



# Hastings (Brothers in Arms #15)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Hastings loves his job as a secret agent for the Home Office. He always gets to kill the bad guys and save the day. He wakes up after a bout of heavy drinking to find himself naked and abandoned in the country, in the garden of a kind, handsome vicar. Suddenly he's not so sure that the lonely, violent life he's living—a life that requires him to deny his feelings and avoid commitment—is the best thing for him after all.

The Reverend Mr. Stephen Matthews has always ministered to his wayward friends and acquaintances with patience and kindness, despite their unusual personal relationships. Relationships he accepted but didn't always understand. Then he finds a naked spy in his garden—a gift from one of those friends—and he wants to indulge the side of his nature he's always denied: impatient and wicked in the best possible way.

When Madelyn Hyde shows up seeking shelter and protection—sent by the head of the shadowy Home Office agency Hastings works for—she complicates their lives even more. She's beautiful, mysterious, and so very lonely. Stephen recognizes her loneliness despite the disguise she uses to hide it, and Hastings recognizes it because her hunger and loneliness mirror his own.

Can three people who have lived their lives trying to be what other people demand find the happiness that has eluded them when they drop their masks and show each other the real people underneath?

**Total Pages (Source):** 50

## CHAPTER 1

Stephen awoke to the feeling of being watched. It was still dark out, the only light coming from the moon shining in his window. Which shouldn't be happening because he'd closed the curtains before going to bed.

A creak of the floorboards next to his bed had him sitting up abruptly. Unfortunately, that was the same moment his watcher chose to lean down over the bed. Their heads came together with an audible thump and the impact left Stephen dazed as he collapsed back on the bed.

"Bloody hell, saint," the man beside his bed cursed at him. "What the hell are you head butting me for?"

Stephen cracked an eye open, rubbing his aching forehead. "Me?" he asked. "What are you doing creeping around in my bedroom in the middle of the night again?"

"I wasn't creeping," Hastings told him. "You sleep like the dead. I could have come through here beating a drum and still you would have slept through it."

"Obviously not," Stephen said with a sigh. He started to sit up again, but caution made him hesitate. "Fair warning," he said. "I'm sitting up."

"Good," Hastings said. "I need a place to sit."

Stephen gingerly sat up and scooted back a bit, making room at the end of the bed. Hastings promptly sat and then fell backward in a sprawl. He was a large man and

took up most of Stephen's bed.

"Are you drunk?" Stephen asked. Hastings smelled like a distillery, but he didn't want to assume. It might irritate him further.

"Always."

"And it appears you are naked again," Stephen observed.

"It's how they left me," Hastings said, dejection in his voice.

"Indeed," Stephen said with a sigh. "You've been drunk and, for the most part, naked, for the better part of three weeks. Don't you think it's time you did something else?"

Three weeks prior, one of Stephen's oldest friends had stopped by and left Hastings there to, as Simon had put it, "be healed by the power of Stephen's ministry." Stephen was relatively sure Simon had been drunk at the time as well. He had unceremoniously dumped a drunk and naked Hastings in Stephen's garden at the parsonage and ridden off immediately. Considering Simon's past, and apparently present, as an agent for a shadowy, secretive department in the Home Office, Stephen assumed Hastings shared the same occupation. It was hard to envision him in the role, however, since he'd yet to see Hastings sober or fully clothed, despite Stephen's best efforts. Nor did Hastings appear to be interested in anyone's ministry.

Despite Hastings ill humor and appalling manners, Stephen did feel for him. It was clear he was having personal troubles, and he felt quite abandoned by his compatriots. Hastings clearly needed help and so Stephen had taken him in, and tried to clothe and feed him until such time as he was ready to face whatever he was avoiding. These sorts of things always came down to avoiding something, didn't they?

“What else is there for me to do besides drink?” Hastings asked plaintively. “I’m in the country, for God’s sake. Why on earth do you live in the country?”

“I quite like Ashton on the Green,” Stephen told him mildly. “Fresh air and lots of pleasant walks. And my garden, of course. Not to mention this is where my parish is.”

“That’s another thing,” Hastings said, pointing at him. Or at least in his general direction. Honestly it was hard to tell he was drunk from his speech, but his coordination was always disastrous. “How are you a parson? Good-looking fellow like you, pleasant to be around, sporting and all that. You look like a proper squire, maybe even a knight. A saint,” he said as if it were a revelation. “That’s right. A saint,” he repeated, clearly forgetting he’d just called him that not ten seconds ago. He didn’t sound as if that was a good thing, either.

“I’m afraid I’m just the Reverend Mr. Stephen Matthews,” Stephen said. “As for my looks and my disposition, you can thank my parents. Or could, if they were still alive. Everything else is my fault.”

“Orphan, are you?” Hastings said compassionately. “Me, too. In the sense that my mum now has an establishment in Bath and doesn’t wish me to show up and reveal her true age.”

“I see,” Stephen said encouragingly. This was the most personal information Hastings had shared since he’d arrived. “And how do you feel about that?”

“I don’t like Bath,” Hastings said, as if that settled the matter. “I want to go back to London.”

“Then why don’t you?” Stephen asked.

“Can’t,” Hastings said with a huge sigh. “Sir Barnabas said I was to lay low here for a while.”

Sir Barnabas James was the head of the shadowy department at the Home Office. That confirmed Stephen’s suspicions. “When did you hear from Sir Barnabas?” he asked.

“Got a note two days after I arrived.”

Stephen was astonished. He’d had no idea. “He told you to stay in Ashton on the Green?”

“No, he told me to stay with you.” Hastings turned over and crawled fully up onto the bed, half draped across Stephen. “So, I’m staying with you.” He yawned widely and rolled over onto his side. “Far as I can tell, you don’t need protecting and there’s no one to kill here, so God knows what that wily bugger is up to.” He yawned again. “But I do as I’m told.”

“In that case, go lie down in your own bed,” Stephen told him. “This is the second time this week you’ve crawled into mine.”

“I like yours better,” Hastings said. “The sun comes up in my window.”

Within moments Stephen heard a light snore. He sighed and lay back down. He certainly wasn’t giving up his bed again. He turned his back to Hastings and hoped there were a few more hours of sleep to be had.

### CHAPTER 2

Stephen was buttering his toast when Hastings came shambling into the dining room. He had donned pants and a shirt, which was hanging open, revealing the dark hair on his broad chest that matched the unruly curls on his head. This had been his morning attire since Stephen had found some clothes for him. He knew his housekeeper, Mrs. Tulane, would be appearing momentarily, as she'd taken quite a shine to Hastings and his lack of decorum and clothing.

"Good morning," Stephen said pleasantly. "And how are you this fine day?"

"People who are pleasant in the morning should get the pox," Hastings growled.

"That good, eh?" Stephen asked, highly amused by Hastings's displeasure. "Perhaps something to eat?"

Hastings grunted wordlessly as he dropped into the seat to Stephen's right. He put his forehead in his hands and rolled it from side to side, as if massaging it.

"Steak? Eggs? Toast?" Stephen goaded. Experience had taught him Hastings was green around the gills in the morning after indulging too much.

"I will kill you," Hastings mumbled. "No one here to stop me. I have the skills."

"I'm sure you do," Stephen said with exaggerated compassion. "Poor thing."

"People actually fear me," Hastings said, raising his head and sitting up straight. His

dark brown eyes were red-rimmed. He tipped his head from side to side and Stephen heard his neck crack.

“If you have to tell someone that, it loses some of its impact,” Stephen said reasonably.

Mrs. Tulane came bustling in with a glass on a tray. “Here’s your morning remedy, Mr. Hastings,” she said demurely. The fact that his aging, judgmental housekeeper adored Hastings bemused Stephen. He attributed it to misplaced compassion or grandmotherly concern, but she ogled Hastings’s chest too much for Stephen to actually believe it.

“Thank you,” Hastings said with real gratitude. He took the glass and drank it all down without stopping for air. Stephen wasn’t sure what was in it, but it smelled noxious and was a sickly reddish green. Mrs. Tulane claimed it had cured the late and not much-lamented Mr. Tulane on many an occasion, and it did seem to help Hastings. Once he’d finished, he took a deep breath and miraculously seemed better, if not cured.

“I have sent for the duchess,” Stephen told him without preamble. He figured it was best that way.

“What?” Hastings asked, suddenly alert and understandably incredulous. “Why would you do a fool thing like that?”

“As we discussed last night, it is time you did something besides get drunk and run around naked.”

“I don’t run around,” Hastings argued. “That indicates a lack of forethought, and indecision. I very deliberately get drunk and walk with purpose around the parsonage naked. That is completely different.”

“We shall agree to disagree,” Stephen conceded. “Be that as it may,” he continued, holding his hand up to stop Hastings’s retort in its tracks, “there is no one better than Her Grace to help us determine what that something should be.”

“She insulted me,” Hastings said, glowering at Stephen.

“She did not. She merely pointed out that you were drunk, and that she hadn’t seen you sober yet. Both were points of fact.” Stephen wiped his mouth with his napkin. “When she arrives, you will be courteous.”

“I will not.” Hastings crossed his arms and looked very much like a recalcitrant schoolboy, which for some reason endeared him to Stephen. Hastings was mad at the world, and how awful that must be for him.

“You will.” Stephen stood up. “She also happens to be one of my dearest friends, so I would appreciate your consideration in this matter.”

“I will simply make myself scarce,” Hastings said, pushing away from the table.

“Then your future in Ashton on the Green will be decided without you,” Stephen told him. Stephen was trying very hard to be stern. It did not come naturally to him.

“Fine,” Hastings ground out. “But I don’t have to like it, or her.”

“No, you do not,” Stephen agreed. “But I think you’ll find her rather pleasant actually, and a grand person to have on your side.”

“She’s a busybody,” Hastings said, heading toward the door. “People who stick their noses into other people’s business often find their noses cut off.”

“Well, that’s a gruesome thought,” Stephen said to his back. “In Ashton on the Green



they simply feel free to offer their opinion on everyone's business. That is what it is like in the country."

"That is why I prefer London. No one cares what you're doing or who you're doing it with."

"You, sir, are familiar with a London that most people do not know even exists," Stephen told him. "My London friends can't sneeze without the entire ton commenting on it."

"I'm familiar with what your London friends are doing, and it isn't sneezing," Hastings said, and Stephen actually heard amusement in his voice.

"You've made my case for me," Stephen said with satisfaction. Hastings spun around and Stephen could see the dismay in his face that he'd lost the argument. "Anne, Her Grace, will be here any moment. Go put on some more clothes."

Without another word Hastings spun on his heel and retreated. Stephen was impressed that he could apparently do what he was told on occasion.

### CHAPTER 3

Hastings stood on the threshold of the parsonage's small parlor, grinding his teeth. Her Grace, the Duchess of Ashland—Anne, as Stephen called her—was looking him up and down in what was clearly an insulting way. She was still young and quite pretty, a diminutive brunette, her curls barely contained by her elegant hairstyle. Looking at her you'd never guess she was a duchess, or the mother of four. But when she spoke it was with the authority of her station.

"You'll do," she said flatly. "At least you're fully clothed today." She waved him into the room imperiously, directing him to the sofa opposite her and it was only the beseeching look on Stephen's face that kept Hastings from turning around and stalking off.

"Not on your account," he told her, walking over and sitting down in a stiff-backed chair in the corner farthest away from her.

"Naturally," she said with equanimity. "Since you were barely covered the last time I called I didn't think my sensibilities were paramount in your sartorial decisions."

"I'm still half shot," Hastings said rudely. "Enough pleasantries. Let's get this over with."

"I'm sorry," the duchess said with ill-disguised sarcasm. "Were we being pleasant? I hadn't noticed."

"Anne," Stephen said with a sigh. "Hastings."

“He started it,” the duchess said.

“I’ll end it, too,” Hastings said.

Stephen pinched the bridge of his nose and Hastings took a deep breath, pressing his lips together. He hadn’t meant to say that. It just slipped out. “Sorry, Stephen,” he said.

The duchess watched them closely. “I am not the enemy, Mr. Hastings,” she told him not unkindly.

“Just Hastings,” he corrected her. “I’ve just the one name.”

“You... you don’t have a Christian name?” she asked.

“No, I haven’t,” he answered, not upset by her question. He was used to people asking him about it. “Just the one. My mum said she thought it was my father’s name, but she couldn’t be sure. She abandoned me to the parish when I was barely in britches, and though they tried to give me another name—can’t remember what it was, actually, I think they tried several—I only ever answered to Hastings.”

“Did your mother tell the parish about your father? Is that how you know?” Stephen asked, a frown wrinkling his brow.

“Nah,” Hastings said with a laugh. “She showed up when I was ten or eleven, wanting some money. She’s not a bad woman, just not mother material. We get on pretty well, all things considered.”

“I... well, goodness,” the duchess said, blinking rapidly. “I didn’t know you were a foundling.”

“Why would you?” Hastings asked, then yawned widely.

“Are we keeping you up?” she asked archly, whatever sympathy she’d been about to impart redirected, much to his relief.

“Not at all, Your Grace,” he told her with a grin. “I didn’t get to sleep until quite late last night, and Stephen hogs the bed.”

Stephen blushed beet red. Hastings liked to shock him. “I do no such thing,” Stephen said calmly. “You were the one who came into my room and proceeded to collapse on my bed in a drunken, snoring stupor.”

The duchess covered her mouth as she giggled. Hastings wasn’t going to shock her with the thought of two men in a bed together. It was a fact that she and her duke and their friend Mr. Haversham were tucked up quite nicely each night into their ducal blankets. Honestly, he had no idea how Stephen’s motley crew of friends—the duke and duchess and their lover included—got away with such blatant disregard for the rules. He having a royal title helped considerably, as did having a royal friend.

Stephen cleared his throat. “Now then. Anne, I asked you here today to help us find some sort of useful industry for Hastings while he is staying with us here in Ashton on the Green.”

“He’s staying?” she asked, and Hastings couldn’t tell if that was delight in her tone or mere incredulousness.

“I’m as surprised as you are,” he told her.

“Well, what prompted that decision?” she asked, leaning forward a little, avidly anticipating some gossip, most likely.

“That’s a state secret,” he told her, making his face as blank as he could.

Stephen’s snort ruined the moment. “Hardly,” he said. “Sir Barnabas has ordered him to stay here with me, for only God knows what reason.”

That was only part of the reason. The other part was sitting across from him in a bottle green jacket that made his cheeks look even rosier than usual, piously trying to improve Hastings’s life. He’d never been interested in a man before. This attraction to the parson was damned inconvenient and Hastings didn’t know what to do about it. And until he did, he was staying right here.

“How wonderful,” she said, and Hastings believed she meant it. “Ashland is always happy to have someone new in the village,” she added, referring to her husband. “Well, what can you do, Mr. ... ah, Hastings?”

“I can kill people,” he said, squinting as if in thought. “Guns, knives, bare hands, whatever’s required.”

“Yes, well, we don’t often have need of that here...” She trailed off, a diabolical grin breaking out on her face. “However, we do have an opening that might suit your skills.”

He was as shocked as Stephen looked. “You do?” he asked in disbelief.

“Oh, no, Anne,” Stephen said, his face noticeably pale. “No, no, no. I don’t think that’s a good idea.” He stood up as if to make his point. He looked genuinely alarmed.

“Nonsense,” the duchess said firmly, her mind obviously made up. “He’s perfect. He’s an agent of the law, isn’t he? It is quite, quite serendipitous that he should arrive just in our hour of need.”

“I don’t think I should kill anyone here,” Hastings said slowly. “I’m supposed to be laying low.”

The duchess laughed in delight and Hastings got a chill down his spine. “Really, this was Stephen’s idea, not mine,” he blustered. “I’m perfectly content with things the way they are.”

“Nonsense,” she said again, and Hastings got the impression she said that a lot. “Drunk and naked is no way to go through life, Hastings.” She put her teacup down on the table in front of her with finality. Hastings hadn’t seen her take a sip, but Mrs. Tulane’s brew was notoriously strong. Even Hastings had to have it half cream.

“You will present yourself at Ashland Manor tomorrow morning, Hastings. It is, of course, up to the duke, although I believe he will accept my guidance in this matter.”

“When does he not?” Stephen muttered and she looked at him sharply, one brow raised.

“You are correct,” she told him. “His Grace is quite astute and not averse to wise counsel.” She headed for the door.

“Wait,” Hastings said, scrambling out of his seat. Somehow he’d lost control of this meeting. “What exactly am I supposed to do for you?”

She didn’t even turn around as she answered him. “Why, Hastings, you are the new sheriff.”

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### CHAPTER 4

Hastings impatiently jumped down from his horse. His new horse. The duke had sent it with his summons this morning. It was a beautiful horse—big and strong, and feisty, with a glossy brown hide and thick, black mane and tail. Hastings had to hold tight to the reins to get him to behave on the way over, but not overly much. He enjoyed the horse's prancing and obvious relish at being on the road. He was by far the grandest horse Hastings's had ever ridden.

He pulled the duke's note from his pocket and reread it as a groom came and took the horse away.

Hastings—present yourself at the Park this morning at 10 o'clock. There are official steps that must be taken before I indulge my duchess in this harebrained scheme. I've sent the horse for your indefinite use, as the new sheriff must have a reliable means of transport. I shall see you this morning without Stephen .

Ashland

He'd underlined that last part, "without Stephen." As if Hastings couldn't put one foot in front of the other without the parson in tow. Overall, it was a very highhanded missive and Hastings had every intention of telling Ashland that, duke or not. He'd had quite enough of that sort of ordering around from Sir Barnabas. He was damn tired of everyone ordering him around.

He ignored the uneasy feeling in his stomach as he stared at what had to be the grandest house he'd ever seen. Ashton Park was more like a palace. It was certainly

grander than Hampton Court, and a sight statelier than St. James, to be sure. Italian marble gleamed a soft peach in the morning sun. The entrance door was massive, an imposing black monstrosity that reminded Hastings of descending into Hell from Heaven. He cast away that gloomy image with a blown-out breath, then resettled his hat on his head and walked to the door with determination. He'd beard this lion in his den. He grinned slyly. If things didn't go well, he could always kill the duke. Although Sir Barnabas would probably be rather unhappy if it came to that. So, first he'd have to see how this meeting went.

He felt a little trepidation meeting the duke without Stephen. He hadn't had much interaction with people around the Park without the buffering presence of Reverend Matthews. Hastings was under no illusions about his own company. He wasn't well versed in the social niceties, despite Sir Barnabas's attempts to train him. He was impatient, rude, and insubordinate to his betters, mostly because he didn't think any of them were better than he was, a belief Sir Barnabas told him was damn near revolutionary and might cost him his head one day. Today was not going to be that day.

A butler opened the door. Hastings recognized the type. They were often loftier than their employers.

"I've got an appointment with the duke," Hastings said without preamble. The butler didn't blink an eye.

