has his special license.”

“Not if I get ahold of it he won’t,” Lawrence said, taking her hand and drawing her down the stairs. “I’ll tear it up and throw it into the fire, or I’ll scratch out his name

and sign my own to it.”

“I do not think that would hold much weight in a London court,” Minerva said, a surprising amount of humor in her voice.

“Then I will run the usurping bastard through and we will escape to Sweden,” Lawrence said as they reached the ground floor and stepped out into one of the servants’ hallways. “You are already dressed for that life, after all.”

Minerva laughed. The sound was like a bolstering trumpet voluntary that spurred champions into battle. As long as he had Minerva with him, Lawrence could endure even the strongest claim to what he knew was his.

They hurried to the great hall, stopping along the way to freshen up enough so that no evidence of the mischief they’d just gotten up to remained, then continued on to the great room.

They were the last ones to arrive, which was, perhaps, fortunate. It meant Lord Gerald and Waldorf had already begun the battle.

“You cannot just walk into my father’s home in such a manner, demanding whatever you please,” Waldorf was in the middle of admonishing the three newcomers.

“You are harboring my bride,” Lord Owen argued in return. “She is mine by consent of her parents and by license of the Church of Wales. I have the license here to prove it.” He gestured for the bedraggled maid who had apparently come with them to produce the license in question.

“Lady Minerva is a woman,” Lord Gerald argued with an irritated frown, “not a business you wish to operate. A license means nothing in matters of the heart.”

The maid had successfully taken a roll of paper from the large reticule she carried, but as soon as she attempted to present it to Lord Owen, he shoved her back with a peevish look, as if she were impertinent for doing precisely what he'd asked her to do. He turned his focus to Lord Gerald instead.

“Perhaps you are too old and feeble to remember it, but the law of the Kingdom of Wales states that a woman’s parents have the right to arrange her marriage, and that their arrangements are binding.”

“That law is an abomination,” Minerva herself said, picking up her pace so that she and Lawrence could take place in the unfolding argument. “It is designed to turn perfectly capable young women into chattel, and it should be struck down at once.”

“Minerva!” Lady Caren Llewellyn cried out at the sight of her daughter, stepping towards her.

She seemed more relieved to see Minerva alive and well than angry that she had disobeyed her wishes, which Lawrence counted as a good thing.

“Mother,” Minerva nodded to her, then valiantly stared at Lord Owen as they finished their approach to the cluster in the center of the great hall. “I do not know why you’ve come here,” she told Lord Owen, with a short glance to her father. “I have said all along that I’ve no wish to marry Lord Owen. I went to great lengths, despite your attempts to force me, to escape the union.”

“You wickedly defied my wishes,” Lord Dilwyn said, turning to her with so much force and arrogance that Lawrence stepped forward to come between them.

That movement surprised Lord Dilwyn, thwarting his attempt to chastise Minerva.

Lord Owen, however, was not as easily cowed.

“I knew you were not dead,” he snapped, grinning darkly in a way that exposed his teeth. Lawrence thought the expression made him look like one of the vampires Minerva liked to read about. “You are a wicked woman to go to such lengths to deny your obligations and escape your fate.”

“If she is such a wicked woman, then why do you wish to marry her?” Waldorf demanded. He wore his most intimidating scowl and had pulled himself up to his full height. Lord Owen was a fool for not being terrified of him.

“It is none of your concern,” Lord Owen snapped, then seemed to immediately contradict himself by saying, “It is a business arrangement between Lord Dilwyn and myself. The merger of our families will bring immense prosperity to both of us.”

“Did I not just say that women are not commodities to be bought and sold and treated the same one might treat a market stall?” Lord Gerald complained, tsking and shaking his head.

“You stay out of this, old man,” Lord Owen shouted, pointing a finger at Lord Gerald.

Lord Gerald gaped, his face going red with fury. Lawrence could count on one hand the number of times he’d seen his father truly angry, but he suspected he was about to add to that list.