"Of, course, sir. Please come in." He stepped out of the way, and his deference made Hastings suspicious.

"You know who I am?" he asked.

"Of course, sir. You are Mr. Hastings." He reached out for Hastings's hat.



“Just Hastings,” he replied, handing over his headgear.

“And I am just Reeves,” the butler said. “Follow me, sir. The duke is waiting for you in the library.”

The entryway was an oval surrounded by fancy marble columns that matched the flooring. The lower walls had a Greek key design going all around them. This wasn't a home, it was a bloody museum. The butler, Reeves, bypassed the rooms and hallways that opened off the entryway and instead led him over to a grand staircase that took up half of the back wall. It started out wide and narrowed as it ended at a landing and a small door. As they ascended the stairs, it seemed an odd juxtaposition to have all that grandeur leading to a small door.

“They hide the family quarters behind that door, don't they?” Hastings asked, analyzing the dimensions.

“Indeed,” Reeves said.

Once through the door, Reeves led him down several narrow passageways until they emerged at a long gallery that stretched the length of the rear of the house. One side was all windows looking out on a spectacular garden. Hastings saw the duchess in the garden playing chase with the children. He could almost hear their shrieking laughter. Brett Haversham sat off to the side at a small dining table littered with what looked like the remains of breakfast. He was shouting encouragement, but Hastings wasn't sure to whom. Most likely the duchess, who everyone in the vicinity knew was his mistress, just as the duke was his lover. Hastings was relatively sure at least two of the grand couple's children were Haversham's, but it didn't seem to bother the duke. He doted on them all.

“This way, sir,” Reeves indicated, moving down the gallery. Opposite the windows were a steady procession of gloomy portraits, dukes and duchesses past, no doubt.

But even though the gallery was imposing it was also bright and looked well lived in. There were books set down on tables and chairs as if someone had just walked away in the middle of reading them, and scuffs on the floor from running feet. Reeves finally arrived at a closed door and knocked.

“Come in.” Hastings recognized the duke’s voice, friendly as always, calling out to them from behind the closed door.

The library walls were lined with a deep gold, oriental paper and floor to ceiling bookshelves. There was another bank of windows here, placed advantageously to catch the morning sun. In front of them were sofas and couches and tables, comfortably lined up. The furniture was well used, bright and airy, upholstered in a light floral pattern and deeply cushioned, and the floor had bright, thick rugs covering it. The tables and sofas were once again littered with books and papers, and Hastings could see childish drawings on some of them. He got the impression the family spent a great deal of time in here.

One corner of the room was recessed, and the books there were behind cages, kept in the dark. Hastings would bet money those were the ones worth something. Although the porcelain vases displayed on shelves to either side of the fireplace looked like they’d fetch a pretty penny, too. He inwardly sighed. Only the aristocracy would treat a collection like that as ornaments in a family room.

His Grace, Frederick, The Duke of Ashland, Freddy to his friends—of which Stephen was one—was sitting in front of the windows, watching his family. He was a tall man, lanky but handsome and well built. His bright red hair was almost shocking. As usual, he was dressed in the most fashionable style, looking perfectly turned out even as he sat alone in his library. Hastings was continually surprised by how young he was, only just in his thirties. He wore the mantle of responsibility easily, but then Hastings supposed he shared it with the duchess and Haversham, which made the burden lighter.

“Looking for escape routes?” the duke asked, amusement in his voice. Hastings wasn’t sure how the other man knew he’d been closely examining the room.

“Don’t need one,” Hastings replied. “I can usually kill my way out.”

“I’m sure you can,” the duke agreed, not the least perturbed by Hastings violent tendencies. “Reeves should offer very little resistance, I think. And I don’t hire my footmen for their physical prowess.”

“What do you hire them for?” Hastings asked, wandering over to one of the sofas and moving a few books out of the way before he sat down opposite the duke.

“Their loyalty and discretion, of course,” he replied. “That is more valuable than physicality.” He looked at Hastings then, his bright blue eyes sharp, revealing the intelligence that lurked there, his expression clearly indicating he expected some response.

“I think that’s the lesson I’m supposed to be learning,” Hasting said, cocking his head to the side as he grinned at the duke. “It’s why I’ve been banished to the country.”

“Are you disloyal?” the duke asked with a frown.

“No, quite loyal,” Hastings said. “I’m like a damned retriever, I’m so loyal. But discretion? That seems to be my sticking point.”

The duke’s face cleared, and he laughed with what appeared to be genuine mirth. “Yes, Anne has regaled me with tales of your...lack of discretion. Poor Stephen.”

“He’s not complaining,” Hastings said, leaning back with a sigh. This interview was going to take longer than he’d thought.

“Yes, well, he never does, does he?” the duke asked. The way he said it made Hastings look at him.

“No, I don’t suppose he does,” he agreed, and saw a flicker of disappointment in the duke’s eyes, as if he’d failed some test. It was the duke’s turn to sigh.

“So, you want to be sheriff,” the duke said, readjusting himself in his seat and sitting up straighter. It was as if he was shaking off the lethargy of family and privacy and putting on the mantle of his station.

“No,” Hastings told him. That made the duke stop his restless movements for a moment. Then he leaned back and seemed to relax again. Hastings idly wondered if the duke knew his body language gave him away so easily.

“That’s right,” the duke said. “The duchess wants you to be sheriff.”

“That’s about the size of it,” Hastings said. “Not sure why.”

“I believe she said you can’t continue going through life drunk,” the duke said thoughtfully. “Oh, and naked.”

“Don’t see why not,” Hastings said. “At least for now.”

“Because you are staying with Stephen, and the village—I dare say the county—is judging him by your actions.”

“What?” Hastings blurted. He leaned toward the duke. “The parson has done everything to straighten me out besides stand on his head. This is nothing to do with him.”

“Isn’t it? That’s a shame,” the duke said with a moue of disappointment. Hastings

was beginning to understand his power lay in that disconcerting disappointment. “Well, what has it got to do with?”

“I thought this was a meeting about being the sheriff, not my motivation or lack thereof.”

The duke waved a hand airily. “It’s all one and the same, isn’t it? Why are you here?”

“I was summoned. By you.” Hastings could hear his voice growing curt and tried to curb his impatience.

“I mean here, in Ashton on the Green. I realize Simon Gantry dumped you on Stephen, but that was weeks ago. You could have left at any time. And yet, here you are. Why?”

“Fair question,” Hastings conceded. “I was told to stay put. I do have a job, you know. And my employer ordered me to stay here.”

“Sir Barnabas James?” the duke asked thoughtfully. He clearly didn’t expect an answer. “Why do you suppose he did that? I’m quite certain there is nothing going on here that would jeopardize King or country.”

“I wholeheartedly agree,” Hastings said with feeling. “There is nothing going on here. I have no idea why he wants me here. But stay I shall until he releases me.” He shrugged. “To be honest, I think I’m being punished. Again.”

“Oh, that sounds interesting. For what?” the duke leaned forward conspiratorially.

“I’m not really sure,” Hastings admitted. “I didn’t kill anyone I wasn’t supposed to on our last mission, God’s truth. He’s cured me of that.”

The duke blinked slowly several times. “I see. Well, perhaps you’re right. Perhaps your sojourn here is meant to teach you discretion. And patience. There is much to learn from rustivating in the country.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Hastings said. Something the duke had said was still gnawing at him. “So you think this sheriff business will help Stephen? I mean, the parson? I can’t have people blaming him for my shortcomings.”

“Indeed,” the duke said, sounding like his butler. “It certainly won’t hurt. After all, the sheriff is generally highly respected.”

“Well, that would be a first,” Hastings said under his breath.

“Brett thinks you’d be good at it. He said despite your shortcomings, as you call them, people seem to like you.”

“They do?” Hastings said, not trying to hide his shock.

“Hmm, really,” the duke assured him. “I was surprised too. But Brett seems to believe that they find it easy to talk to you, and they empathize with your situation and station.”

“I don’t know what you mean by that, but Haversham is a good man, according to Stephen, so I’ll take it in a positive way.” Did he mean because Hastings was born poor, the villagers could relate? That was true, although everyone he’d met in the village was far richer than he’d been as a child.

“He is a good man,” the duke said with a wide smile. “And so I shall take his advice, and follow my dear Anne’s lead, and appoint you sheriff.”

“You will?” Hastings was beyond shocked.

“Yes.” The duke stood up and Hastings rose as well, following the duke’s lead. “I shall draw up the proper paperwork and have it sent round to the parsonage. Do you need other lodging?” He had narrowed his eyes and was watching Hastings closely as he asked, but his smile didn’t waver.

“No. Why? Do I have to move?” Hastings asked in alarm. He liked the parsonage. Mrs. Tulane took care of all his needs and, damn it, he liked Stephen’s company.

“No, not at all,” the duke assured him, and Hastings got the impression this time he’d passed the test.

### CHAPTER 5

“Have you seen Mr. Hastings?” Stephen asked Mrs. Tulane as he entered the foyer of the parsonage and hung his hat on the peg. “I haven’t seen him all day.”

“Oh, well, there was some trouble out to Tuck’s farm, sir,” she said, not looking at him as she dusted the mantle. “He and Grady, again, don’t you know, sparring over that border wall. They sent for the sheriff.”

Stephen stopped in his tracks and very slowly turned back to face her. “Please tell me you didn’t let Hastings go out to Tuck’s without me.”

She turned a bemused expression to him, foregoing her dusting. “Well, you were working on the Widow O’Bannon’s eulogy, and we thought it best not to disturb you, considering as how it’s going to be hard to find a charitable word for the old harridan, God rest her soul.”

“For that I should have been disturbed,” Stephen said, dread settling like a rock in his stomach. “Hastings. In the middle of Tuck and Grady. Honestly, I thought I’d have more time before he was expected to perform his duties after that last fiasco.” It had only been a week since the official paperwork signed by the duke had been delivered, yet Hastings had managed to assault a farmer in the middle of the road over a wayward cow and frighten poor old Mrs. Thompson when he’d mistaken her for a lady of the evening. Stephen found that last one improbable, but Mrs. Thompson was still basking in the glow of her notoriety.

Stephen closed his eyes and put his palm on his throbbing forehead. “As if that



eulogy hadn't given me enough of a headache." He opened his eyes and asked alarm, "Was he drunk? Or naked?"

"He's hardly either of them anymore," Mrs. Tulane assured him. "More's the pity," she added under her breath. Stephen chose to pretend he hadn't heard that last bit.

"That isn't an answer." He spun around and headed for the back door. "I'm taking the horse."

"You're going to ride Old Timber?" Mrs. Tulane squeaked in alarm. "Do you think that's wise? Let me get Thomas to fetch the wagon."

"There will be a rebellion on our hands if I don't get there as quickly as possible," Stephen told her as he tried to get around her. She had moved from the mantel to the hallway with unexpected speed. "You are surprisingly spry for your age, Mrs. Tulane," he said with a touch of amusement as she tried to block the hallway and keep him from the stables.

"You're underestimating Mr. Hastings," she said, trying to shoo him away with the feather duster.

"You're right," Stephen agreed. "At least one person has probably been shot already."

"I'm sure his Grace wouldn't have made him the sheriff if he didn't think he could handle a little thing like a border disagreement," she argued.

"Now you underestimate both His Grace's penchant for chaos, and the full depth of the disagreement between Tuck and Grady." Stephen sighed in exasperation. "I do not wish to bodily remove you from my path, dear lady," he told her. "But I will."

She hesitated for a moment but after gauging the look on Stephen's face, she stepped aside. "But the horse..." she said, clutching the feather duster. "Remember what happened last time?"

"Old Timber and I simply needed to come to a mutually satisfying arrangement," Stephen said with a confidence he was far from feeling. His shoulder still ached when it rained. "He'll let me ride him for as many apples as the fat old dun can eat. I rode a horse in the war, for heaven's sake. I think I can manage him."

Timber did indeed let Stephen saddle him as he munched happily on some apples from Stephen's small orchard. "You see this?" Stephen said to him, holding an apple up as he gave Timber a stern look. "You'll get it after we arrive at Tuck's. In one piece. Understand?" He put the apple in his pocket and mounted Timber with no problems. "There," he said with a satisfied huff. "I knew we could reach an agreement."

He immediately nudged Timber into a trot as soon as they left the stables. "Can't ride a horse," he said derisively. "I rode with a horse brigade in the war, I'll have you know!" Timber tossed his head with an equally derisive whinny. "Oh, shut up," Stephen told him. "I did ride with them. I wasn't one of them, but I ministered to them. It's practically the same thing."

"Your hat, sir!" Mrs. Tulane called from behind him. He turned in the saddle to see her standing at the gate waving his wide-brimmed hat.

"My hat be damned, Mrs. Tulane," he called back to her, throwing caution to the wind—and unwilling to try to slow Timber's forward progress. "I'm off to save the countryside from Sheriff Hastings!"

\* \* \*

When Stephen arrived at Tuck's Farm he would have found them even if he wasn't familiar with the contested border between Tuck's place and Grady's holding. There was a huge crowd, all hollering and shoving one another, gathered in one of the fields near a collapsed section of a rock wall separating the two farms, bleating, alarmed sheep looking on. It looked as if some people had ridden over, horses and buggies abandoned at the bottom of the hill. He saw some men at the back of the crowd furtively exchanging money, as if they were betting on a boxing match. It was a complete circus. And of course, Hastings stood in the middle of it, his black hat rising above the sea of straw farmers' hats surrounding him.

Stephen took the time to throw Timber's lead around a fence post and hastily shoved the promised apple in his mouth. "You better be here when I get back," he warned, and Timber just gazed at him from one baleful eye.

The crowd parted when they saw Stephen and he marched right through to find Hastings holding back the two men at the center of the disagreement, a hand splayed on either chest. Tuck was wiry and a notorious scrapper, but Grady had at least ten stone on him and shoulders the width of an oak trunk. They both had the O'Bannon curly brown hair, however, and their grandmother's dimpled chin. The cousins had been at odds since the day they were born. The widow O'Bannon had been the matriarch of a large clan, and her death was reverberating throughout the shire in many ways.

Hastings looked over as Stephen broke through the crowd. "Where's your hat?" he asked calmly, and Tuck and Grady stopped their yelling and turned to Stephen.

"Here, take mine, sir," Grady said, whipping off his straw hat.

"Why is everyone so concerned about my hat?" Stephen demanded in irritation, and Grady hastily put his hat back on.

“Suit yourself,” Hastings said with a shrug. “I will remind you of this when you’re complaining tomorrow because you’ve had too much sun.” There were murmurs of agreement in the crowd and Grady was nodding.

“I do not complain, and I most definitely do not complain about getting too much sun,” Stephen told him. “Now, what is going on here?”

“I’m sheriffing,” Hastings said, as if it was the most ordinary thing in the world. “Isn’t that what you’ve all been telling me to do?”

“Well, yes,” Stephen said. He tried to choose his words carefully. “But the last time didn’t go so well, so I thought we’d agreed that I’d go along to...smooth things over.”

“Me jaw still aches,” Farmer Ringer yelled from the back of the crowd. “Punched me, he did,” he told anyone who would listen. “And just because me cow was blocking the lane!”

“In my defense,” Hastings said, “I was very drunk.”

Stephen sighed. “That is not a defense.”

“Where I come from it is,” Hastings replied in a way that indicated that discussion was over. “I’ll just sort these two out, then,” Hastings said, removing his hands from where they’d been resting on Tuck and Grady’s chests. Both men moved back a step.

“See here, now,” Tuck said angrily. “He’s trying to steal my land. He built this border wall ten feet over into my field!”

“I did no such thing,” Grady said calmly. “I went to the registrar and consulted the map and even had a surveyor out to give me the line. And I only had to build the wall

because he was stealing my sheep. These here,” he gestured at the bleating sheep, “are mine. He destroyed the wall to steal them.” The crowd gasped at this most dastardly accusation.

“I what?” Tuck demanded. He balled his fists up. “Take that back or I’ll lay you out.”

“Be quiet or I’ll lay you both out, and you won’t be getting back up,” Hastings said mildly.

The crowd gasped again. Hastings’s exploits as an agent for the Home Office was a well-known secret, as was his fighting ability. He’d had a row or two in the local pub, and then there was Ringer’s jaw. Ringer had at least two stone on Hastings and still hadn’t stood a chance.

“Hastings,” Stephen admonished gently. “These are not London ruffians.” There was shuffling and more bets changed hands in the crowd.

“The way they’re acting, they sure seem the same to me,” Hastings said with a shrug.

Just then a carriage came careening around the bend in the road, heading for the field. Stephen recognized the Duke of Ashland’s carriage. “Oh, wonderful,” he murmured to himself. Freddy would most assuredly play instigator, escalating the situation. And if he had his two sons with him, mayhem would be the result. Those two boys caused chaos wherever they roamed. God help them all when the oldest boy, Bertie, became duke. England would surely fall.

“Hold on there, Sheriff Hastings,” a woman called out. “The duke is on his way! We wouldn’t want him to miss anything.” The crowd laughed and shouted in agreement.

“I don’t need the bloody House of Lords here,” Tuck said impatiently. “Just arrest him and make him move the wall.”

“Arrest me?” Grady said, incredulous. “I’m not the one who’s been stealing.”

“What did I say about being quiet?” Hastings asked. His voice was low and menacing and gave Stephen a little shiver up his back. That voice said do what I say when I say it and had the confidence to back it up.

Stephen’s reaction wasn’t from apprehension. He did not care at all for the way his body had been acting since Hastings was unceremoniously dumped, naked and drunk, in his garden by Simon. Hastings had been entrusted to Stephen for the sole purpose of helping him navigate his violent and, lately, unfulfilling life. He was at least ten years senior to Hastings and Stephen had no business finding him so damn attractive and tempting, even when he was sober and dressed. Those feelings might do very well for his friends, but Stephen was a man of the cloth, and the Church of England frowned quite vigorously on that sort of thing. Unfortunately, however, the Church was not uppermost in his mind when he was around Hastings.

Stephen reluctantly turned away from Hastings to greet chaos as it emerged from the carriage.

## Page 6

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### CHAPTER 6

The carriage came to a stop, the horses whinnying in protest. The door was flung open before the footman at the back had a chance to jump down and open it. To Stephen's horror it wasn't the duke's face peering out with gleeful anticipation; it was Anne. "Oh, good Lord," he muttered.

Just then Anne spotted Stephen. "Oh, drat! I heard Hastings was here alone and fully expected gun play of some kind. Perhaps a near-fatal wound." She pouted. "I'm exceedingly disappointed at your presence, Stephen."

"The feeling is mutual, Your Grace," he said drily. "Dare I hope you were intent on stopping the bloodshed?"