“How dare you speak to a gentleman who has been so kind and considerate of me in such a manner?” Minerva demanded, primed and ready to hold her own in the argument, no matter how heated it might become. “The Godwin family has offered me nothing but kindness and care since my arrival. And I was most definitely ill upon arrival. They have cared for me. I’d wager that you, sir, would have found a way to force me to the altar, no matter how out of sorts I felt, and you would have found a way to bed me no matter how feverish I was.”

“Minerva!” Lady Caren gasped. “You cannot speak of such things in company.”

Lawrence caught the light in Minerva’s eyes half a moment before she blurted out, “Did you think I was a virgin that would go sweetly into this abomination of a marriage without knowing what awaited me? At my age?”

It was all Lawrence could do not to let himself laugh aloud. Like Minerva, he, too, glanced to Lord Owen to see if her confession of experience might turn him away from their proposed marriage.

“I do not care if you are the Whore of Babylon,” Lord Owen said, thwarting their hopes. “That only means I will enjoy getting an heir or two out of you.”

“Oh, dear,” Lady Caren said, slumping back against her waiting maid. “I cannot...I will not....”

Lawrence was concerned for the woman, but the way Minerva sent her a narrow-eyed look hinted that perhaps the woman was prone to theatrics and was not as shocked as she appeared.

Minerva turned back to Lord Owen and her father, who were now standing side by side, and crossed her arms in defiance. “I will not marry Lord Owen. That line has been drawn indelibly in the sand, and it will not be crossed.”

“Then you will be ruined,” Lord Owen seethed. He glanced around at all of the Godwins present. “You will all be ruined. I will take you to court and sue for my bride. Every wrong your family has ever done will be exposed. Every impropriety you have tried to keep secret will be revealed. I will have Minerva in the end, one way or another, and you all will suffer!”

“What a load of theatrical bollocks,” Waldorf snorted. When Lord Owen and Lord

Dilwyn glanced to him with offense, he went on with, "Have you no idea who our family is and what connections we have?"

"My late wife was the sister of King Swithin's wife," Lord Gerald said, looking like he was building up a head of steam to lecture Lord Owen into his grave. "My son here," he gestured to Waldorf, "has been in the employ of Queen Matilda of Mercia. My other children are connected to some of the wealthiest and most celebrated personages throughout all of Britannia. And you dare to speak to me as if I am a hall boy?"

He practically quivered with fury, but that did nothing to convince Lord Owen to mind his manners.

"I do not care if you are King Swithin's cock-warmer," he shouted, stepping closer to Lord Gerald. "You are a pathetic old man who hides behind his children to protect a whore of a woman whose only purpose is to increase my influence and bear my children. I will not allow you to stand in my way. If necessary, I will summon the full force of the law to get my way, and you will not stop me!"

Lord Owen had moved close enough that with each of his final words, he poked Lord Gerald square in the chest.

It was unforgiveable, and Lawrence stepped forward to drag the man back, as did Waldorf and Dunstan. Nobility or not, Lawrence had half a mind to pummel Lord Owen until his face was unrecognizable, both for his insults to Minerva and for laying a hand on his father.

But before he could do more than jerk the man back and spin him to face him, Lord Gerald let out an anguished cry. Worse than that, he clasped a hand tightly to his chest, curling in on himself, then collapsed to the floor.

Twenty

Minnie gasped so hard as Lord Gerald crumpled that it sent her into a coughing fit which prevented her from leaping forward to save him. She liked the old man tremendously, and she had already made up her mind to love him like a father. But the blasted remnants of her cold had her doubling over a bit herself instead of rushing to the wily man's aid.

Carys had no such impediment, however. As Lawrence and Waldorf dragged Owen back from Lord Gerald's crumpled form, Carys rushed to her employer's aid, crouching by his side and resting her hands on his face, her eyes wide with panic.