She laughed heartily as she climbed down the steps of the carriage, allowing the footman to help. The crowd had parted and was quietly listening to the exchange. "Oh, I'm sure you know better," Anne told him. "I find Hastings endlessly amusing, as you know."

As Stephen watched another lady got out of the carriage. "Really, Mrs. Westridge?" he asked of the redheaded matron.

"Don't blame me," she said, hands raised innocently. "I was just there for tea." Her daughter climbed down then, a beautiful girl of sixteen, as redheaded as her mother.

"Oh, don't scold, Mr. Matthews," the girl, Esme Marlestone, said. "There isn't that much to do in Ashton on the Green, you know. Sheriff Hastings is the new

entertainment.”

“I do what I can,” Hastings said in mock humiliation, inclining his head, palm to his heart, like an actor taking a bow.

As she stepped down another face appeared in the doorway. “How many of you are in there?” Stephen asked.

“I’m the last, I’m afraid,” Mrs. Sarah North told him. She stepped down gingerly, being several months with child. “You may carry on.”

“See here, Your Grace, ladies,” Tuck said, clearly seeing a new avenue of approach. “I’m just trying to keep this one from stealing my land. You’re from here, you know how it is. My border has always been ten feet over.”

“I know you’ve been fighting over this border for years,” Anne agreed. “But I am not in charge here today. I’m here merely to see how the new sheriff resolves this age-old argument.” She stopped and whispered in the ear of the pubkeeper, and Stephen saw them surreptitiously exchange some coins.

“Anne,” he said, exasperated. “Are you making a wager?”

“I’m sure I have no idea what you’re talking about, Mr. Matthews,” she said haughtily. She motioned the other ladies to follow her to the front of the crowd.

“Have you had to punch anyone yet?” Esme asked eagerly. Several people in the crowd answered no, and she said, “Oh, good,” clearly anticipating what she thought was an inevitable conclusion. Stephen very much feared she was right.

“Oh, I don’t need to punch anyone today,” Hastings said, sounding almost bored. “I’ve already made my decision.” Stephen wasn’t the only one who looked surprised.



“Here now,” Tuck blustered. “You know I’m in the right.”

“Let’s have it then,” Grady said. He seemed impatient with the whole affair. “I want my sheep back.”

“My sheep,” Tuck argued.

“As we all know, possession is eleven points in the law,” Hastings said, quoting an old Scottish proverb. “Since Grady now possesses the land, and the official documentation from the land registrar, the wall stays. Make sure all the titles are in order.” Grady beamed as Tuck started to protest. Hastings held up a hand to quiet them both. “However, the ownership of the sheep is still in question. Since you both claim them, and they have no identifying marks or anything else, we will split them.”

“See here,” Grady blustered. “I don’t want half of my sheep.”

“Yes, well, you get to choose which half,” Hastings said jovially. “Do you want the head, or the ass?”

“What?” Grady said, clearly confused.

“Oh, Hastings,” Stephen said, dawning realization making him shake his head. “No, no, no.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” Hastings told him with a mischievous grin. “You didn’t think I was listening when you were practicing your sermon last week, did you? Well, today I’m playing Solomon.”

“You’re going to kill the sheep and cut them in half?” Grady asked in horror.

“Yes,” Hastings told him. “That’s exactly what we’re going to do.”

Tuck laughed. "All right then, Sheriff. I'll take the asses if he's not going to choose." He glanced at the restless crowd, satisfied. "More to sell then, isn't there?"

Stephen's shoulders slumped and he rubbed his aching forehead. "Tuck, I don't think you were listening to the story in my sermon last week."

"Take the sheep," Grady said, pale. "I'll not kill off a good herd over it."

"No?" Hastings asked. He turned to Tuck. "But you will?"

Tuck shrugged. "They're just sheep, after all. Alive or dead, either way, I get my money." The crowd was grumbling in disapproval.

Hastings rubbed his hand over his chin as he regarded Tuck. "In that case," he turned to Grady. "Grady gets the sheep as well."

"What?" Tuck yelled. "You just said we were to split them."

"You were willing to kill a herd of sheep, killing off future profits for immediate gain. The rightful owner of the sheep wouldn't dream of doing that to a herd he's cared for and nurtured."

"All right, then," Grady said. He whistled and his dogs, who'd been obediently sitting by the fence, jumped up and began barking, rounding the sheep up and herding them through the gap in the wall.

"I'll not stand for this," Tuck blustered, red-faced.

"You'll stand for it," Hastings told him, "or lay down and take it for eternity."

"Hastings, you can't openly threaten people," Stephen told him.

“It’s always worked before,” Hastings said. “Fine,” he grudgingly muttered at Stephen’s glare. He grabbed Tuck by the arm. “Come here.” He moved off to the side, towing a protesting Tuck, and had a whispered conversation with him that left Tuck pale and nodding. “Good,” Hastings said loudly. He turned to Stephen. “He sees the logic of the decision.”

Stephen let it go. The truth was, he was rather proud of Hastings’s decision. Everyone knew Tuck had been stealing Grady’s sheep, but the recently deceased Widow O’Bannon was grandmother to both and had always favored Grady, so Grady had looked the other way, most likely out of pity. When she passed, her fortune went to Grady, which had exacerbated the situation. Perhaps this would get Tuck to stop his foolishness.

“Is that it?” the duchess said, clearly disappointed.

“That’s it, sorry,” Hastings told her. “Stephen wants me to be less violent.” Everyone turned and glared at Stephen.

“That is a good thing,” Stephen told them. “Everyone go home. You too, Your Grace.”

“I think it was a fine decision,” Sarah North said in approval. “And basing it on scripture was inspirational.”

“I think it’s rubbish,” Miss Marleston said. “No one wants to see that.” She turned with a flounce of her curls. “Let’s go.”

“Say goodbye to the parson, Esme,” her mother said. “And the sheriff.”

“Goodbye, Parson,” she said without looking at Stephen. “And goodbye, Sheriff. You are both exceedingly dull today.”

“Hear, hear,” the duchess agreed. “I should have brought the boys.”

“No,” Stephen and Hastings said in unison.

“Don’t be beastly,” the duchess said, making a face at them. “I’m off to drop Sarah back at North’s. Perhaps he will entertain me.”

“Oh, yes,” Miss Marleston said over her shoulder, her excitement rebounding. “Let’s go see Mr. North.”

Mrs. North sighed wearily. “I’m sure he will spar with you,” she assured the duchess. “I am going to nap.”

“Another exciting day in Ashton on the Green,” said Mrs. Westridge. “Let us ride to our next destination.” She reached out a hand to Stephen and when he took it, she squeezed it companionably. “You’ve done an admirable job with that one,” she whispered, tipping her head toward Hastings.

“I’m not so sure I’ve done much of anything,” he confessed.

“Oh, I think you have,” she said with a grin and a wink. “I shall see you on Sunday, Mr. Matthews. Good day, Mr. Hastings,” she called out.

“Just Hastings,” he told her.

The crowd had dispersed, leaving Stephen and Hastings to walk down the hill together. Stephen tried to ignore the warmth coming off Hastings next to him, and the smell of the outdoors that overlay Hastings tangy sandalwood smell. He knew that scent as well as his own cologne. As a matter of fact, it was Stephen’s cologne. But it was different on Hastings because it made him smell like Stephen’s, as if he’d gotten the scent off Stephen himself, and it was quite distracting. The various ways they

could share and transfer that scent fueled Stephen's wayward thoughts. Suddenly Hastings stopped and Stephen did too, turning back to give him a quizzical look. Hastings took his hat off and put it on Stephen.

"There," Hastings said, sounding satisfied. "Your nose is turning red, and I can tell you have a headache."

Stephen touched his nose. "Is it?" he asked. He adjusted the hat. "Thank you." They started walking again, Stephen enjoying the companionability of it. "I expected this situation to go much differently," he finally admitted.

Hastings just kept walking, not looking at Stephen. "Well, I didn't want to disappoint you," he said. "You've been trying so hard to turn me into a saint."

"I don't think we need worry about that," Stephen said.

Hastings turned to him then, an enigmatic look on his face. "No, I suppose we don't," he agreed. He smiled and Stephen was startled at how handsome he looked, almost boyish.

"You don't smile enough," he said without thinking.

"I've been considering changing that," Hastings told him.

"You have?" Stephen asked. How many more surprises did this day have in store for him? "Since when?"

"Since I woke up in your garden."

"You've been drunk since you woke up in my garden," Stephen said. "I didn't realize you'd had the time or inclination to do any thinking."

“Oh, I’ve got the inclination,” Hastings said. “I’m just not sure what to do about it.”

“Smile more, I suppose.”

Hastings laughed at Stephen’s suggestion. “Easier said than done, but I’m working on a plan for...smiling.”

“Why do I always think half of what you mean goes unsaid?” Stephen asked in exasperation. “How does one plan for smiling?”

“You’ll be the first to know when I’ve figured it out,” Hastings told him. He stopped suddenly. “You rode Old Timber?”

“Yes, and don’t start. We got along quite well. Although I don’t know what I’m going to do now. I’m out of apples.”

“Oh, I really want to make some lewd suggestions here,” Hastings said. “I’m really holding back. I want credit for that, Parson.”

Stephen shook his head. “There you are. I was wondering what happened to the old Hastings.”

“A leopard can’t change his spots overnight,” Hastings said with a shrug. “You’ll ride behind me, and we’ll tow that sorry piece of horseflesh home. He should have been glue years ago.”

“I’ve seen you giving him apples,” Stephen said mildly.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Hastings denied the accusation, but Stephen saw him smile. Hastings wasn’t as tough as he pretended to be.

### CHAPTER 7

Maddy stared out the window of the coach as they drove through the little village. It was quaint. Was that the right word? Sweet and very...villagery. Which most likely wasn't a word, but she hadn't finished reading the dictionary yet. She was only on the Rs.

Rustic . That was it. It was very rustic. The streets were lined with little shops, with a house or two interspersed among them, and people on the street turned to watch them as they drove past. A few even smiled and waved. Which was madness. They had no idea who was in this coach. She could very well be a villain.

She was a villain.

"Here now, princess," the girl traveling with her said. "Keep yer 'ead in. Wouldn't do to 'ave them telling everyone who's come to town."

Maddy looked at her. She dressed just like a man, right down to her polished Hessians and cravat. Even her hair was cut short. She appeared to be a little younger than Maddy, so she was surprised she was working for the Home Office.

"I am not even remotely like a princess," she told her . Maddy regarded her companion for a moment. "I do beg your pardon," she said, a little sheepishly. She didn't want to sound as if she were being judgmental. "Are people supposed to know you're a girl? Do I call you her or him when we're in company?"

"Took you long enough to ask," they said. "Most people can't wait five minutes."

“I didn’t want to be rude,” Maddy said. She knew what it was like to be on the end of those sorts of rude comments. Are you a lady? Your father’s no gentleman. He’s a criminal, isn’t he? You’re no better than you ought to be, with a father like that and a whore for a mother. No, she would not be rude like that to anyone, whether they deserved it or not.

“That’s something then, isn’t it?” The girl stuck her hand out. “Just call me Essie. And it’s fine if people know I’m a girl, although I’d much rather have been born a man. Mostly for the clothes, which are a lot more serviceable.”

“Well, that is true,” Maddy conceded graciously. “I cannot argue with your logic.” Although she herself thought the absolute freedom that men enjoyed to do and be whatever they chose was a stronger argument. She shook Essie’s hand. “Sir Barnabas told me ‘not to get chummy with the help’,” she said, quoting the cold, formidable head of the secret Home Office department under whose tender care she now found herself.

“ ‘e would,” Essie said, clearly not caring one way or another what her employer had said.

“If I might inquire,” Maddy said, giving in to her curiosity now that the door had been opened. “How did you injure yourself?” Essie had one arm in a sling, a bandage wrapped around the fingers of the same hand.

“Oh, this?” Essie held up the arm and winced. “Got my ass handed to me by a bloke I should ‘ave bested. Knifed me in the arm and broke three of my fingers before I slit his throat.”

Maddy sat there and blinked rapidly as she digested this information. Essie appeared to be in the same vein as her father’s thugs. And me. Though, to be fair, she was a better dresser than his thugs, and a far more enjoyable travel companion, even if



they'd hardly spoken in two days.

"I see," she finally answered. "And was this in the line of duty or pleasure?"

Essie let out a loud, startled laugh. "Took that like a real goer, didn't you?" she said, and Maddy recognized it as the compliment it was. "Duty."

"Good to know," Maddy said. The coach began to slow, and she looked out the window. They were on the edge of the village, turning down a short lane bordered on one side by a large garden in late summer stages. It looked as if it had been very productive and quite pretty not long ago but was a little ragged and overgrown now. It made Maddy acutely conscious of the passage of time over the last few months, and how little time she had left before her misdeeds caught up with her. She looked away, only to see a small orchard on the other side of the road, the trees not quite denuded of apples yet.

The coach came to a stop and Maddy saw they'd reached a closed gate. No sooner had they stopped than a man appeared next to the carriage, frowning at them. He was quite tall and dark, wearing a black suit and hat, his dark hair peeking out from underneath it. He walked over to the carriage window and Maddy sat back against the cushions, inching away from the window. He frowned harder.

"Do I know you?" he asked abruptly, staring at her with eyes as dark as his hair.

"No, sir, you most certainly do not," Maddy replied, feigning the bravado of oblivious privilege.

"That's what I thought. Which is why I cannot for the life of me figure out why you are blocking the path to my domicile." He sounded very put out.

"You're the parson?" Maddy asked in astonishment. He wasn't at all as Sir Barnabas

had described him.

“No. I’m the sheriff.”

“You’re the sheriff?” she said, her astonishment blatant. She hadn’t figured on a sheriff who looked like he knew what he was doing.

“Yes. And why does everyone say it like that?” She hadn’t thought he could frown any harder.

“Because you, sir, look like a brigand,” she replied before she could stop herself. She inwardly winced. Starting out by offending the sheriff was a terrible beginning.

“Well, yes,” he agreed, astonishing her once again with his apparent amusement.

“That does come in handy sometimes.”

“I’m sure I don’t know how,” Maddy replied, pretending outrage.

“Then, clearly, my dear, you are not a brigand.” This man was truly astounding. What kind of a response was that? If she was a lady, she’d be mightily offended.

“I most certainly am not,” she assured him. Although, really, she was, but she wasn’t going to tell him that. “Wait, you live in the parsonage? Then where does the parson live?” They were supposed to find the parson. Sir Barnabas had been very clear about that.

“Here.”

“You live with the parson?”

“Yes.”

“Why?” This conversation was so far off-track Maddy had no requisite experience to steer it back.

“Well, I...I don’t have to answer that. Who the devil are you?” He was back to his original exasperation.

“I want to know why you’re still living with the parson, too,” Essie said, finally joining the conversation.

“Good God,” he said, clearly appalled. “Essie? What the devil are you doing here?” He closed his eyes as if pained. “This is why I’m here, isn’t it?”

“Pin a medal on his lapel,” Essie said cheerfully. “He’s figured it out.”

He cracked an eye open. “A little over a month with Sir Barnabas and you’re already aping his sarcasm.”

“I can be sarcastic all on my own,” Essie said. “That didn’t require any lessons.”

“So, this is Hastings? No one told me he was the sheriff,” Maddy said, grasping at her dwindling patience.

“Yes, what about that?” Essie asked. “Sheriff? Since when? Sir Barnabas didn’t say anything about that.”

“He likes to drop little surprises in your lap,” the man said a little wearily. “He plays his cards closely.” He turned his attention back to Maddy. “Hastings. That’s me. And now, who are you? Don’t make me ask again.”

“Or you’ll do what, exactly?” Maddy asked tartly. She figured it was as good a time as any to establish herself. From what she’d heard, this bloke wasn’t one to play

games with. She'd met the type many times before. He'd have little interest in her, other than seeing her as another unpleasant task to be undertaken.

He pulled back, surprise on his face. "I don't know, but it won't be good."

"Does that sort of empty threat usually work on people?" she asked, genuinely curious. "You must be a terrible sheriff." Maddy couldn't seem to stop antagonizing the man. She didn't know what had gotten into her.

"I am an excellent sheriff," he stated forcefully. "And my threats aren't empty. I've killed plenty of men who'd tell you so."

"Yes, well, if they're dead they can't tell me anything, can they?" she observed drily. "Convenient, that." She smiled at him, imitating the false smiles she'd seen on so many faces. He looked extremely displeased, and normally Maddy would have been worried about making an enemy of him, but for some reason she knew this man wouldn't do a thing to her.

"Essie?" he said, looking at the other woman.

"Honestly, 'astings, this needs to wait until we're inside." She sounded apologetic but firm.

"It's business then," he stated flatly. "Come on. I'll meet you at the door." He walked off, moving to the side of the road, and motioned the coach forward.

### CHAPTER 8

As soon as they stopped in front of the door to the little parsonage— quaint, like the village —the front door opened, and another man came out. This must be the parson. Tall, but not too tall, solid, with strawberry-blond hair blowing in the slight breeze, ruddy cheeks, freckles, and a large smile on his handsome face. Just the way Maddy liked them. Nothing had ever harmed this one.

Homespun . Maddy liked that word. It suited him perfectly. He was exactly as Sir Barnabas had described. Now, if he could only be as clueless as Sir Barnabas had indicated, it would all be too perfect.

The parson turned to watch Mr. Hastings walking up to the door. His smile became one of welcome rather than inquiry, the difference subtle but obvious to Maddy. Before the two could greet each other, Essie threw open the door and vaulted from the coach, swinging down with one hand on the door frame.

“And who have we here?” the parson called out in a friendly voice. “Good afternoon, ma’am,” he said with a little bow of his head. There was no shock or disapproval in his tone at Essie’s appearance. He spared a glance for Maddy, where she still sat in the coach, observing him. His smile encompassed her, urging her out into the open.

“That’s Essie,” Mr. Hastings said, waving a hand at Maddy’s traveling companion. “Don’t know who that is in the coach. They won’t tell me.” He stopped next to the parson and faced the coach, his arms crossed. They were exact opposites, one light, the other dark, one gloomy, the other genial and open. Yet, somehow, they seemed to present a united front against her.

Essie stuck her hand out to the parson and he shook it. “Reverend Mr. Stephen Matthews,” he said by way of introduction. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. Hastings has mentioned your name in passing.”

“Did he?” Essie said suspiciously. “All lies, most likely.”

“I have?” Mr. Hastings asked, frowning at the parson.

“It was all positive,” he assured Essie. He turned to Mr. Hastings. “When you were drunk,” the parson said, no censure in his voice.

“Ah,” Mr. Hastings said. “That explains it.”

Maddy chuckled at their word play and the parson’s gaze found her in the gloom of the coach. He looked sharp as a nail, despite Sir Barnabas’s belief to the contrary. That was trouble.

“Come out,” he urged her, beckoning with one hand as if she were a shy kitten. “We won’t bite.”