Minnie only caught a split-second glimpse of Lord Gerald opening one eye to see Carys hovering over him before her attention was yanked to the brewing battle between the men.

"How dare you?" Lawrence shouted, grasping Owen by his jacket and shaking him. "How dare you assault an aging duke?"

"I...I did not mean?—"

Owen was given no time to defend himself. Lawrence might have been content with shaking, but Lord Waldorf was not, and he was by far the more dangerous of the two men.

"Bastard!" he shouted, tearing Owen out of Lawrence's hold and smashing his fist hard across Owen's face.

Minnie and her mother both yelped as Owen's head jerked to the side and blood splattered from his nose. Kat growled, her fists clenched, while Napoleon hissed from behind her skirts, then dashed to the other side of the room to hide under a sofa. From the look of her, Minnie was certain that Kat not only approved of her husband's actions, she wished she had been the one to throw the punch.

"You would dare strike an old and ailing man?" Lord Waldorf demanded before throwing a second punch that had just as startling an effect as the first.

"Waldorf, compose yourself," Lord Dunstan said, though perhaps without as much force as he might have used, as he shifted to grasp Lord Waldorf's arm, holding him back.

"Villains, all of you!" Minnie's father shouted. His eyes were wide with fear, though, and he'd retreated to behind a nearby chair, lest he be drawn into the combat.

Minnie saw a tiny sliver of opportunity and snatched at it.

"You would truly have me marry a man who assaults the elderly and speaks so wickedly of women?" she demanded, taking a step closer to her father.

"I...the uniting of our two houses would provide immense financial opportunity for?—"

"Someone fetch the doctor!" Carys cried out, her face a splashed mask of horror and misery. She sat splayed on the floor and had drawn Lord Gerald into her arms, as if he were her own father. "It is Lord Gerald's heart!"

Lord Gerald moaned, continuing to clutch tightly at his chest, rocking slightly in Carys's arms, as though he were in pain. The parson who had arrived with Minnie's parents and Lord Owen moved as if to pray over Lord Gerald, but Dunstan shifted

into his path to stop him.

“Send for Dr. Meadows this instant,” he called out to the small cluster of servants in the doorway. They must have heard the commotion and come to see what was happening.

One of the maids nodded and turned to run out, but the two footmen charged into the room, like their assistance would be needed to deal with Lord Owen.

Lord Owen must have thought they were coming to his aid.

“Stop this madman from killing me!” he called out, appealing to the two young men as the parson switched his efforts to attempting to calm him. “And send for a doctor for me as well!”

“I want this man banished from Godwin Castle,” Lawrence called out to the footmen, his eyes almost frighteningly wide as he glared at Owen. “He has offended the woman I love, and unless God, in His grace, intercedes, he will have killed my father as well.”

“I only poked him!” Owen shouted, all color draining from his face. “I haven’t killed him.”

Lord Gerald groaned out in agony and shivered in Carys’s lap.

“Father, are you well?” Lord Dunstan gasped, rushing to crouch by Carys’s side, resting a hand on his forehead. “The doctor is coming. All will be well. You will be saved.” He raised his head and appealed to the maids at the other end of the room. “Fetch his medicines at once!”

“You will pay for this,” Lawrence continued. “You dare to threaten my family with a

lawsuit for attempting to set Lady Minerva free from the unholy deal to be your bride that she had no part in? Do you think the courts in London would side with a murderer?"

"He's not dead yet...is he?" Minnie's mother asked, tears streaming down her face.

Lord Gerald moaned, and Carys nearly flew into hysterics as she cried, "He's dying! He's dying!"

That sent Minnie's mother into a swoon. Minnie was close enough that she leapt forward and managed to catch her, but her mother's weight sent them both sinking to the floor.

"Look what your arrogance has done?" Lawrence boomed at Owen. "Will you feel self-satisfied and proud of your actions when you are moldering in a gaol, sir?"

"I...I didn't...he cannot be dying," Owen said, staring at Lord Gerald as blood streamed down his face and onto his neckcloth and jacket from his nose, which was now perched at an odd angle. "I did not do this. I am not a murderer."

Minnie was so close to the edge of tears. She wanted to leap to her feet and finish the job Lord Waldorf had begun in ending Owen's life. She could not bear the thought of losing Lord Gerald so soon after meeting him.

Hugging her mother's limp form tightly, Minnie glanced across to Lord Gerald as he moaned in Carys's arms. She was so close to tears that her eyes and throat ached.

And then Carys winked at her.

More than that, Lord Gerald opened one eye halfway, and when he spotted Minnie watching him in horror, his mouth pulled into the smallest of smiles.

And then Lord Gerald huffed out a breath and went completely motionless in Carys's arms.

Minnie gasped, but not because the specter of death had touched the house. She gasped because she knew exactly what she needed to do.

"Murderer!" Minnie shouted, her heart pounding and her lungs squeezing with the desperate need to either laugh or cough. She jerked her head up and fixed Owen with a horrified look. "You've murdered him! Lord Gerald is dead because of you!"

"He isn't...no!" Owen shouted, reeling back.

The moment and setting were too perfect for Minnie to resist shouting, "I curse you! By the power of the Curse of Godwin Castle, I curse you!"

She set her mother aside gently as she came out of her swoon, then stood. Lord Owen and his parson both flinched back as she surged toward them.

"I curse you, Owen Spurloch," she continued, wishing she still wore her black gown and had her hair down and flowing wildly to boot. She remembered how Mary from the village church had assumed she was a witch, and in that moment, she had never embraced that image more. "I curse you to a lifetime of tragedy, you toad! You have sought to imprison a sorceress, and now you have killed a good man! May your days be filled with darkness and may treachery await you around every corner!"

"No! No, this isn't real. You're not a...a witch?" Owen stumbled back, his face a mask of fright and disbelief.

The parson started muttering prayers and crossing himself, backing farther away from Minnie, his face white.

“I have returned from the dead once, and I will do it again simply to spite you if you do not leave this place at once!” Minnie shouted. Her face was a mask of rage, but inwardly, she rolled with laughter. Owen was an utter fool for believing a single thing he was seeing. “Be gone with you!”

“Help! Help!” Owen shrieked, turning and bolting for the door, the parson following him. “Get me out of this place at once!”

“Caren! We are leaving!” Minnie’s father shouted.

“But....” Minnie’s mother glanced between her and her husband.

“Now!” Minnie’s father bellowed, already running for the door.

“Mother, you do not have to leave with them,” Minnie appealed to her mother, though perhaps without as much enthusiasm as she should have. Her mother was complicit in what would have been her fate for failing to stand up against it, after all.

After a few more moments of hesitation, Minnie’s mother pinched her face in misery, burst into sobbing, and ran after her father. The two of them, Owen, and the parson bolted from the room.

“Go after them,” Lawrence charged the maids as Waldorf and Kat joined Carys and Lord Dunstan crouching beside Lord Gerald. “Make certain that they leave here, and make it clear to them that if they ever return or pursue Lady Minerva again, everything they have done today will be exposed to the ton and used against them.”

“Yes, my lord,” the maids all said in turn, bobbing curtsies, then looking like Furies who had been sent after the villains of a Greek myth to hound them.

When that was done, Lawrence turned to join the others crowded around Lord

Gerald. It was clear to Minnie by the genuine fear in his eyes and his pale face that he believed his father to be in dire straits, but she caught him, keeping him from falling to his knees in front of his father.

“All is well,” she attempted to reassure him. “Your father is?—”

“I must go to him,” Lawrence said, trying to break away from Minnie.

As if sensing the turn things might take, Lord Gerald drew in a deep breath and groaned again, showing that he was alive. He continued to huddle in Carys’s lap, however, and to behave as though he might die again at any moment.