“Speak for yourself,” Mr. Hastings said, and then he growled and snapped at her like a dog. That made her smooth her hair up under her bonnet and move to the door.

“I’m afraid I’m not as adept as Essie at getting out of the coach without a step,” she said, sticking her head out the door with a self-deprecating smile that took all her meager acting skills to produce.

“Jump,” Mr. Hastings suggested.

“Hastings,” the parson admonished, scandalized. “Of course, ma’am,” he told her. He grabbed a stool from beside the door, set it down in front of the coach and held his

hand out to her. “May I assist?” he asked politely.

Maddy put her hand in his and descended from the coach. “Thank you,” she said demurely.

“I am the Reverend Mr. Stephen Matthews,” he said with a bow after he helped her down. “The parson here.” He looked at her inquiringly.

“I have been sent by Sir Barnabas James,” Maddy whispered to him, looking around furtively. There didn’t seem to be anyone close enough to hear other than the coachman, and he was an agent according to Essie. And Mr. Hastings, of course, but he was the sheriff and an agent, after all.

“Have you?” Stephen said, his smile intact. “That seems more like Hastings’s department than mine.” He turned to the other man. “Do you know what it’s about? It’s all very mysterious, I’m sure.”

“That usually means he’s got some ulterior motive at work,” Hastings said. “And we won’t know what it is until it’s too late to avoid his scheming.”

“Invite us in and I’ll tell you all about it,” Essie said. “Oy, you,” she said to the coachman, who turned and glared at her. “Play footman and get our bags, eh?”

Maddy watched the parson bite his lip to hide a smile at the exchange. The coachman got down and stomped to the back of the coach.

“Yes, yes,” the parson said, “come in, won’t you?” He ushered them to the door and called out, “Mrs. Tulane, we’ve guests. Might we have a spot of tea, please?”

Hastings watched the strange woman glide into the parsonage on Stephen’s arm and he wanted to snatch her away from him and lock the door against her. Every instinct

he possessed was telling him she was bringing trouble, and he didn't want Stephen caught up in the middle of it. Damn Sir Barnabas and his mysterious, conniving ways.

He'd just learned the business of this sheriffing. It was the easiest job he'd ever had and didn't require him to kill anyone. Not yet, at least. Good food, a nice roof over his head, excellent company—of course it was too good to be true. His old life had to reappear at some point, he supposed. He just wished he'd had more warning.

He watched Essie taking the parsonage in. After a thorough inspection of the cozy rooms and Stephen, she turned to Hastings with a confused, questioning look on her face. She reminded Hastings so much of himself when Sir Barnabas had first brought him into the fold. Very rough around the edges, even more so than he was now, and unable to comprehend a life outside of London. Hell, he hadn't been able to comprehend it a month ago. But London seemed long ago and far away.

Mrs. Tulane bustled in with the tea tray, a plate of cakes enticing him farther into the room. She left, but Hastings knew she was lurking in the hallway just outside the door, her curiosity piqued. Mrs. Tulane loved a good piece of gossip. He closed the door before he moved to sit beside Stephen. It was probably safer if she didn't know their business in here.

The stranger had taken a chair opposite them, while Essie remained standing in the far corner, where she could see the whole room, the exit and the windows. He didn't bother telling her there was no reason. No one in Ashton on the Green was going to try to break in here. But he didn't know what their business was or what danger this woman might represent. Maybe he should be more on guard, as well. He hadn't worried about taking a seat with his back to the door since he'd arrived here. Now, the back of his neck was tingling in warning. He pushed the ridiculous fears aside and reached for a cake.



“Shall I play mother?” the stranger asked, causing him to freeze in midmotion.

“Please,” Stephen replied politely. He looked pointedly at Hastings’s arm, and the devil inside made him grab the cake from the plate despite Stephen’s obvious signal.

“We don’t stand on ceremony here,” he said. Then he took a bite while she tipped her head to the side to observe him, like a specimen.

“So I see,” she murmured. She reached for a cup and saucer with one hand and the teapot with the other. “Tea?” she asked Stephen. She sounded like the damned duchess. Looked like her, too, in that flouncy confection of a pink dress, her dark blonde hair tucked up in some complicated knot at the back of her head. Her full bottom lip was made for temptation. She was far too beautiful and that usually meant trouble for everyone involved.

“Yes, please,” Stephen answered.

“Sugar and milk?” she asked.

“Yes, please,” Stephen said again.

“This is painful,” Hastings said in a burst of nervous energy. He stood abruptly and confronted her. “Who are you? Why are you here? What have you to do with Sir Barnabas? What does any of it have to do with us?”

“Easy there,” Essie told him, standing to attention as she watched him—as if he were the danger in the room.

“I don’t like being kept in the dark,” Hastings told her. “First, he tells me to cool my heels here in the country with no further explanation, and then he sends you two, without advance warning. What happened to your arm?”

“Completely different case,” Essie told him, waving her hand negligently.

“She told me a bloke stabbed her in the arm and broke her fingers before she slit his throat,” the other woman said calmly before she handed Stephen his cup. Her use of cant and lack of distress as she imparted that information had Hastings reassessing how much of a lady she was.

The cup rattled at Stephen’s start of alarm. “Good heavens,” he murmured. “Did you really?”

Essie got a mulish look on her face. “’e deserved it,” she claimed. “And that’s what Sir B sent me there for.” She pointed at Hastings. “’e was ‘ere, so somebody ‘ad to do it.”

Hastings couldn’t stop the laughter that burst out of him at the silly name she used for Sir Barnabas. “You call him that to his face?” he asked.

“What do you mean, ‘he was here’?” Stephen asked frowning. He turned to Hastings. “Is that the sort of thing he makes you do?”

Hastings shrugged. “That’s my job.”

Stephen sighed deeply as he sat up straight with a fierce frown and put his cup on the table in front of him. “Well, that is not your job anymore. Now you are sheriff. Here.”

“That’s temporary,” Hastings told him, his gut churning. “You all knew I had another job.”

“Yes, well, you do work for Sir Barnabas,” the stranger said. “If what he said about you is true, I understand why he sent me here. I wondered how he expected a parson to protect me, or even a rustic sheriff, but you’ll do.” She took a sip of her tea.

“Protect you from what?” Hastings asked, glad to finally be getting to the heart of the matter.

“My father,” she said, setting her cup down. She didn’t look at either him or Stephen.

“He and his gang are trying to kill me.”

### CHAPTER 9

Stephen was speechless. She delivered that devastating bit of news as if they were talking about the weather. Stephen's friends from the war seemed to constantly be in one scrape or another—duels, feuds, love affairs, kidnappings—but things had quieted down recently. Well, other than Simon's kidnapping and consequent rescue from Barbary pirates. That, too, had been Sir Barnabas's fault. Stephen barely knew the spymaster, but he disliked him heartily, which was something he tried not to do—judging someone so harshly. But his mind was made up, so he did the penance for his uncharitable thoughts instead.

“Why?” Hastings didn't sound sympathetic at all. He sounded suspicious.

“How awful,” Stephen interjected, silencing Hastings with a look. “I'm terribly sorry for your trouble.” He tried to convey his sympathy with a look and his body language. He wasn't acquainted with the lady well enough to take her hand or offer any physical comfort. She was really quite beautiful, which of course had nothing at all to do with her tragic circumstances or the help they would obviously render. But all the same, it was hard to ignore how ethereal she was with her striking features and blonde hair set off by the delicate pink of her dress. Which was rather clingy and showed an admirable amount of bosom. If he were a lesser man, he'd let it distract him. Stephen, however, was made of sterner stuff and dragged his attention back to the matter at hand.

“It is rather awful, isn't it?” she said with a sigh, blinking big blue eyes at him while she leaned forward slightly, improving the view. She was good, he'd give her that. It had been a very long time since a pretty woman had cast lures his way. He was, after

all, a poor, dedicated curate. Despite her acting skills, she had a cunning look about her, and he was confident he could resist her, no matter how delightful it was to be the recipient of her charms.

“Why?” Hastings asked again, and Stephen let the question sit there this time, awaiting an answer.

“Her father is Harry Bleecker,” Essie told them when the beautiful stranger hesitated. Stephen didn’t know what that meant, but Hastings clearly did.

“Bleecker?” Hastings asked, looking incredulous.

“Who is Harry Bleecker?” Stephen asked.

The lady sighed and fell back in her chair with an inelegant slump. “He’s a crime boss,” she told him. “In London.”

“You can’t be Bleecker’s,” Hastings said. “He’s a short, loud-mouthed little worm. Greasy hair, disheveled—in other words, there is no way he produced...” Hastings hesitated and waved a hand at her, “You.”

“We are dissimilar in many ways, you are correct,” she agreed. “But let me assure you, Harry Bleecker is indeed my sire.”

“How?” It seemed as if Hastings was having trouble forming coherent thoughts. Perhaps he was also affected by the lady’s charms.

“My mother was a gentlewoman reduced to poverty by circumstances, as things often happen. Dead parents, no relatives willing to help, no skills. My...Bleecker came sniffing around and offered to protect her. No one else came forward. So, she did the unthinkable and agreed to his dastardly bargain.”

“I say,” Stephen said, shocked. “The poor woman.”

“She was lucky,” Essie said. “She had one nasty bloke to please. I know a lot of women who have to take on a lot more than that.”

“We shall agree to disagree,” Miss Bleecker said primly.

“That still doesn’t explain why he wants to kill you,” Stephen nudged her.

“Good point,” Hastings said.

“Yes, well, there is no love lost between he and myself,” the lady explained. “As a matter of fact, other than barely keeping a roof over my head, and that was questionable at best, he ignored my existence for most of my life.” She looked away and sighed. “My mother died, you see, when I was a child, not even out of leading strings. I’m told she never recovered from my birth, and he was determined to have more brats off her. His words. He seemed to believe that their children would be able to move about in society simply because she was their mother no matter how many times she told him that was not how society worked. An impoverished young woman who took a criminal to bed to make ends meet would hardly be welcomed in Mayfair.” She looked back at Stephen and smiled wryly. “When he was unable to place me in a wealthy household after her death he realized the truth of her words. No one wanted his brat, you see. I became a useless waste of his time and resources then.”

“And so?” Hastings said impatiently.

“I’m sorry if the abbreviated version of my life and how I came to be running for it is taking too much time,” she snapped at him, and for the first time Stephen got a glimpse of the real woman.

“Get to the part where I’m supposed to care,” Hastings told her rudely. “Why does Sir Barnabas care? That’s the real question.”

“You’re supposed to care,” Essie told him with a smug smile, “because this is all your fault.”

“Mine?” Hastings asked incredulously, a hand to his chest.

“You didn’t kill him when you had the chance,” Essie said. “Back when Kitty O’Shaughnessy was trying to shop her man’s territory around.”

“For God’s sake,” Hastings spit out. “He told me I couldn’t kill anyone!” He began to pace. “Don’t kill anyone,” he muttered. “No, now I want you to kill them. Why didn’t you kill him?” He spun around to Essie. “He needs to make up his damn mind!”

“Miss Bleecker,” Stephen interrupted. He was aghast anew at what Hastings had done for Sir Barnabas, and he and Hastings would have to discuss it, but right now he needed answers. “The reason for your current situation is still not evident.” He spoke kindly. People tended to tell you what you wanted to know when you did so.

“Miss Hyde,” she corrected him. “He never married my mother, thank goodness. My name is Miss Madelyn Hyde.”

“Surely not of the Higginbotham-Hydes?” Stephen asked, scandalized.

“One and the same,” she confirmed. “My mother was from the poor side of the family. A distant younger son who was disowned many years ago, and his progeny were never welcomed back into the fold. They saw no reason to bring my mother in when she was left destitute. As her uncle said, it certainly wasn’t their fault she came from a depraved line.”

“And when she died, leaving you alone?” Stephen asked, trying to recall what he knew of the family. It was an extensive brood, very high in the instep, or so he’d heard Freddy say. They had attempted to give Anne the cut direct when she first went to London, but Freddy and Brett played the market against them, and they saw the error of their ways rather quickly when they began losing money.

“They didn’t consider me alone,” she said dispassionately. “My father, was, after all, alive, and attempting to blackmail them into taking me.”

“You said he left you alone for most of your life,” Hastings said. “So why does he want to kill you now?”

“Several years ago he took note of my, shall we say, attributes? And decided that perhaps I had some value after all.”

Stephen’s stomach dropped. Surely the man hadn’t sold his daughter? “What happened?” he asked, dreading the answer.

“He decided to polish the discarded penny,” she said, that wry smile back. “Sent me to be educated properly in the ways of a lady and began to shop around for takers. People he could use in some way. Money, contacts, whatever it might be. Marriage or not, he didn’t care, as long as he got what he wanted.”

“What do you know?” Hastings asked, clearly quicker than Stephen at figuring out the end of the story.

“Oh, Mr. Hastings,” she said with a predatory smile, “quite a lot. Quite an awful lot.”



## Page 10

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### CHAPTER 10

“What’s next?” Hastings asked Essie with a sinking feeling in his chest. It was time to leave Ashton on the Green and the parsonage.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Well, we can’t stay here. What’s the plan?”

Stephen and Miss Hyde were both looking at him, one with dawning horror and one with a slight frown between her perfectly curved eyebrows.

“That is the plan,” Essie told him, widening her stance and folding her arms as if preparing for a fight.

“What is?” Hastings asked, because he surely must have misunderstood her.

“Staying here.” Her answer ignited his already short temper.

“We’re supposed to harbor the daughter of a known crime lord, who’s put a price on her head, here, in the parsonage? With Stephen? And Mrs. Tulane? And the whole village? Just...right here?” He spread his arms out wide for emphasis.

“That’s about it,” Essie said, cocking her head at him. “Have you got a better idea?”

“Yes,” Hastings said. He tried to lower his voice. He’d started yelling. “Anything else. Anything else is a better plan. Run? Throw her off the edge of the British Isles?”

Take her back to Sir Barnabas and tell him this isn't a home for wayward, criminally adjacent daughters?"

At that Stephen stood up, catching everyone's attention. "Of course they can stay here." He turned to Hastings. "You can't leave."

Hastings closed his eyes and dropped his head back, trying to count to ten but he only got to three. "Have you any idea what you are inviting here? They will look for her. And it may not just be her father and his minions, either. Clearly, she's got information on someone that interests Sir Barnabas, and Bleecker has never particularly interested him before." He saw Miss Hyde's gaze dart over to him, calculating and a bit alarmed. He'd obviously got that one right.

"Well, we have you," Stephen said with distressing finality. "And Miss Essie. Clearly, Sir Barnabas thinks that will be enough to foil any nefarious plots that come our way." He smiled at the bloody nuisance of a chit sitting there, but she was watching Hastings.

"Sir Barnabas was very clear that he wanted me here, at the parsonage," she finally said. "So here I shall remain."

"Surely there is somewhere else in all of Christendom where you would be safer, and so would everyone else," Hastings argued in frustration.

"Sir B thinks no one will look here," Essie explained. "Here, he sent this." She handed him a note. "His logic is sound. She hasn't got a connection to anyone here. Who would believe she'd try to hide out in a parsonage in a tiny little village?" She looked at Miss Hyde. "Have you ever left London before?"

She shook her head. "No." She looked around the parsonage with interest. "This is my first time anywhere like this." She shrugged. "I wouldn't even think to look for

me here.”

“Me neither,” Essie said. “I mean, I’ve never left London either.” The look she cast around the cozy little parlor was much more suspicious than Miss Hyde’s. “First time for everything, I guess.”

“Sir Barnabas didn’t give any other instructions? Nothing for me?” He’d read the note, and it was very brief, just restating what Essie had told him. What was missing was the usual directive not to kill anyone. Which usually meant he’d have to kill someone. The question was, who? He was relatively sure it wasn’t Miss Madelyn Hyde. Sir Barnabas had confirmed she was important in an ongoing investigation.

“No,” Essie shook her head.

“So, it’s settled then,” Stephen said, sounding far too happy about the situation than Hastings believed was warranted. “Now, let’s get our stories straight before everyone arrives.”

“Everyone? Who’s everyone?” Essie demanded, in fighting mode again.

“Oh, you really have never been to the country,” Hastings said with a cruelly satisfied smile. “There will now begin a steady stream of visitors, as absolutely everyone in the entire village has heard of your arrival by now. It’s the most exciting thing that’s happened here in weeks.”

“The county, I daresay,” Stephen corrected him. “Other than you, I’ve never had any strangers here. They will all want to know who you are and why you’re here.”

“That doesn’t sound as if we are going to quietly hide in the country,” Miss Hyde said, frowning. “Can’t you just send them away?”

Hastings laughed out loud; he couldn't help himself. "If you figure out how to send the duchess on her way, be sure to teach me."

Their hastily devised cover story was that Maddy was the wife of a very distant cousin of Reverend Matthews, recently widowed, and had come to bring him news of his cousin's death, and Essie had been employed as her traveling companion. Maddy didn't think anyone would believe something so ridiculous—after all, she was clearly capable of writing a letter and didn't need to go traipsing all over the country informing distant relatives of a death. But the parson and Hastings—what kind of person didn't have a surname or use an honorary? Suspicious people, in her experience, that's who, no matter how handsome they were—had assured her that indeed the gentry did just that sort of thing out of boredom. They were apparently constantly visiting one another for long periods of time. It was inconceivable.

The most difficult part of the plan, however, was that Essie would need to wear a dress.

"I'm not putting on a bleeding dress," Essie growled again.

"Essie," Hastings began, with an admirable amount of patience in Maddy's opinion since they apparently were under a time constraint, "you will be too notable wearing gentleman's garb. That's the sort of interesting little tidbit that gets passed around in letters from town to town and eventually might make it back to London, where some industrious criminal will say, 'Wasn't there a bunch of those girls who liked to dress like gents and used to kill for Fat Linnie, but now one of 'em's working with that cagey Home Office fellow? What's she doing there?' And then, before we know it, assassins everywhere."

"Were you one of Fat Linnie's girls?" Maddy asked, impressed. "No one's seen her for ages. Nor, honestly, any of the other girls. I can't believe I didn't make the connection." Fat Linnie had knocked on her door, but by then her father had plans for

her and she was unable to get away. Although, going from killing for Bleecker to killing for Fat Linnie would hardly have been getting away. Hastings looked surprised. Perhaps she shouldn't have revealed how much she knew about London's criminal underworld.

"You have just proven my point," he said after a moment. He turned back to Essie. "She might have been slow to make the connection, but there are a lot of people out there who won't be."

There were a lot of holes in that argument but Maddy didn't say so. He was making a lot of assumptions. "I don't think it's fair to make Essie wear something she doesn't want to," she said instead of criticizing his logic. Personally, she would champion any woman who decided to wear whatever the hell she wanted despite society's ridiculous rules.

"There? See?" Essie said. "If she doesn't mind it, then I don't suppose anyone else will."

"She isn't a lady," Hastings said, and Maddy felt the sting of that observation. Once again, she was reminded that she was a thing in between, not good enough for gentry and too good for the street.

"Close enough," Essie said. "She walks like one and talks like one, and that's all you need to pass."

"Enough," Mr. Matthews said. He had a very sweet face and demeanor, but he didn't even need to raise his voice to get people to listen to him. Maddy had no idea how he did it. She was accustomed to the loudest voice winning. "She is not the first female to visit Ashton on the Green wearing men's clothing."

"She isn't?" Maddy asked. Perhaps the country was more sophisticated than she'd

been led to believe.

“I’m not?” Essie asked, clearly as surprised as she was.

“No. Margaret Witherspoon likes to dress like a man. She’s at least as old as Essie now and is usually to be found in breeches and boots. Everyone here has seen it, so they most likely won’t comment. Don’t you agree, Mrs. Tulane?”

They’d brought the housekeeper into their confidence as a matter of necessity. She looked askance at Essie. “I suppose not, as I’m sure the duke and duchess will accept it without blinking an eye. And no one would dare say something if they don’t.” She sniffed in clear disapproval, however. She had not liked the idea of the parson being forced to lie to everyone. Mr. Matthews, however, had convinced her that if he was doing so to protect an innocent, then the Savior would forgive him. The Savior might, but Maddy wasn’t so sure about Mrs. Tulane. Obviously, she had no intention of revealing how very not innocent she was.

Stephen’s comment was a puzzle to Maddy, because she had no idea who those people were.

“Her father Derek is rather ruthless, and a great bully. Which, I suppose, is why no one says anything about Margaret’s clothes,” Mr. Matthews mused.

“Does he beat the girl?” Maddy asked curiously.

“Does he what?” Stephen asked, frowning at her.

“Well, you said he was a bully,” she answered, suddenly feeling self-conscious. “In my experience that means he’s free with his fists.” She’d been on the receiving end of plenty of those in her time, even after Bleecker decided to clean her up and use her.

“That’s true,” Essie agreed. “I’ve known the type.” Their eyes met in understanding and Maddy nodded.

“No,” Stephen answered. “No, he would never. He loves Margaret. She’s his daughter.” He sounded scandalized.

“All that means is he’s got the legal right to do it,” Maddy said disdainfully. She didn’t like that she’d revealed so much about her own past with her careless question.

“See here,” she said impatiently, bringing the conversation back to the topic at hand. “Essie will be my cousin. If we keep it all cousins, we shan’t get confused.” She held out her hand and Essie hesitated before she took it. “She is my dearest cousin, and we are inseparable. You’ll need a last name, of course. Miss…”

“Waters,” Essie grudgingly said.

Maddy nodded and continued. “She has been my foundation since the death of my beloved husband, um, let’s call him David, it’s simple and easy to remember. She’s been my protector on my journey here.” She smiled sweetly at Essie, who blinked at her slowly, confusion on her face. Maddy dropped the smile and Essie’s hand and looked at both men. “Will that do?”

“I believed it,” Hastings said. “And it explains why she never leaves your side. She can keep an eye on you that way.” He sounded irritated and Maddy had no idea what she’d done now. She didn’t have time to worry more about it because there was a polite knock at the door.

“And so it begins,” Mr. Matthews said.

### CHAPTER 11

“A cousin, you say?” the duke asked again, scrutinizing Miss Hyde. Or rather, Mrs. Higgs. Stephen had realized just as he was about to introduce her that Freddy would most definitely make the connection to the Higginbotham-Hydes if Stephen had. Higgs was what ended up coming out when he introduced her. She hadn’t blinked an eye, just given Freddy and Anne a very pretty curtsy.

“Yes, Your Grace,” she answered sweetly.

The sweeter she acted the angrier Hastings looked. Stephen inwardly sighed. “Hastings,” he said, as if he’d suddenly thought of something. “Can I speak to you for a moment? About that situation I was consulting you about?”

“Oh,” Freddy said, his attention swinging from Miss...Mrs. Higgs to Stephen and Hastings. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“Nothing at all, Freddy,” Stephen assured him. “It has to do with the garden, and some work I need done.” Freddy was supremely uninterested in the garden, although he did like to come and watch Stephen work on pleasant days.

“I’ve told you, Stephen, that I will send workers from the Park to help you with the garden,” Freddy told him. “After all, you feed half the parish from it. It is the least I can do.”

“Now, Freddy,” Stephen told him. “You know I love my gardening. Don’t you dare threaten to take it away from me!” He took Hastings’s arm firmly and pulled him



toward the door as Hastings continued to glower at Miss Hyde. Mrs. Higgs . Good God, Stephen was going to give the game away if he didn't remember her correct, or rather, incorrect name.

"It looks like I'd be taking it away from Hastings," Freddy said, waving them out of the room as he turned back to scrutinize Mrs. Higgs.

Once they were in the hallway, Stephen turned to Hastings with a scowl that matched the other man's. "What are you doing?" he whispered. "What is the matter with you?"

"What are you talking about?" Hastings asked, and Stephen hushed him with a finger to his lips. Hastings shrugged, his eyes wide and his hands up in the air, silently asking the same question.

"You must stop glowering at her," Stephen whispered furiously.

"Do you see how well she lies?" Hastings hissed back at him. "She was born to it."

"Well, I daresay she was," Stephen said, and Hastings, who had been looking toward the parlor with a scowl, as if he could impart his displeasure through the wall, turned back to him with a surprised look on his face.

"She told us exactly where she came from," Stephen reminded him. "And how she was brought up. I assume lying is second nature to her." Hastings looked like he didn't know what to say. "She is playing a part we asked her to play," Stephen said. "I am not going to be a hypocrite and criticize her for doing it well. Now get that look off your face or go out and sheriff somewhere."

"Sheriff somewhere?" Hastings whispered incredulously. "What does that mean? I can't just conjure up sheriffing when it suits me."

“I’m sure that’s what other sheriffs do.” Stephen smiled at him. “Besides, it’s an excuse to check out the village and see what people are saying and make sure there are no other strangers about. Correct?”

“Where is she going to sleep?” Hastings asked.

“I imagine in the spare bedroom,” Stephen answered. “I’m not putting her in the barn.”

“The one right next to mine?” Hastings asked, his face scrunching up again the way it did when he was about to complain.

“Yes,” Stephen told him. “And across from mine. It’s the only other bedroom we have. She’ll be in there with Miss Waters.”

Hastings was drumming his fingers on his crossed arms. “Fine,” he whispered, his tone saying it was anything but fine. He walked around Stephen and went to the door of the parlor. “I’m going,” he announced abruptly to the room, stopping conversation. “I’ve got sheriffing to do.”

“I’m so glad to see you taking your new position seriously, Hastings,” Stephen heard Anne say. “I knew you would make an excellent sheriff.”

“Humph,” Hastings grunted in reply before he turned and stalked down the hall to the front door, glaring at Stephen over his shoulder. Stephen just sighed and watched him leave because, honestly, even when Hastings was acting poorly, Stephen was man enough to enjoy the view.

Maddy was sweating. She thought she was hiding it rather well, but she could feel her shift growing damp with nervous sweat as the duke and duchess stared at her. A duke and a duchess! You’d think that would have been something someone might have

mentioned to her along the way. Oh, yes, dear, you'll be expected to entertain a duke and his duchess in the parlor, while they glare at you with obvious suspicion. Forsooth! Or whatever nonsense people like this spouted. God, could you even call royalty people? He was a handful of accidental deaths away from the throne. She tried to breathe through the panic that was constricting her chest all while maintaining a monstrously fake, sweet smile.

Where the devil did that parson go?

"Mrs. Higgs?" the duchess inquired politely, her sharp eyes damning Maddy.

"I'm so sorry, Your Grace," Maddy said, not having to feign embarrassment at her inattention. "My mind wanders these days. I'm afraid the journey was not easy, so soon after my husband's death." She reached back for Essie's hand, and when it was not forthcoming, she turned around and glared at her. Essie jumped up as if she'd been pinched and grabbed Maddy's hand roughly.

"I asked if your husband had any other family. Mr. Matthews doesn't talk of his family much. I understand his parents are deceased," the duchess repeated. She was staring at Essie with a mixture of fear and fascination, as if she was an exhibit in a wild menagerie.

"Just distant cousins, spread out all over, Anne," Mr. Matthews said as he came back in. "I'd lost touch with Danny over the years, to be honest."

"I thought his name was David?" Mr. Haversham said from the far corner where he'd been sitting quietly observing them all. Maddy wasn't exactly sure who he was, or what his connection was to the duke and duchess, but they treated him like family.

"Oh, yes," Mr. Matthews said. "Danny was a nickname I used for him."

“For a distant cousin you barely knew?” Mr. Haversham asked, frowning.

“We were close as children,” he quickly replied, darting a glance at Maddy, who nearly groaned at his complete ineptitude at lying. He’d already almost called her Miss Hyde a dozen times.

“If Mr. Matthews and your husband had lost touch, Mrs. Higgs, I wonder at your decision to travel all the way from...where was it again?” Mr. Haversham pressed.

“Northumberland,” she said. That seemed far enough away. Maddy knew it was north, although how far north she couldn’t be sure. Mrs. Delancey hadn’t spent a great deal of time on geography in her lessons. She was more concerned with making sure Maddy could pass as a lady, per Bleecker’s instructions.

“Right,” Mr. Haversham said, drawing the word out. “And is that where you’re from? Originally?”

“I, um, ah—” Maddy wasn’t sure how to respond to that. Did they have distinctive accents in Northumberland? If she was a lady, would she have one? Gentry all sounded the same to her.

“No,” Essie said, not bothering to hide her London accent. “London. We’re both from London. Originally.”

“And you and David lived where in Northumberland?” Mr. Haversham wasn’t giving up. “With Miss Waters?”

Bloody hell . Maddy didn’t know a single place name in Northumberland.

“Widdrington,” Mr. Matthews blurted out. “They lived in Widdrington.”

“I didn’t live there,” Essie said. “Just went up to help Mads out after Danny died.”

“Did you enjoy the castle ruins?” Mr. Haversham asked. Maddy felt a drop of sweat slide down her cheek and tried to surreptitiously wipe it away.

“Didn’t have time to go sightseeing,” Essie said, sounding bored. “Castles don’t interest me, anyway.”

“I would imagine not,” the duke murmured, watching her with a fascination equal to the duchess’s.

“And what happened to your arm, Miss Waters?” the duchess asked sympathetically.

“Got in a tussle,” she said. Maddy wanted to box her ears.

“My dearest Essie fell down the stairs trying to carry a trunk that was clearly too heavy for her,” Maddy said. “When the footman tried to take it from her, she resisted and lost her footing. She’s never been one to accept her limits.” She smiled benignly at the duchess, ignoring the glare Essie was giving her.

“Indeed.” The duke turned his attention to Maddy with startling speed. “Well, we are very happy to have new arrivals in the village.” He stood and held his hand out to the duchess, who hesitated before she took it, setting her cup down before she stood up. It wasn’t hard to interpret the look she was giving him. She wasn’t ready to give up the interrogation, and Mr. Haversham didn’t look like he was, either.

“Freddy,” Mr. Haversham began firmly, only to be interrupted by the duke.

“I’m exhausted from all this socializing,” the duke said, although he didn’t look it in Maddy’s opinion. “And we mustn’t wear out our welcome.”

Mr. Matthews had come to his feet as well and gave Maddy a look with a flick of his head. She quickly rose as well. The duke came over and she offered her hand to him. Instead of shaking it he kissed her wrist lightly.

“Enchanté, madame,” he said. “It really has been a delightful visit. You must come to the Park.” He turned to Essie and solemnly shook her hand, correctly assuming she would not welcome a kiss, even from a duke. Then he turned to the parson and took his hand. “You must bring them to the Park, Stephen. Tomorrow. And bring Hastings, as well.”

“I’m not sure,” Mr. Matthews began, but the duke interrupted him.

“Nonsense,” the duke said jovially. “You’ll come for luncheon. A picnic! Won’t that be delightful, my dear?” he said to the duchess. “The children will enjoy it immensely.”

“Delightful,” the duchess said wryly, raising an eyebrow at the duke. Maddy would love to be a fly on the wall in their carriage on the way back to their...castle? Did dukes live in castles?

Mr. Haversham bowed to them all very proper like from where he was standing by the door. He’d moved while the duke was saying his goodbyes. He gave Mr. Matthews a very stern look. “Yes, Stephen, we shall see you tomorrow at the Park.”

The parson sighed audibly. “Yes, fine, at the Park. But whether or not Hastings is with us I cannot guarantee. You know very well Hastings will do what Hastings wants.”

“I’m sure Hastings will see the benefit of a picnic at the Park,” the duke said blithely, “if you tell him I specifically asked for his presence.” He tucked the duchess’s arm in his and pulled her to the door, where Mrs. Tulane was waiting with their hats and

gloves. "Welcome to Ashton on the Green, Mrs. Higgs, Miss Waters." He sailed out the door with the duchess and Mr. Haversham limped out behind them. Maddy wondered how he'd gotten the limp. It looked like an old injury, not a new one. She could tell the difference. The war, perhaps? He was the right age.

Mr. Matthews closed the door behind them. When Maddy started to speak, he put a finger to his lips to hush her. Finally, when they could all hear the carriage move off down the lane, he slumped against the door.

"Good heavens," he said. "I thought they'd never leave."

"That Haversham knows we're lying through our teeth," Essie said, plopping down on the sofa next to Maddy. "And so does the duchess."

"Oh, my dear, so does the duke. Don't be fooled by him," Mr. Matthews said. "But for some reason he has decided not to pursue it, and so we shall be grateful for the reprieve."

"Reprieve?" Maddy said, trying to hide her panic. "We are to dine at the duke's palace tomorrow!"

"It's not a palace," Mr. Matthews assured her. "Just a very, very large estate." He sat down and shook his head. "There's nothing to worry about. They are very informal at home, and Freddy chose a picnic so the children would be there. He's offering us a buffer, because Anne and Brett won't interrogate us in front of the children."

"I never learned how to eat with royalty!" Maddy said, not bothering to hide her panic anymore. "They'll know instantly that I'm not a lady." Hastings had seen through it immediately. Her mask of gentility was hanging by a thread. Why had she thought it would work in the first place? Playing the lady among her father's thugs and associates was one thing, but here among actual nobles was quite another. She had

never longed more for the freedom to be herself. She just wasn't sure who that was anymore. Perhaps here in the country she could figure that out, if she could carry off this farcical deceit.

Essie snorted. "I'm guessing they do it just like everyone else. Put the food in your mouth and chew."

Mr. Matthews laughed. "You're exactly right, Essie." He sat forward in his chair and reached out to take Maddy's hand. "There's no need to fret, Miss...Mrs. Higgs." He shook his head and then smiled again. "I mean it when I say it will be very informal. Just food set out on tables and games on the lawn. There are no strict etiquette rules to abide by. After all, Hastings can do it."

He let go of her hand and she missed it, which surprised her. His hand had been big and strong, and surprisingly callused. He'd said he liked gardening. That must be why his hands weren't soft. Maddy had never had a hand to hold in stressful situations. Earlier she'd reached for Essie's hand as part of her playacting the distressed widow, but she'd found holding hands with her had calmed her nerves. Stephen's hand had the same effect on her. How odd, that such a simple thing could bring relief.

"Call me Madelyn," she said impulsively. "That way you don't risk using the wrong name." She smiled to soften her words. "Why did you change my name?"

"Freddy knows the Higginbotham-Hydes," he told her. He scrubbed his face with his hands. "What a tangled web we weave, eh?" he smiled at her.

Well, that was confusing. "What do spiders have to do with it?" she asked, frowning.

"That's a quote," he said. "From Sir Walter Scott's poem, 'Marmion'. 'Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive!'" His smile was also meant to soften his words, she was sure. She felt terribly ignorant at that moment. It was



obvious it was a quote he thought she'd recognize.

"I didn't learn poetry or geography in school," she told him flatly. "All I learned in my brief time there was how to walk and talk like a lady." She bit her lip. "Was Northumberland a good choice?"

"As good as any," he said. "After all, a lie is a lie no matter how good it is."

### CHAPTER 12

Stephen woke up abruptly when a large weight fell on top of him and knocked the wind out of him. “What the blazes?” he cried out, shoving at whatever was attacking him.

“Shhhh,” Hastings slurred right next to his ear. “You’ll wake her up.”

“Are you drunk again? And naked?” Stephen asked in disbelief. “With ladies in the house?”

Hastings snorted as he nuzzled behind Stephen’s ear. “‘Ladies’ is questionable at best,” he whisper-shouted in his ear.

“You are yelling in my ear,” Stephen told him. “That will definitely wake them. And why are you on top of me? I can barely breathe.”

“I’m whispering,” Hastings said, and his voice was slightly quieter this time.

“Of course you are,” Stephen said with a sigh. Hastings snuggled into him, his legs spread open, with Stephen nestled in between. Stephen was trying very hard not to notice Hastings’s obvious erection pressed right against his burgeoning one. Hastings had one hand in his hair, and his lips were now sucking on Stephen’s earlobe. “What are you doing?” Stephen asked, his voice a little unsteady.

“I’m trying to seduce you,” Hastings mumbled. “Is it working?”

“Better than you know,” Stephen muttered. Then more clearly, he said, “You’re not going to remember any of this in the morning.”

“Course I will,” Hastings said with the confidence of the very drunk. His mouth was now nipping its way along Stephen’s jaw.

“Why are you doing this?” Stephen asked. He tried to push Hastings off, desperation making him clumsy, but Hastings was having none of it. He closed his fist in Stephen’s hair, pulling it a bit, and bit his lower lip. Stephen’s heart began to beat a rapid concerto and his erection was now full blown. “I can’t do this,” he told Hastings, even as his hands made their way to Hastings’s shoulders and gripped them tightly.

“You don’t want me?” Hastings asked, his lips touching Stephen’s, his breath hot and heavy in Stephen’s mouth. It was the most erotic thing Stephen had ever experienced, which made him cringe a little inside because it indicated how very little experience he had with this sort of thing.

With sexual relations, he told himself firmly. If you’re lying here with an erection pressed against another man’s erection and thinking of him in erotic terms, you can surely call it what it is. It’s sexual.

“You know I do,” Stephen admitted without hesitation. “But you are very drunk, and it would surely be taking advantage of that situation if I allow this to continue.”

“Take advantage,” Hastings whispered. He paused to suck on Stephen’s lower lip and Stephen couldn’t suppress a groan. “Please.” That sounded very like begging to Stephen, who wasn’t immune to the power of Hastings’s need.