“Father!” Lawrence cried out plaintively.

Minnie was uncertain what role Lord Gerald wished her to play in the drama they were apparently continuing, but she held fast to Lawrence.

At least, until Lord Gerald said in a weak voice, “Come here, my son.”

Minnie let Lawrence go, then moved forward with him.

Lawrence dropped to his knees and grabbed his father’s hands. “Father, you will be well, I know it. The doctor is on his way.”

“My son,” Lord Gerald said, reaching a hand up to cradle Lawrence’s face.

“I should have known you were truly ill,” Lawrence said, becoming more emotional by the moment. “I am sorry that I did not believe you when you told us all your time on this earth was short. I should have believed you.”

“Lawrence,” Lord Gerald said, beginning to slip out of his act.

Lawrence did not see the transition, however. “I should have sought out a wife sooner and obeyed your wishes. But I only just found Minerva now. No one else would have done.”

Minnie caught the flash in Lord Gerald’s eyes as he peeked at her. He then resumed his dying mien and said, “It is my dying wish. You have witnesses here, and we are in Wessex. The last thing I see and the last thing I hear in this life should be you securing Lady Minerva as your own.”

“Yes, Father,” Lawrence said. “Yes.”

He let go of Lord Gerald’s hands, then shifted around to grasp at Minnie’s as she crouched beside the scene.

“Minerva, will you have me?” Lawrence asked, as though the question deserved the desperation he put into it.

It took all of Minnie’s self-control not to giggle at the wild scene. “Yes,” she said, surprised at how quickly her heart filled with joy at the prospect not only of marrying Lawrence and spending the rest of her days as his wife, but at joining the Godwin family in all their wild and ridiculous glory. “Yes, I will marry you.”

“Are you aware of the sacred and binding laws and traditions in the Kingdom of Wessex?” Lawrence asked, still serious.

“I am aware,” Minnie said, her composure breaking slightly as her mouth wobbled.

Lawrence nodded, then stood, taking Minnie with him. He continued to hold her hands and gazed into her eyes as he said, “I Lawrence Godwin, Earl of Amesbury, do declare in front of these witnesses,” he nodded to his father and the others, still crouched on the floor and having a nearly impossible time keeping a straight face,

“that I am engaged to you, Lady Minerva Llewellyn.”

Minnie could not help but smile as she squeezed Lawrence’s hands and declared, “I, Lady Minerva Llewellyn, make it known to these witnesses and any others who should ask that I am engaged to you, Lord Lawrence Godwin.”

Lawrence let out a heavy breath of relief, then surged forward, kissing Minnie’s lips soundly.

“Well then,” Lord Gerald said, his voice strong, suddenly in the picture of health as he stood, with Carys and Dunstan’s assistance, “that did not take much, did it?”

Lawrence nearly bit Minnie’s lip in shock before pulling away from her and staring at his father and family.

“You...you were not...how...,” he stammered.

Lord Gerald chuckled. “We certainly put the fear of God into those odious Welshmen, didn’t we,” he said with a wink for Minnie.

“You’re not...I cannot...this was all....” Lawrence went from being desperate and pale to flushed and furious as he glanced from his father to Waldorf—who also looked surprised—to Dunstan.

“I suddenly remembered your story of how you both pretended Lady Minerva expired from the putrid fever to dispatch Lord Owen once before,” Lord Gerald said, then shrugged. “And I thought, why should the two of you have all the fun? I am just as capable of feigning my own ultimate repose as you are, and with me, it was far more believable. Do you not think so, Lady Minerva?”

“You were most convincing, my lord,” Minnie laughed.

Lawrence gaped at her. “You knew?”

“Not at first,” Minnie said, shaking her head. “But when my mother swooned and I was on a level with your father, Carys winked at me, and then your father grinned. From there, I understood the ruse.”

Lawrence was still shocked. He turned to Carys and Dunstan, who had moved to stand closer to her, then to Waldorf and Kat. “And you. Did you know?”