“Stop kissing me,” Stephen told Hastings, his words a bit muffled by Hastings hot, greedy mouth trying to conquer his. But even as he said it, he wrapped one arm

around Hastings back and grabbed onto his firm, naked backside with his free hand. Good lord, he'd never felt anyone else's behind like this and it was glorious. Why hadn't anyone told him how heart-stoppingly delicious it was to squeeze that mound of flesh?

"You like that, hmm?" Hastings said into his mouth. "I do, too." Then he gave up any pretense of trying to seduce kisses out of Stephen and took control of his mouth. He pressed his open lips against Stephen's and thrust his tongue into his mouth, and Stephen moaned as he tried to keep up. He tentatively slid his tongue against Hastings's, who promptly sucked on it and groaned as he ground his hips against Stephen.

Stephen knew he should stop this. He knew from experience Hastings was far too drunk to remember what was happening right now. But he couldn't make his body obey his mind. He blamed it on being rudely awakened and not having his wits about him, on being half asleep still, on anything that would allow him to keep kissing Hastings and touching him.

It was only as Hastings continued to thrust his hips against Stephen and Stephen's nightshirt crept up his thighs that Stephen realized Hastings had pushed the covers away before lying down on top of him. By then they were kissing endlessly, roughly, and Stephen had his hands buried in Hastings's curly hair, holding his mouth on his. He couldn't stop Hastings from reaching down and yanking his nightshirt up, from their naked cocks rubbing against one another, and when that happened, he also couldn't stop the sharp gasp of arousal he made against Hastings's mouth. Hastings broke the kiss and pressed his forehead to Stephen's.

"So damn good," Hastings moaned. "It feels so good."

And it did. It did. Stephen could feel the wiry hair surrounding Hastings's cock, he could feel his ballocks brushing against him each time Hastings thrust. The

movement of Hastings's cock against his was a sweet torture, rubbing him closer and closer to climax.

"Hastings," he gasped. "You must stop. I'm going to go off, Hastings. I can't...stop." He reached both hands down and pulled Hastings's hips tighter into him, squeezing his behind with both hands, driving him down again and again against his cock.

"Good," Hastings said, his voice rough and breathless. "I'm going to come. Want you so bad. Wanted this so bad." He leaned over and bit Stephen's shoulder, and then he groaned and froze above Stephen, cock to cock, and Stephen felt a wash of wet heat on his stomach. He couldn't have stopped his own climax then if the archbishop had been standing there.

When Stephen came it had a force to it he hadn't expected. His climax was ripped almost painfully out of him, the heat and the shuddering spasms of pleasure almost too much to bear. He'd taken himself in hand many, many times over the years, but there was no comparison here, no comparison to the one time he'd had sex with a prostitute in Portugal during the war. This was him and Hastings, and he was already wearing Hastings's climax across his body, and now he'd branded Hastings with his and it was all so magnificent and shattering.

And then it was over. He lay there panting, his satisfaction warring with embarrassment. It had all happened so fast, and Hastings warm and willing and in his arms was more than he could resist. He knew he should have resisted, knew he'd probably regret it, particularly when Hastings had no recollection of it in the morning. Hastings was panting, too, his head resting on the pillow next to Stephen's.

"We can forget about her now," Hastings muttered. He was a boneless heap on top of Stephen, and Stephen wasn't surprised when moments later his breathing deepened, and it was apparent he'd fallen asleep still atop him.

Stephen gently but awkwardly rolled Hastings off. Hastings lay there sprawled on his back snoring, completely oblivious to the sight he made, his cock still half mast, a smear of their combined climaxes across his hips and stomach. Stephen was shocked at his desire to lick it right off his stomach and kiss him some more. What was the matter with him? Had he lost all sense of propriety? He quickly rolled off the other side of the bed. He held his nightshirt up off his stomach, horrified at what Mrs. Tulane would say if she saw his linen besmirched by their semen. He stumbled over to the washstand and filled the bowl and used his washrag to clean himself off. His cock was so sensitive he hissed as he wiped it off, hoping that would settle it down.

When he was done, he went over and cleaned Hastings. He took his time, not sure he'd ever have the opportunity to see and touch him like this again. He shouldn't. He should have stopped this before it got so far out of hand. It was clear jealousy had driven Hastings's desires tonight. Now Stephen felt like a vile seducer because Hastings was cup shot and upset and Stephen had groped him like a lecher.

Hastings briefly woke up at the touch of Stephen's hand as he wiped him off. Hastings reached down and wrapped his hand around Stephen's, holding it on his cock with a sigh. "All right," he said, then he closed his eyes and went back to sleep.

Stephen rinsed the cloth and determined he'd toss the water out in the morning to prevent any questions. Luckily, he didn't have to worry about Hastings's presence in his bed causing concern since he'd been there before. He crawled back into bed and leaned down and kissed Hastings's chest, right over his heart. Stephen was determined that if Hastings didn't remember what had just happened, he wasn't going to tell him. It would change everything between them, and Hastings would probably run back to London. He was terrified of belonging here, of having something of his own. And Stephen wasn't ready to lose him yet, even if this never happened again.

When morning came Stephen had barely slept. He gingerly climbed out of bed and dressed, and snuck out of the room, wash basin in hand. Mrs. Tulane wouldn't even

be up yet. They had to face Freddy at the Park today. There was no hiding the fact that he'd just had the most intimate and erotic sexual encounter of his life with Hastings. Surely everyone would see it.

Before he went down the stairs, he took a deep breath and sternly told himself that as far as the rest of the world was concerned, nothing unusual had happened last night. And if Hastings didn't remember, then Stephen would maintain the lie even if it killed him.

### CHAPTER 13

“This is ridiculous,” Hastings said as he stood on the back lawn at Ashton Park, looking at the duke and duchess and Haversham out there frolicking with their brood. Several tables laden with food and some chairs had been set out under an awning on the paving stones surrounding a large fountain. “Why are we here? More to the point, why am I here?” As far as he could recall, and he had excellent recall, he’d never been to a picnic in his life. “I don’t understand why people would choose to eat outside if they don’t have to. What’s the point?”

“I know,” Madelyn said from beside him. She’d told him to call her that, so they could keep name mix-ups to a minimum, but it still felt strange. She had a frown on her face. “Wealth certainly seems to make people do very odd things.” She looked at Stephen. “Am I dressed properly?” She sounded nervous.

“There’s proper dress to eat outside?” Hastings asked. She was wearing a very fetching dark blue dress with a matching jacket, and it made her eyes look particularly blue. She looked every inch the fine lady, except for her too full bottom lip. That plump lip had him imagining all sorts of dangerously tempting things, beginning with the way it would feel and taste. He would never tell her that of course, but he’d noticed. He’d noticed more than he wanted to. He was clearly still very much attracted to ladies and not just handsome, country parsons.

“Gentry have a dress for everything,” Essie said. “One for eating, one for walking, one for riding, one for dancing, and I guess one for eating outside.” She shrugged, looking bored.



“We are all dressed appropriately,” Stephen assured them. He smiled at Madelyn first and then Hastings. Stephen had been acting odd all morning. Hastings had probably done something rude and embarrassing last night when he’d crawled into Stephen’s bed drunk and naked again. Of course, Stephen wouldn’t tell him what. He just gave him a disappointed look when Hastings told him he couldn’t remember but he was sorry all the same.

Essie didn’t appear to need any encouragement. Hastings was beginning to see why Sir Barnabas thought she’d be an asset. There was a high level of efficiency associated with that kind of confidence. Hastings hadn’t really needed the encouragement, either, but he liked it when Stephen smiled at him. It made him feel like he wasn’t a completely useless human being.

Hastings had no idea what he was doing when it came to pursuing a man. It was fair to say throwing himself naked and drunk in a woman’s bed would be a bad idea. He supposed it was equally off-putting for a man. Even more so for a man like Stephen. He felt like a bloody idiot.

“Did you know there would be so many people here?” Madelyn asked. She looked as uncomfortable as Hastings felt about this family affair.

“Mr. Matthews!”

Hastings saw Mrs. Westridge waving at Stephen from the lawn as her husband and Kurt Schillig stood by and frowned at him. The men disapproved of him but for the life of him, Hastings didn’t know why. He hadn’t done anything to disturb the two, but he got the impression they didn’t like anything that disrupted the routine of their sedate lives as country squires. It was too bad, because the duke had gotten his horse from Westridge, and Hastings would have liked to talk to him about that. They’d brought that nuisance, their daughter Esme, who was old enough to cause trouble for all of them. One of the children playing near them squealed loudly and Hastings

wincing. Children baffled him. He'd never really had the chance to be a child.

He almost groaned aloud when he saw Gideon North, who raised horses over at Blakely Farm, not far from Ashton Park. Not horses like his new hunter. Now there was a horse. Hastings had been riding Bronny all over the countryside whenever he got the chance. North raised carriage horses, which weren't nearly as handsome as Bronny. He was sitting at a table with his very pregnant wife. She'd been pregnant the entire time Hastings had been in Ashton on the Green. Shouldn't that be enough time? Gideon had his cane today, probably because they were outside with children underfoot. Usually, he had no trouble getting around on his Anglesey leg, a wooden leg he wore courtesy of an old war wound. Gideon was frowning at them, the scars on his face making it a gruesome sight. He did that to everyone, but today it seemed more pointed than usual. The Norths's three young children hollered and ran right at Stephen as soon as they saw him, abandoning Charles Borden, who'd been playing with them on the grass.

"Greetings!" Stephen called out as he crouched down to gather them all in a hug when they launched themselves at him, knocking his hat off in the process. All the other children followed, and Stephen fell to the ground, laughing under a pile of wriggling bodies. Madelyn gasped and jumped out of the way.

"What the hell?" Essie exclaimed as Madelyn bumped into her.

"Come on, you little demons," Esme Marlestone said, wading into the pack and picking children off Stephen and tossing them away. "Sorry, Mr. Matthews. They've been bubbling like kettles all morning waiting for you to get here." She looked at Hastings. "Sheriff. What are you doing here?" she said by way of greeting.

"I have no idea," Hastings replied, backing away from the pile of children. They streamed around him, as if he were a rock in a river. A man with a headache from drink didn't deserve this sort of torture.

“How do you do?” Miss Marlestone said to Madelyn and Essie. She stared openly at Essie. “I’m Esme Marlestone.”

“How do you do?” Madelyn said stiffly. She sounded like someone’s great aunt, trying too hard to play the lady. “Mrs. Madelyn Higgs.” She shook the girl’s hand. “This is my cousin, Miss Essie Waters.”

“Essie and Esme,” Miss Marlestone said with delight, clapping her hands. “It’s meant to be.”

“What is?” Essie asked suspiciously.

“Why, our friendship, of course,” Miss Marlestone said. She reached over and grabbed Essie’s good hand, pulling her away from Madelyn. “Come on,” she said as she tugged Essie away.

Essie gave them a panicked look. “I have to stay with Madelyn,” she argued, trying to get out of her clutches.

“Nonsense,” Miss Marlestone said. “We won’t be far away.” She linked their arms and short of using her fists, there was no way for Essie to get away from her. Hastings saluted Essie and got a glare from her for his trouble.

“Now run along and play, children,” Stephen said, standing up and gently tumbling children off his lap. “I have to introduce my guest.”

“Who is she?” one of them asked. It was a little redheaded girl, and Hastings wasn’t sure if it was the duke’s or the Westridge’s. There were several redheads among them.

“This is my late cousin’s widow, Mrs. Higgs,” Stephen said. “My dear,” he said to

Madelyn, “this is Lady Barbara Thorne, the duke’s daughter.” He made the introduction as if the little girl was full grown.

“How do you do?” Madelyn said in that odd voice again.

“You’re supposed to curtsy to me,” Barbara told her in a whisper that could have been heard three leagues away. “But we don’t stand on ceremony here.”

“Young lady,” her father said as he sauntered over to them. “Mrs. Higgs is not required to curtsy to you. If this were a formal occasion, she would only need to curtsy to myself and your mother. Rest assured I will be speaking with your nanny about this unfortunate lapse.”

“Papa,” the girl whined. “I was just having some fun.”

“At the expense of others. Apologize.” He stood firm as he stared at his daughter.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled.

“That is perfectly all right,” Madelyn said calmly. “I wasn’t going to curtsy anyway.” Hastings had to hide a smile at her response. He admired her confidence.

Her comment made the duke laugh. “My faith in you is rewarded,” he said to Madelyn, holding out his arm. “Let me introduce you, my dear. Where is your delightful cousin?”

“Esme dragged her off,” Stephen told him. “Who knows where they are now.”

The duke had a thoughtful look on his face. “Hmm. They shall find them soon, I’m sure.” He led Madelyn off while she looked over her shoulder at Stephen and Hastings, looking as panicked as Essie had a moment earlier.

“Alone at last,” Hastings muttered to Stephen. He watched as North heaved himself to his feet and grabbed his cane. “Bloody hell.”

“Hastings,” Stephen chided gently. “But I see him, too. I’m afraid I’m about to be interrogated.” He sighed as Hastings looked at him in surprise. “Oh, yes. They are all meddlesome and think it’s their right and duty to know every little thing about my life because they think they’re protecting me.”

“I thought they were glaring at me ,” Hastings said in relief. “And I haven’t done anything. Lately, anyway.”

“Oh, I’m sure they’ll have a few things to say about you still staying with me at the parsonage. And now Madelyn.”

“Shots fired over your left bow,” Hastings murmured as North got closer.

“Don’t leave me alone with them,” Stephen begged, reaching for Hastings’s forearm. “You know I’m a terrible liar.”

“Oh, thank God you said that,” Hastings said. “I was trying not to hurt your feelings by mentioning it, but you really are awful at it.”

“Were you?” Stephen said, turning to smile at him, ignoring North’s looming presence as he arrived just ahead of Brett Haversham. “That’s very kind of you, Hastings.”

“Hastings? Kind? What nonsense is this?” North barked, scowling.

“I can bloody well be kind if I’m so inclined,” Hastings growled at him, still looking at Stephen. He placed his hand over Stephen’s on his arm in a silent pledge not to leave him alone with these vultures.

“North, behave.” The duchess peeked around Haversham’s back. “What are we talking about?”

“Anne,” Haversham said with a put-upon sigh. “Perhaps you should leave this to the men.”

“Now that is nonsense,” she said, stepping around him and forcing North to make room for her. “Nothing should ever be left completely in the hands of men.” She winked at him and Haversham’s ears turned red.

“What is going on?” she asked Stephen. “No one here believes that faradiddle about Mrs. Higgs being your late cousin’s widow from Northumberland. I mean really, Stephen.”

“We hadn’t met until yesterday,” Stephen said. “I mean, I didn’t know David had married. Until yesterday. That is, I didn’t know he’d married her .”

Hastings nearly groaned aloud. Stephen could not be trusted to carry this conversation. “Unfortunately,” he jumped in, “her letter indicating when she’d be arriving never reached us.”

“Us?” Haversham said, narrowing his eyes at Hastings.

“The parsonage,” he corrected himself. “I’m not stealing his post.”

As usual, he was getting annoyed with the questions. He much preferred to be on the other end of them, when he remembered to ask them, that is. That reminded him that his unfortunate habit of shooting first and asking questions second was why he was twiddling his thumbs in the country. But redirecting their attention to him meant they’d leave Stephen alone and they wouldn’t have to discuss Madelyn Hyde.

“You’ve certainly settled in at the parsonage,” Haversham said with a frown.

“At my invitation,” Stephen interjected firmly.

“Don’t you have to return to London soon?” North demanded of Hastings.

“Not yet,” Hastings said with a big grin. “I’m all yours for the foreseeable future.” North visibly gritted his teeth. He was as easy to bait as a caged bear, so of course Hastings couldn’t resist.

“For which I, at least, am grateful,” the duchess said. “We needed a sheriff and Hastings is doing a wonderful job.”

“Nothing happens here,” North said with obvious disbelief. “Why do we need a sheriff?”

“Hastings has prevented quite a few physical altercations since becoming sheriff,” she argued.

“He’s caused just as many, too,” North declared. “I don’t see how one outweighs the other.”

“Well, you’re not in charge, are you?” Hastings asked, his annoyance getting the better of him. “It’s the duke who’s paying my salary, so I don’t see as it’s much your business, unless you’re trying to hide something from the law?”

“Unless I’m trying to—” North looked apoplectic.

“Hastings,” Stephen said, pulling on his arm. “Don’t.”

“There is adequate lodging over the pub,” North finally ground out. “Why does he

need to stay with you?”

“Because I want him there,” Stephen answered, and Hastings ignored the warm knot in his chest at his declaration.

“No one wants him here,” North stated.

Hastings hated how his words stole away the warm feeling. How many times had he heard something similar in his life? He pulled his arm away from Stephen’s grip.

“That’s not true,” the duchess said in a rush. Hastings refused to be grateful to her for her defense.

“It isn’t up to any of you,” Stephen said tightly. “And I would appreciate it if you would kindly stay out of my business.”

“Now Stephen,” North began, his tone lecturing.

“Don’t ‘now Stephen’ me as if I’m one of your children, North,” Stephen said coldly. “I think it is time that all of you learned to mind your own business when it comes to mine.”

Hastings had never heard Stephen sound so angry. To be fair, his tone was still relatively mild when compared to most people, but for Stephen it was decidedly cold. The rest of them looked as if Stephen had grown two heads, they were so shocked.

“Stephen,” the duchess said, sounding scandalized.

“That’s what comes of mixing with his lot,” North said.

“Gideon North, if one more unpleasant word comes out of your mouth, I will read



your name at Sunday service,” Stephen told him. “Sarah will be mortified.”

Haversham was pinching his nose. He looked like Stephen. Hastings was reminded that they’d been friends for a very long time. “I thought we were discussing Mrs. Higgs,” Haversham said, clearly trying to change the subject.

“Also my business,” Stephen declared, straightening his shoulders.

Hastings was about to reply when Charles Borden came over. “Sarah is quite tired, North. I think we should take her home.”

North immediately forgot all about Hastings and Stephen and whatever his objections were. He turned and started walking over to his wife without another word and Hastings was surprised when Borden winked at him. “Sarah sent me over,” he whispered. Hastings glanced over to see Sarah North waving at him before she turned her attention to her husband. She and Borden were unexpected allies, but everyone knew they were the only ones who could keep North under control.

“Let the children stay, Charles,” the duchess begged. “They are all having such a fine time. We shall send them home in the carriage later.”

“Are you sure?” he asked skeptically. “You’ve already got a handful.”

“Absolutely,” she said, taking his arm and leading him back to the Norths, Haversham following them. She smiled apologetically over her shoulder at Hastings, and he wasn’t quite sure what had just happened. Stephen had chosen him? Over his friends? And several of those friends had come to Hastings’s defense. Why?

Valentine Westridge, Miss Marleston’s stepfather, approached them, looking right and left. “Where is Esme?” he demanded.

“She and Essie wandered into the maze,” Hastings told him. “I saw them go in a few minutes ago.”

“Kurt went in not long after,” Stephen told him.

“Damn it,” Westridge said under his breath. He spun on his heel and headed toward the maze.

“What is his objection to Essie?” Hastings asked Stephen after Westridge was out of earshot.

“I think it’s more to do with Esme,” Stephen said. “She has a predilection for girls like Essie. Girls who disregard the rules so blatantly.”

“A predilection?” Hastings asked, eyebrows raised.

Stephen smiled. “She likes them.” He let out a big breath. “Well, we certainly distracted them from asking about Madelyn.”

“For now,” Hastings agreed. “But she’s been left alone with the duke too long.”

“Oh, good heavens,” Stephen said, looking around frantically.

“They went into the maze, too.”

“Then into the maze we shall go as well,” Stephen said. He marched off toward the maze and Hastings followed. He didn’t have anything better to do today than get lost in the maze with Stephen, after all.

### CHAPTER 14

Essie watched the girl where she sat on a bench at one of the farthest dead ends in the maze. She'd hadn't made a single wrong turn on the way, dragging Essie quickly behind her. Her red hair still showed the vestiges of a very ladylike chignon, but wisps were now falling around her shoulders from playing with the children.

"What do you want?" Essie asked, feeling completely out of her element. She had an itch between her shoulder blades that said this one was trouble. "Miss Marleston," she added hastily, not wanting to offend so early in their acquaintance.

"What a peculiar question!" Miss Marleston declared, laughing. "I want to get away from the children for a moment, if that's all right. How old are you?"

"I...what?" Essie asked. This girl should work for Sir Barnabas with the interrogating.

"How old are you? It's a simple question. I'm sixteen, soon to be seventeen." She stared at Essie expectantly.

"I'm about eighteen, I suppose," Essie said, uncomfortable.

"About? Don't you know?" She seemed astounded that someone wouldn't know their own age.

"Not really," Essie said defensively. "My ma died when I was born, and no one I know seems to remember exactly when that was. I might be eighteen, could be

twenty for all I know. But eighteen sounds about right.”

“How extraordinary,” she said breathlessly, as if it was the most fascinating thing she’d ever heard. “Who raised you?”

These questions were far too personal. No one had told Essie she’d have to discuss her personal life. “That’s rude. Who raised you?” she asked right back.

“Well, my parents, naturally.” She rolled her eyes. “Mama, and Father, and Papa Kurt.”

“How do you have two fathers?” Essie asked, confused. “Is your mother divorced?”

Miss Marleston blushed. “No.” She sat up straighter and stared at Essie defiantly. “Mama is married to Father, of course, but Papa Kurt lives with us.”

Essie frowned as she tried to comb through Esme’s words. She grinned when she realized what the girl wasn’t saying. “So, she’s got two of them dancing to her tune, eh? Well, good for her.”

The girl made a face. “You’ll find that’s a common occurrence around here, I’m afraid.” She pulled her feet up onto the bench and wrapped her arms around her legs, a most unladylike position. Oddly enough, it put Essie more at ease. “Ashton on the Green is a little bastion of hedonism,” she said dramatically. “I heard the grocer describe it that way once behind Mama’s back. To be fair, he didn’t seem to mind. Custom is custom, after all, and he’d never turn my mother or the duchess away, and most people think Mrs. North is a veritable saint, what with putting up with her bear of a husband.”

“Wait,” Essie said, trying to keep up. “You mean the duchess and Mrs. North have each got two cocks crowing as well?” She’d thought people in London were the only

ones who got up to that sort of thing, at least among the nobs. Now here they were in the country and practically everyone was doing it. “Is there some sort of woman shortage I’m unaware of?” she asked, amused.

Miss Marleston laughed far louder than a lady ought to. Essie was taking a shine to the girl. “No, I don’t think so,” she said at last. “Father and Papa Kurt met during the war, you see.” She looked away. “They became very important to one another.” She turned back and smiled at Essie. “That’s how Mr. North and Mr. Borden met as well. Mr. Borden saved his life, you know. And Mr. Haversham served with the duke’s older brother.” She paused, watching Essie. “I think war does strange things to people, don’t you?”

Essie snorted. “Well, I didn’t know it did that to people.” She bent and picked up a stick from the path, holding it in her bad hand, and began awkwardly peeling the bark off. “And aren’t we all fighting battles of one kind or another? Most people just drink or something.”

“Is Mrs. Higgs really your cousin?” Miss Marleston asked, surprising Essie with the unexpected question. Her eyes were a little too perceptive. “You don’t seem alike at all.”

“We weren’t raised together,” Essie said. “Different stations.” She hoped that was enough of an explanation for why she didn’t sound like Madelyn Hyde.

“Yes,” she said thoughtfully. “I can see that. And how did you hurt your arm?”

“Got in a fight with a man, and he knifed me and broke my fingers.”

“Good heavens!” Miss Marleston said. “How did you get away?”

“I killed him,” Essie told her.

Miss Marlestone snorted and rolled her eyes. “If you didn’t want to tell me the truth, you could have just said so.” A moment later she was swinging her feet down off the bench. “Well, you can keep your secrets.” She stood up, grabbed the stick out of Essie’s hand and threw it to the ground. “You can kiss me now. Papa Kurt will probably find us any minute.”

“Kiss you?” Essie asked, astounded. “Why the blazes would I do that?”

“Well, it’s obvious that we are like minded in our desires.” Essie had never heard anyone state it so boldly. Coming from this girl, it was incomprehensible. She was uncommonly pretty, and a gentleman’s daughter, no matter what that gentleman’s circumstances were, and Essie was sure she was destined to make a good match. She took a step toward Essie and Essie took a step away from her in response.

“Miss Marlestone, I’ve got me a girl,” Essie said, “back in London.”

“Well, I don’t want to marry you,” Miss Marlestone said. “It won’t come to that if you kiss me. And call me Esme.”

“Fine, Esme, but I’m not going to kiss you,” Essie told her, exasperated. “You’re practically a child!”

She looked as if she’d been struck, and then her cheeks grew pink with anger as she glared at Essie. “I am not a child. I told you, I’m almost seventeen.”

“Too young to be kissing strangers in a maze,” Essie told her, with the authority of one or two years on the girl.

“And when were you first kissed?” she challenged Essie, her arms crossed defiantly.

Essie thought for a moment and then blanched. She’d been a lot younger than this

girl. "Different circumstances," she muttered.

"That's what I thought," Esme said, grinning. She took a step toward Essie and then froze when a voice called out her name. She groaned and slumped where she stood.

"He's getting faster, I think," she said under her breath.

"Who?" Essie said spinning around to look in both directions down the path.

Just then one of her fathers appeared at the end of the path and glared at them. Essie was surprised when he reserved most of that look for Esme.

"Young lady," he said with a bit of a German accent, "you will say your goodbyes and come with me."

"Papa," Esme wheedled. She hooked her arm through Essie's and Essie tried to dislodge it, frantically shaking her head at Esme's father, who sighed and nodded.

"I think you have shown the young lady enough of the maze for one day," he said gently. "Perhaps she will come to call on you at home soon, yes?"

"Oh, that would be grand," Esme gushed, hugging Essie's arm. "When can you come?"

Essie had no idea how to answer that. She'd never been invited to call on anyone before. "I...I have no idea," she stammered.

"We will call at the parsonage in a few days," her father said, beckoning Esme over to him. "Come, come. It is time to go."

I'm sorry, Esme mouthed to Essie as she backed away from her. "Goodbye," she said

loud enough for her father to hear. “I shall see you soon!” She ran to her father and grabbed his hand, pulling him down the path and out of sight.

Essie collapsed onto the bench. What on earth was going on around here? Women with two husbands and fathers inviting rough female assassins to call on their daughters. She laughed out loud at the absurdity of it. The country was clearly no place for the faint of heart.

Maddy was taking her glove on and off nervously. She couldn’t stop herself. She hated these nervous little tics of hers. They were a complete tell, and you didn’t give away your thoughts or feelings to anyone for free. She’d learned that at a young age. But here she was, doing it right in front of the duke of all people. Because she was wandering a maze with a duke. On his palatial—she’d learned that word recently, and really, it was a splendid word—estate. Where the devil was the parson and that damn agent of Sir Barnabas’s? And wasn’t Essie in here somewhere?

“You seem a bit nervous, my dear,” the duke said. His tone was kindly. “You needn’t be, you know. I may be a duke, but I’m completely harmless.”

She glanced over at him in disbelief. Surely, he didn’t expect her to believe that? He looked benign enough, walking beside her without a jacket, his hands clasped behind his back as he looked around the maze as if trying to figure it out. She knew as well as he that he probably knew every square inch of this maze like the back of his hand.

“Yes, well, harmless to you,” the duke amended. He hadn’t even met her incredulous look. He just seemed to know what her silence implied. When she didn’t respond he sighed. “Why don’t you tell me why you’re really here, in Ashton on the Green? I’m quite well aware Stephen doesn’t have any distant relations. If he did, they wouldn’t be distant. He longs for family and would not discard them so easily.”

This time he did turn and met her stare with one of his own. His blue eyes were so



piercing Maddy felt it like a physical blow, and she stumbled. He reached out and steadied her with a polite hand.

“I’m so sorry,” Maddy blurted out. “That was so clumsy of me. Forgive me.” She was furiously trying to come up with a good plan that wouldn’t be ruined the second they were back in company and he began to quiz Mr. Matthews and Hastings.

“The path is uneven in several places,” he said. “Best hold on to my arm.” He offered it graciously and she took it. At least that would keep her from fiddling with her gloves. She didn’t respond to his inquiry, hoping he would take her silence to mean she did not wish to discuss it and move on. If she remembered correctly, and she invariably did, that was the thing to do in polite society. You never forced a conversation about personal subjects. Which seemed ridiculous to Maddy, because, really, they were the only kinds of interesting conversations.

“I’m afraid I must insist on an answer, my dear Mrs. Higgs,” the duke said firmly. “You see, lacking his own family has made Stephen part of ours, and we’re rather protective of him. He would see the good in everyone, if he could. I’d like him to continue to be so trusting. Which is why I need to know if I can allow you to stay.” He pulled her gently to a stop and turned her to face him. “So out with it. It can’t be that bad, can it?” He smiled to take away any sting his words might have.

“I...need his protection,” she prevaricated. She’d been fascinated to learn there were different words for various levels of lies. How very English.

He waited a moment or two for her to continue, but she just looked at him. “I see,” he said. “Why do you need Stephen’s protection?”

She licked her lips nervously and bit the bottom one before she realized what she was doing and made herself stop. The captain of her old gang of pickpockets, Dickie Bales, would have beaten her hide nine times ten today if he’d seen how badly she

was flubbing her story. “Someone is looking for me,” she finally said.

“And what does this someone have to do with Stephen?” The duke was patience itself, and Maddy realized he would wait as long as he needed to in order to get the truth out of her.

“Nothing,” she replied honestly. “He doesn’t even know that Mr. Matthews exists.”

The duke crossed his arms and tapped his lower lip with his index finger, pinning her to the path with his gaze. “No?” he said. “Interesting. And how did you know Stephen exists?”

Maddy broke away from his gaze and began walking again, slowly. He was a tricky one, this duke. He knew just the right questions to ask. “Someone else sent me to him. Someone he knows.”

“Well, that is a large segment of the population,” the duke said, stepping back to her side and continuing the walk, hands behind his back again. “Someone I know?”

Maddy had to stop and think. “I don’t know,” she finally said, once again glad to be able to fall back on honesty.

“Does Miss Waters know them?” he asked.

Maddy’s step almost faltered, but she caught it in time. “Yes,” she said.

“And is Miss Waters really your cousin? The truth on this matter, please, because she is in this maze somewhere with Esme Marleston and I need to know if I have to shout for assistance.”

“She is not,” she said, willing to give that lie up. “But she also knows the person who

sent me and is here for my protection.”

“Now we are getting somewhere,” the duke said happily. “So, I shall assume Miss Waters is trustworthy, yes?”

“Yes,” Maddy said firmly. She was surprised when the duke took her word for it.

“All right,” he mused. “And does Hastings know why you’re here?”

“Yes,” she answered. She liked these simple questions better. Less lying this way.

“Well, that’s good,” he said. “He is the sheriff, after all. If you need protection, he’s the man to see.” Maddy snuck a look at him out of the corner of her eye. He turned and caught her watching him. “Not to mention that whole agent of the crown business.”

Maddy’s eyes went wide at his unexpected comment, and then she closed them, cursing herself for a fool for so easily giving more away.

“Come, we must find Esme and Miss Waters before her father does,” the duke murmured, taking her elbow and encouraging her to walk again. “Let me see if I have this straight. Stop me if I get something wrong. Sir Barnabas James has sent you here to the parsonage with one agent, Miss Waters, to meet one of his best agents, that would be Sheriff Hastings, to hide you from whoever is looking for you and protect you. He chose Ashton on the Green because you have no connection to it, nor I gather does the individual looking for you. Needle in a haystack. But conveniently, Hastings was already here, and I assume a parsonage is the last place they’d look for you.”

Maddy did not say a word.

“And how much danger does that put the rest of us in?” he asked, stopping on the path. She continued for a step or two and then stopped and turned to face him.

“I don’t know,” she said. Honesty, again. The best way to lie is not to lie.

“So, it might put my family at risk if I were to move you to the Park?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said, nodding.

“Or anywhere else,” he said with resignation. “And knowing Stephen, he will not let you leave his home now that he knows you are in danger.”

“I know I’m taking advantage of his better nature,” she said, trying to be as earnest as she knew how to be. “But it’s only for a little while. And Hastings is there. As sheriff, any funny business around the village will be brought to his attention.”

“True, true,” the duke agreed. “So we shall keep you all at Stephen’s.” He nodded. “Someone will come by and check on you periodically. And I shall have to tell the others what I know.” He held up a hand as she began to object. “They deserve to know there is a danger to their families, slight though it may be.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Maddy said miserably. Now everyone would know she was a villain. To her surprise the duke reached out and chucked her under the chin like she was a child.

“Cheer up, my dear,” he said. “This means fewer social visits to suffer through.” Maddy brightened up immediately and the duke laughed. “You’ll get better at them,” he assured her. “Come, I think I hear Esme and your cousin—are we sticking with that story?—over here.”

### CHAPTER 15

Hastings walked companionably at Stephen's side as they wandered through the maze. Now that they were alone Stephen didn't know what to say to him. He didn't remember last night, and so Stephen would maintain that nothing had happened. It was better that way. If Hastings had wanted to remember it, he wouldn't have gotten drunk first.

No matter how many times Stephen had been in the maze he could never find his way through. Hopefully they ran into one of the many people already inside it.

"Before I dragged you in here I should, perhaps, have mentioned that I cannot navigate us out again," he told Hastings nervously.

Hastings barked out a laugh. "I wondered. You're almost as bad at directions as you are at lying."

Stephen gave him a look, thoroughly annoyed. If he only knew. "That is not true. I'm perfectly fine at directions when I am not in a maze."

"So, Esme Marleston is trying to seduce Essie in here?" Hastings asked idly, perusing the high hedge on all sides of them.

"Good Lord, I hope not," Stephen said fervently. "Kurt would have a fit."

"Worried about his precious darling, is he?" Hastings sounded very sarcastic.

“Most likely worried about Essie’s virtue,” Stephen said. “Rumor has it, Esme can be very convincing. She means no harm. She’s just charming and pretty and lively, and very hard to resist. Most fathers keep their daughters well out of her path.”

Hastings’s laughter was bright and genuine this time. “That one is trouble, you’ve the right of it,” he agreed. “Westridge and Schillig have their work cut out for them.” He frowned. “They don’t treat the girl badly, do they? I thought they doted on her.”

“They do,” Stephen said. “That might be part of the problem. She’s never wanted something they haven’t given her.”

“All children should be spoiled,” Hastings replied solemnly.

Stephen was taken aback by the comment, which didn’t sound like Hastings at all. “Why do you say that?” he asked, encouraging Hastings to say more, to reveal more of his innermost thoughts to him. Stephen had been trying to draw him out since his arrival. He didn’t just want Hastings physically. He wanted to know who he was, who he really was.

“Because I know what it’s like to be unwanted,” Hastings told him simply. “To have nothing and be given nothing without having to struggle and sacrifice at too young an age.” His voice became fierce. “No child, no matter how rambunctious or troublesome, should have to feel like that.”

“Hastings,” Stephen said. He put his hand on Hastings’s arm and pulled him to a stop. He stepped in front of him and waited until Hastings looked at him. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

Hastings grinned in that devil-may-care way he had. “Not your fault,” he said. “And I turned out fine, didn’t I?” His gaze was intense, belying his cavalier tone.

“More than fine,” Stephen told him. Hastings’s gaze grew heated and suddenly the path seemed too small, too close, too tight to contain them. Stephen grew uncomfortably warm and started to draw his hand away from Hastings’s arm, but Hastings put his hand on Stephen’s, holding it there. It was the second time today he’d done that. Perhaps he did remember?

“You’re more than all right, too,” he said quietly, and Stephen’s heart began to beat a rapid tattoo in his breast.

“Hastings.” His voice was breathless, and he cleared his throat, embarrassed.

“These mazes are certainly made for seducing someone, aren’t they?” Hastings observed quietly, and Stephen had to remind himself to breathe.

“I believe many people have met their downfall in a maze,” he agreed. Hastings frowned, and Stephen rushed to add, “Or their destiny, I suppose.”

“Destiny,” Hastings repeated. He tipped his head to the side as he regarded Stephen. “Do you believe in that?”

“Of course,” Stephen said. “Don’t you?” What other reason could there be for the two of them to cross paths as they had? For Stephen to feel this way about him, something he’d never felt for anyone before.

“No.” Hastings answered immediately. “I believe we make our own destiny. If I waited around for destiny to find me, I’d still be a guttersnipe in the stews.”

Stephen shook his head vehemently. “No, I don’t believe that. You are still the same person you were as a boy, Hastings. People don’t change, not that much. Lessons are learned, of course, but the man you are was in there already, even when you were struggling.”

Hastings gave him a lopsided grin. “Think so, do you? You might not have been so kind if I’d picked your pocket back then.”

“I daresay I would have taken you in hand and bought you a good meal,” Stephen told him.

“Taken me in hand, hmm?” Hastings said quietly. He took a step closer to Stephen, until they were lapel to lapel, their similar scents mingling with their breath, barely a space between them, Hastings still holding his hand against his arm. Stephen could feel Hastings’s muscles tighten. He was shocked at the rush of desire that assaulted him. He’d never felt this kind of passion for someone. He certainly hadn’t expected to feel it with Hastings, not when he’d first arrived at the parsonage. But somehow it seemed as if they’d been headed here all along.