“I most certainly did not!” Waldorf huffed.

“I puzzled it out in the middle of the scene,” Kat admitted sheepishly.

Waldorf snapped a wide-eyed look of indignation to her.

Lawrence turned to Dunstan with a scowl.

“Mrs. Weatherby whispered the plot to me when I first rushed to Father’s aid,” he admitted, blushing. “That is why I prevented the parson from approaching him and discovering the ruse.”

Lawrence clenched his fists, then settled his angry gaze on his father. “I know you do not think very much of me, Father, but this? This was cruel.”

Lord Gerald’s sly look changed to a surprised one. “What do you mean that I do not think very much of you?” he asked.

Minnie shifted closer to Lawrence and took his hand, but the volcano within him exploded all the same.

“My entire life, you have treated me as the imbecile of the family,” he nearly shouted,

pouring so much emotion into his words. “I was never as strong as Waldorf nor as clever as Alden, nor as savvy as Cedric. Even Dunstan and the girls were given priority of place over me whenever you and mother entertained guests, or when it was just the family. I was forever relegated to second-best, and why? Because I could not read well? Because you believed me to be stupid?”

“I did not think you wished to be singled out,” Lord Gerald said, his words heartfelt and his surprise genuine. “You were always a shy child. Your mother and I did not wish to force you into any sort of performance that would make you uncomfortable. We championed your other skills instead. We are all so deeply proud of your artistic accomplishments, son.”

Lawrence’s anger puffed over into a breath of hopelessness, as if relieving decades’-worth of bottled resentments left him adrift and uncertain.

“We are very proud of you,” Waldorf said, looking kinder than Minnie had ever known the gruff man to look.

Those words made Lawrence seem at even more of a loss.

Minnie turned and reached for his other hand, nudging him to stand facing her and not his kin for a moment.

“Sometimes, the stories we tell ourselves of our own life may not be as factual as we believe them to be,” she said softly. “It is so often easier to believe the worst, particularly about ourselves, than it is to feel we are whole and accomplished and good.”

Lawrence relaxed even more, lowering his head and staring at Minnie’s hands in his.

“I think the world of you, Lawrence,” she said, ignoring everyone else in the room

and moving one of her hands to cradle his face. When Lawrence looked up at her, she went on with, “I would have said yes to your proposal days ago, even before our pause at Tidworth Hall. I knew within days of our departure from London that you were a match for me and that no other man would ever come close to competing with you. I love you, Lawrence.”

Lawrence drew in a breath, seeming to feed off those words and gain confidence from them.

“And I love you, my Minerva,” he said, squeezing her one hand in his and resting his other over hers on his face. “I do not know how I lived before you, all I know is that I could not live the rest of my life without you. Whatever I lack in strength and confidence on my own, you have given me by your unconditional friendship and support. I will never take anything you give me for granted.”

“Good,” Minnie said, arching one eyebrow, then sliding her arms around Lawrence’s back to hug him tightly. “And I will fight and curse any man or woman who ever tries to belittle you or set you down again.”

Lawrence laughed and embraced her tightly in return. “We would not want that,” he said, resting his cheek against her head. “You’ve already come back from the dead once, after all. At this rate, you will become part of the Curse of Godwin Castle.”

“And I would enjoy every moment of it,” Minnie said, happier than she’d ever known herself to be.

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As certain as the family was that Owen would not dare to return to Godwin Castle, and that Minnie's parents would never darken its doorstep again, Minnie was not convinced they would maintain a peaceful distance and allow her to live her life. And so, as soon as was possible under the laws of the Kingdom of Wessex, which was a very short time indeed, she and Lawrence were married in the castle's chapel.

"I am deeply grateful for two things," Minnie declared as she and Lawrence addressed their friends and family during the small gathering that took place in the great hall after the ceremony. "The first is that all of my dearest friends were able to rush from London and their homes, despite Joint Parliament being in session, so that they might be present on this joyous occasion."

"Thank heavens there was a boat traveling from London," Bernadette laughed, resting her hand on her round stomach.

"Thank heavens we all had plans to spent the holiday season at Godwin Castle to begin with," Muriel added, patting her even rounder belly.

"Yes, it seems as though the family's luck has changed this year," Alden said, beaming at Bernadette.

"It is because we friends have married into the family," Kat declared with a laugh, then raised her glass of wine to salute her sisters in marriage.

"We are better off for it," Lawrence said, one arm looped around Minnie's waist, beaming at her.

“I must say, the Godwin family appears to have performed miracles of their own,” Muriel went on, smirking at Minnie. “Is that a blue gown you are wearing and not black?”

Minnie laughed aloud. “I have decided that I shall never wear black again.”

“Not even when you are in mourning for those you love?” Lawrence asked with a falsely sad look.

Minnie giggled and rested a hand on the side of his face. “I shall wear midnight blue,” she declared. “But you are under strict orders not to go anywhere until I say you may.”

“What about his impending journey to Hamburg?” Lady Wystan, one of Lord Gerald’s daughters, who had also arrived with her family asked, sending Lawrence a teasing look. “Do you not wish to leave for a certain exhibition opening?”

Lawrence sent his sister a sly look in return.

Amidst all the furor of his and Minnie’s arrival and the subsequent dramatics of Owen and Minnie’s parents arriving, Lawrence had had the statue packed up and sent off to Mr. Loesser in London. A small notice had arrived the day before saying that the sculpture had been received and sent on its way to Hamburg, along with the others for the exhibition. Additionally, Mr. Loesser noted that interest in the exhibition was growing throughout the German Confederation, and should Lawrence ever wish to journey there, he would likely find himself lauded as a great artist.

“We have plans to travel to Hamburg for the opening of the exhibition together,” Minnie informed Dunstan. “In the new year, when everything is arranged and ready.”

“I suppose you’ll want to get away from this place, now that its fate, or rather my fate, is decided,” Dunstan said with a deep sigh.

“That being said,” Lord Gerald broke into the conversation. He pounded his cane against the floor three times in a ceremonial manner, then said, “Mrs. Weatherby, bring me the scroll!”

Carys, who had been invited to attend the family celebration on Minnie’s insistence, and who was dressed in a rather lovely gown of periwinkle blue with her soft brown hair in a style that was actually fashionable and not covered with a cap, set her wine glass aside and walked quickly, but with great ceremony, over to Lord Gerald’s desk at the side of the room. The family all watched with attempts at sobriety as Carys drew the now infamous scroll from the desk’s top drawer, along with a black chalk that Lord Gerald used on occasions such as this.

“Set it on the table where everyone can see it,” Lord Gerald ordered.

Carys hurried to rejoin the celebrating family. She unrolled the scroll and held it open.

“The chalk, Mrs. Weatherby,” Lord Gerald intoned, extending a hand to Carys.

With as much gravity and silliness as Lord Gerald showed, Carys handed the chalk over to him.

Lord Gerald cleared his throat and stared down at the elaborate parchment. It had the words “Heirs of Godwin Castle” written in beautiful, embellished script at the top and the names of all of the family’s male heirs listed beneath.

With great solemnity, Lord Gerald struck Lawrence’s name from the list, then said. “So mote it be.”

Minnie fought not to laugh. That became particularly difficult when she peeked to her friends, only to find them struggling not to burst out as well. Bernadette had a hand over her mouth, and her eyes were glassy with tears from her efforts to keep her

laughter inside.

The only person in the room decidedly not laughing was Lord Dunstan, and with good reason.

“It is done,” Lord Gerald said, handing the chalk back to Mrs. Weatherby, then rolling up the scroll. He handed the entire thing to Lord Dunstan as though handing him his own noose. “I shall write to my solicitors tomorrow, informing them that you, my boy, are now the sole heir of Godwin Castle.”

“And the sole inheritor of the curse,” Lord Cedric said in hushed tones.

Minnie blinked at the man, surprised that he seemed to take the curse so seriously. He was no longer pretending. Muriel held his arm and patted his hand as if to console him. She arched one of her eyebrows at Minnie, as if to communicate that as silly as it was, she respected her husband’s superstition.

“I suppose I knew this would be my fate all along,” Lord Dunstan sighed, looking at the scroll in his hands. “My life has been one mortifying tragedy after another from the start. It is only right that I bear the brunt of this curse.”

“But surely there must be a way around it,” Minnie said, hoping to comfort the man who had become her friend in the last week. “The curse is not written in stone, is it?”

“In fact, it is,” Lord Gerald said, his humor waning as well. “The Curse of Godwin Castle is written in the very stone of this building, in the stone of the foundations upon which it stands.”

“There is a way to break the curse,” Carys said, resting a gentle hand on Lord Gerald’s arm. “The legends of the castle allow for that much, at least.”

“By reuniting two halves of an amulet,” Lord Gerald said. “How do you propose to

do that, my dear, when one half has been missing for nearly a thousand years?"

Carys sighed and sent a sad look to Lord Dunstan.

At least, Minnie thought it was sad at first. The more she looked, the more she was convinced her new friend's look was one of longing, not sadness.

"Let us toast the bride and groom at least," Lord Waldorf said, raising his glass and preventing Minnie from questioning what else might be going on under her very nose.

"To Minnie and Lawrence," Kat offered the toast.

"To Minnie and Lawrence," the others joined in.

"Minnie?" Lawrence said, his eyes going bright as everyone drank to their health. "Is that what your most intimate friends call you?"

"No," Minnie answered with a scowl.

"Yes," Bernadette offered as she hugged Lord Alden's arm and leaned into him.

"Minnie," Lawrence breathed, the sparkle in his eyes ridiculously amorous. "I shall have to refer to you as my very own Minnie from henceforth."

"No, you will not," Minnie said, her scowl darkening.

"You are the sweetest and fairest of Minnies I have ever known," Lawrence continued, sweeping Minnie into his arms.

"Don't you dare," she said, attempting to still appear outraged, when really, her heart was melting with love for the man who was now hers.

“The sun doth rise and set at the whim of my Minnie,” Lawrence pushed on in full, teasing force.

“It is a vile name that is nothing at all like myself.”

“You are just as precious and demure as your name, my lovely Minnie.”

“Would you like it if I began addressing you as Larry?”

“What sweet wonders will my Minnie reveal to me next?” Lawrence beamed.

“Larry, Larry, you are so hairy,” Minnie tossed back at him.

Neither of them could keep up the teasing. They and everyone else in their cheeky family burst into laughter at last, even Lord Dunstan. It was laughter that was beautiful and welcome. It meant that Minnie had, at last, found herself surrounded by precisely the sort of love she had always craved.

I hope you have enjoyed Minnie and Lawrence’s story! Believe it or not, Clarence is actually based on a real skull/person! In the science lab of the high school I attended, there was (and probably still is) a real human skeleton named Clarence. I don’t know if this is true or apocryphal, though honest to God, I think it’s true, but apparently, Clarence was the school’s janitor way, way back in when it was founded in the late nineteenth century. As the story goes, he loved the job so much that he asked to have his skeleton preserved and donated to the school! I thought it fitting to pay tribute to one Clarence by immortalizing him as another.

But what about the Curse of Godwin Castle? It’s all on Dunstan’s shoulders now, but can it be broken? Is it possible that the second half of the amulet isn’t as lost to history as Lord Gerald believes...or that the Whitney family hasn’t actually died out? Maybe Carys Weatherby has the answer. Find out more in *Unlucky in Love*, book five, *Written in Stone* !