When their lips met the heat of Hastings’s mouth on his made Stephen step into him, seeking more of it. He thought of destiny and downfalls and wrapped his arms around Hastings’s neck and kissed him back. Hastings hesitated for a moment, as if he hadn’t expected Stephen’s enthusiastic response, and then he put his arms around Stephen and dragged him even closer, opened his mouth and deepened the kiss. Did he remember? Did he remember the taste of Stephen’s mouth from last night? The press of their bodies against each other?

Stephen tangled his tongue with Hastings’s and tried to make him remember all of it. Hastings moaned quietly into his mouth and arousal coursed through Stephen, settling in his prick, which wanted more—much more—of what it had last night. Hastings gently bit his lower lip, and it was Stephen who moaned. When Hastings shoved his thigh between Stephen’s and cupped Stephen’s behind in his hands, pulling him into it, Stephen thought he might collapse from the rush of desire that assailed him, if Hastings weren’t holding him up.

They both broke away from the kiss to gulp in deep breaths of cool air. Stephen felt



every inch of Hastings that was pressed against him, the heat and hardness of him awakening the memory of Hastings's naked body pressed to his the night before.

Hastings began to lean down toward Stephen, and Stephen's eyes were drifting shut for another kiss when he heard a throat clearing nearby. He jerked away and Hastings let him go, his hands sliding off his bottom to his hips for a moment before he pulled his hands off him completely. Hastings gave him that lopsided smile.

"We've found you, then," Hastings said, before he looked away, over Stephen's shoulder.

"Were you lookin' for me?" Essie asked. "That didn't look like a search party. At least, not for my benefit." She sounded highly amused.

Stephen straightened his jacket and let his ardor cool for a moment or two before he turned to Essie with a smile. "Where is Esme?" he asked her, his voice still a little breathless. "We feared for your virtue."

"You might have warned me about her," Essie said with a frown. "Her father arrived just in time, or she would have had me on the ground."

"I think you're more than capable of defending yourself," Hastings said wryly.

"Yeah, well, not without a knife being involved, or at the very least my fists," Essie told him. "I'm not keen on using either on her."

"I'm glad to hear it," Stephen said with real relief. "Thank you. But you needn't worry. Esme will not trespass where she is not wanted."

"Don't leave me alone with her again," Essie warned. Stephen wasn't sure if Essie was worried about Esme's power of persuasion or her own lack of resistance.

“Have you seen Madelyn?” Hastings asked. “She’s lost in here somewhere with the duke, and I don’t know where in the bloody blazes we are.”

“Christ,” Essie muttered. “What kind of agent are you if you can’t get yourself out of a silly maze? No wonder Sir B sent me to rescue you.”

“I can find my way out,” Hastings argued. “But we didn’t find them behind us, and I don’t know the way in front of us yet.”

Stephen was suddenly alarmed. “Aren’t one of you supposed to be watching her at all times?”

“Bloody hell,” Hastings cursed in a low voice, putting his hands on his hips as he looked around. “I can’t believe the damn parson is the one reminding us.”

“Language, Hastings,” Stephen said, a little hurt at being referred to as “the damn parson”, particularly after their embrace.

“Sorry, sorry,” Hastings muttered, waving a hand at Stephen.

“Well, Freddy’s with her,” Stephen said. “If something was amiss, we’d know.”

“Right you are, Stephen,” Freddy said from behind Hastings. His unexpected appearance had them all jumping. “But, of course, nothing is amiss.” He stepped around Hastings and handed Madelyn off to Stephen, who automatically tucked her hand in his arm. “Mrs. Higgs has informed me of what is going on. I shall send someone around to check on you all at the parsonage from time to time. And I’m going to inform some carefully chosen compatriots, as well, since there is a slight danger to everyone, isn’t there?” He smiled at Madelyn. “But I’m sure you are all up to the task of protecting us.” He rubbed his hands together. “Now, let us go and eat. I’m starving. Do you know the way out?”

\* \* \*

“Why the devil did you tell the duke?” Hastings asked, obviously annoyed with Maddy. Well, if he wanted her to care about his moods, he’d have to stop being annoyed with her, and as far as she could tell he’d been annoyed since she’d met him. He was thoroughly unpleasant, and the fact that he was so dashing and good looking only made him more so.

They were walking back to the parsonage from Ashton Park. Maddy wasn’t sure about getting so much fresh air. She’d heard that sort of thing was bad for the lungs. It did smell wonderful, though, fresh and brisk, like trees and hay.

“He gave me no choice,” she protested. “And I didn’t tell him everything. Just that someone was looking for me, and you and Essie were here to protect me. He figured out Sir Barnabas was involved, and exactly why he chose Ashton on the Green and the parsonage to hide me. I can’t bloody well help it if he’s too smart.”

“Language, my dear,” Stephen said quietly.

“There’s no one around to hear me, and I’m bloody tired of having to pretend to be someone I’m not,” she said, finally releasing some of the anger she’d been holding in check for weeks. “I wish he’d set me up as a maid at Ashton Park or something. I’d be better at polishing the silver than dining off of it.”

“You’d steal it,” Hastings said flatly. “He put you where we can keep an eye on you.”

“Really? Well, bang-up job of it, sheriff.” She stopped in the middle of the lane and faced him with hands on her hips. “If you hadn’t been so busy cuddling up with the parson you might have been doing your job, which is indeed to keep an eye on me. Which you weren’t.”

Maddy had been quite put out to discover the parson was a backdoor man. She'd been harboring fantasies of an ill-fated love affair with him. It might be rather pleasant to have a go with someone who was nice to her. Hastings also preferring men was a bit of a shock, however. He was so big and handsome and reassuringly solid, like a brick wall.

"Cuddling up?" Mr. Matthews said, sounding a little uncomfortable. "I'm sure you are mistaken. I wouldn't call it that." Maddy noticed Hastings didn't say anything.

"You only get to lie to protect the innocent," Essie reminded him, looking like she was thoroughly enjoying this row. "And I would call it that. Or worse."

"Yes, well, you may keep the worse to yourself," the parson said. "Hastings, you know Freddy. I'm sure he browbeat the poor woman, and she had no choice but to tell him. He is a formidable adversary when he wants something."

"Exactly," Maddy said, waving her hand in the air in the general direction of the parson. "See? He knows."

"I have a feeling you've resisted coercion from men far scarier than the duke," Hastings accused.

Like you? "My methods of avoidance are better suited to scum than royalty," Maddy said primly. "It didn't feel right using any of them on the duke, who's just trying to protect his own."

"Freddy isn't royalty," Mr. Matthews said, urging them all to begin walking again. He put his hand on Maddy's elbow and guided her forward. "Aristocracy, yes. But no royal connections, at least as far as I know. I believe the grant was for services during the War of the Roses, although he doesn't prattle on about it like some."

“I don’t know what that is,” Maddy said impatiently. “I’m just an ignorant girl, parson. I can talk and walk and dress like one, but I’m not a lady. I didn’t have time for school when I was a child.” She’d always thought herself so clever, until she arrived here. Now she felt like the uneducated criminal she was.

“So, you keep saying,” Mr. Matthews said, “but I will treat you as I see fit, which is as a lady. And not all ladies are students of history, so that is neither here nor there.”

Maddy was silent for a moment, not sure how to respond to that. Part of her desperately wanted to live up to his expectations. “Thank you,” she finally said with as much dignity as she could find. “Have you got a book about it? I can read,” she assured him defensively. Books were quite dear, and she’d only read one or two in her life. She’d learned to read on broadsheets and advertisements.

“I have a modest library, although Freddy has a magnificent one. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind letting you borrow some of his books.”

Maddy was shaking her head before he finished. “He doesn’t want me around his family too much. You heard him. He’s worried I might put them in danger.”

“Which brings me back to the main point,” Hastings said. “The more people who know why you’re here, the better the chances they’re going to find you.”

“Nonsense,” Mr. Matthews said, patting her hand on his arm. “Why would anyone in London pay attention to gossip from Ashton on the Green? For goodness’s sake, we are quite out of the way here. No one from London passes through unless they make a deliberate plan to come here. No, you are as safe as a babe, here, Miss Madelyn.”

“I don’t like it,” Hastings said, because he couldn’t not be contrary and unpleasant.

“You don’t have to,” the parson said, surprising Maddy. “I like it, and so you will

accept it.”

### CHAPTER 16

“E ssie,” Madelyn said at breakfast two days after the picnic, “I have decided to teach you how to be a lady.”

Hastings choked on his sausage and made a sound halfway between laughing and coughing. “Why?” he finally gasped after Essie had thumped him on the back repeatedly.

“Yes, why?” Essie said, her lip curled in distaste. “I already told you I’m not putting on skirts.”

“Oh, I don’t mean how you dress. I would imagine if you had to wear specific attire when you’re doing a job for Sir Barnabas, there are people to help with that. No, I mean how to talk and carry yourself.” Madelyn looked very pleased with her plan.

Stephen set his correspondence down on the table next to his empty plate. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” he ventured, looking at Essie, who had a decidedly mulish look on her face.

“You don’t think?” Hastings said, his voice still rough from choking. “You can’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear.”

“That is uncommonly vulgar and rude,” Madelyn said in that prim, great-aunt voice she adopted when she was trying to be a lady. Hastings was beginning to like it when she put on airs. He’d figured out she mostly did it when she was nervous.

“I would be better at teaching her how to be a lady than you,” Hastings said, refusing to acknowledge the hurt he saw flash in Madelyn’s eyes at his disparaging comment.

“I’m sure Madelyn would be a brilliant teacher,” Stephen stated, smiling at her. Her return smile lit up her face. She was clearly falling under Stephen’s spell and vice versa.

Every time she flashed that bright smile at Stephen and fluttered her long lashes, flashing those big blue eyes at him, Hastings disliked her more. Stephen was always quick to defend her, even when she was being ridiculous, like now. And Hastings had caught him watching her when he thought no one was looking.

Hastings had never, ever, approached another man the way he had Stephen. What had he been thinking? Of course, Stephen wasn’t interested in someone like him—a killer who’d been raised on the street, who was no better than he ought to be. He’d been good for nothing but killing, and that’s exactly what Sir Barnabas had seen in him when he’d scooped him up and trained him. Despite the way Stephen had reacted to his kiss, Hastings was not for the likes of a gentle man like him, who saw only the good in people. There was very little good in Hastings. But he didn’t think there was much good about Madelyn Hyde, either, other than her beauty. And that, combined with her intelligence and confidence, made her more dangerous, not less.

“Fine,” Madelyn said with a defiant look. “Let’s see who’s the better teacher, shall we? We will both teach her. I dare say you will show your colors soon enough.”

“Are you challenging me?” he said incredulously. “I’ll have you know I’m one of the Home Office’s best agents. I’ve prepared many other agents for undercover work. This is what I do for a living.”

“Phfft.” Madelyn’s dismissal was insulting. “Quite simply, you are not a woman. You don’t understand the nuances of being a woman required to teach her.” She stressed



the fancy word as if to prove she was smart. Hastings noticed she did that, used sophisticated words as if she was trying them out.

“Did you learn that from one of His Grace’s books?” he asked snidely, and her blush revealed the answer.

“Hastings,” Stephen said with a sigh, his disappointment palpable. His tone made Hastings angrier at Madelyn. Everything had been fine before she arrived. Now it seemed that all Stephen felt was disappointment when he looked at Hastings.

“Why are you so horrible?” Madelyn asked furiously, keeping her voice down.

He guessed she was trying not to let Mrs. Tulane hear her. That lady still adored Hastings and treated Madelyn as if she was sent from the devil. It was obvious she feared Madelyn would corrupt Stephen, which was ironic since it was Hastings who kept turning up naked in his bed and had kissed him in the maze. Unfortunately, Stephen had not mentioned the incident in the last two days, and so Hastings hadn’t either.

“Just because I’m right doesn’t make me horrible,” Hastings replied. He kept baiting her out of jealousy, but he couldn’t seem to help himself. “All right, I’ll take your challenge.”

Essie stopped chewing and stared at him. “Don’t I get a say in this?” she said, her mouth half full. “I don’t want to be a lady. I might like to do a lady, but I don’t want to be one.” She laughed loudly.

Stephen sighed and closed his eyes. “Perhaps we could not discuss sexual relations at the breakfast table,” he chided gently.

Essie swallowed and had the grace to look ashamed. “Sorry, parson,” she said.

“Perhaps a few lessons in table manners and such would be a good idea,” Stephen said, his voice still gentle. “I mean nothing disparaging, Essie,” he assured her. “But Madelyn is correct that there may be circumstances where, for safety’s sake, you may need to fit in...a little better.”

Essie narrowed her eyes at them all. “It’s like that, is it?” she accused them.

Madelyn grabbed Essie’s hand. Hastings had noticed she did that a lot to her and to Stephen. She had never grabbed Hastings’s hand, which was a good thing. He’d throw hers right back at her.

“Essie, darling,” she pleaded. “I’m bored. And I must figure out something to do when this is all over. I thought perhaps I could teach etiquette.”

Hastings snorted with barely suppressed laughter. Madelyn glared at him before she focused on Essie again. “I need the practice. Please?”

Essie sat back and blew out a breath that sounded suspiciously like resignation. Traitor that she was, she gave in to Madelyn all the time it seemed, just like Stephen.

“Fine,” Essie said sharply. “But I don’t have to like it.”

“Thank you,” Madelyn cried out, so happy she bounced in her seat.

“Yes, thank you,” Stephen said to Essie. “It is very generous of you.”

“Ha,” Hastings said. “I’ll teach you, Es. I know what you need to know and what you don’t.”

“It’s not a competition, Hastings,” Stephen said, picking up his letter again, giving him that look over the top of the paper.

“Everything is a competition,” Hastings told him. “Most people just don’t realize it.” He met Madelyn’s gaze and saw the same understanding there. He turned away, not willing to admit they had anything in common.

That afternoon found Maddy and Essie in the parlor, already starting her lessons.

“You want me to do what?” Essie said, sounding very uncooperative.

“You put this book on top of your head, like so,” Maddy told her, demonstrating with the copy of *Marmion* she’d found in the library. “Then you walk across the room without letting it fall.” She walked across the parlor as she spoke. When she reached the windows, she turned gracefully and then pulled the book off her head with a smile. “See? It’s easy.”

“Why do I need to put a blasted book on my head? Is this what you ladies do when you get together? Do you at least bet on it, make it more sporting or something?”

“It’s not a sport, Essie,” Maddy said, reining in her patience. “I told you it helps with your posture when you walk.”

“My posture is fine,” Essie said, leaning against the doorjamb in a slouch. “I haven’t fallen over yet, have I?”

“Oh, Essie,” she said impatiently, losing the battle. “Good posture is the first mark of being a lady.” She didn’t care for how like Mrs. Delancey she sounded right now. She had to suppress a shiver at the memory of her old teacher, who liked to emphasize her lessons with a thin wooden rod to the back. “I didn’t want to do it at first, either,” she admitted to Essie. “It seemed foolish. But it really does work.”

“Next you’ll be making me read the blasted things,” Essie muttered, grabbing the book Maddy had given her off a table where she’d discarded it. She slammed it on

her head and Maddy winced at the impact. Essie didn't show any signs of feeling it. She was hard-headed, after all.

"Now what do I do?" Essie turned to look at her and the book fell off. "Damn it," she muttered.

"Language," Maddy chided softly. "A lady does not curse in polite company. Or ever, I suppose," she quickly amended with consternation. It was a rule she often found hard to follow. But being here in the parsonage made her want to be better about it.

Essie gave her an incredulous look. "If you expect me to hold my tongue every damn minute of the day, this is going to be a failure from the start."

Maddy silently agreed. "Perhaps we could start with just watching our language around Mr. Matthews?" she suggested. "I believe I, too, have been guilty on several occasions of letting inappropriate language escape in the past few days."

"I suppose I can curtail it around the parson," Essie grudgingly agreed. "Here, how about we put a bet on it? First one to break owes me a quid."

"A quid?" Maddy exclaimed. "Not on your life. You'll get no more than a bob out of me."

Essie was shaking her head. "You've got to make it worth my while, girl," she said. "A crown, then."

"Sixpence, and if you keep going it will just be for pride." Maddy looked at her sternly. "And don't think I didn't notice that you think you are going to win."

Essie laughed. "Deal. I would've settled for a simple penny," she bragged. "I just

want you to remember you lost when you hand it over.”

Maddy was about to make a scathing reply when Hastings sauntered into the room. He looked the ruffian, with his cravat and jacket missing. “Already accepting that she’s going to lose, then? Excellent. I should have bet money, too.”

“Bet?” Mr. Matthews poked his head around the doorframe. “Who is betting? Not here, I hope.”

“A friendly wager, parson,” Essie assured him. “Mads and I?—”

“Madelyn,” she corrected with resignation. She didn’t care for her full name, but it helped sell the role she was playing. Ladies were not called Maddy. They were called Madelyn, or so Mrs. Delancey had told her.

“—have made a bet that we can stop cursing in front of you,” Essie continued as if Maddy hadn’t spoken.

Mr. Matthews came fully into the room, holding a book, with a pair of spectacles resting on the end of his nose. He looked absolutely divine in Madelyn’s opinion. I could just eat him up , she thought, gazing at his strong forearms exposed by his rolled-up sleeves. Somehow not wearing a jacket just made his manliness more appealing, unlike Hastings, who looked like the brigand he claimed not to be.

“While I appreciate the thought, making a wager on it negates any positive aspects,” Mr. Matthews told them.

He’d stopped next to Hastings, who looked over his shoulder at the open book in his hands, and without any words exchanged the parson closed it so Hastings could see the cover. Their interaction made Maddy frown. She wasn’t going to make any headway with Mr. Matthews with Hastings sniffing around him. It was clear the two

had formed a close bond since Hastings's arrival—oh, how Maddy wished she'd been here to see that!—and she couldn't blame Hastings for trying to have more. After all, she wanted more with the sweet parson as well. And lately his attentions made Maddy believe she had a chance for more. Hastings may not realize it, but there were two competitions going on, and Maddy did not like to lose.

### CHAPTER 17

“S he had you doing what?” Hastings asked Essie from where he was lying on top of the brick garden wall, his head resting on his arms folded beneath. The sun was warm as it beat down on him and he enjoyed it. That was one thing London could be scarce on: sunlight. He needed to get his fill before he had to go back.

“Walking around and around the room, arm linked to hers, with books on our heads,” Essie told him with disgust. “Did you know they made ladies do that sort of thing?”

“I had no idea the tortures those poor women have to endure in order to sleep warmly, dress well, and eat fine foods,” he remarked drily.

“To be fair,” Essie said, and Hastings winced because he knew what was coming, “Mads didn’t get any of that.”

“She hates it when we call her Mads,” Hastings said with glee.

“I know,” Essie agreed with a laugh. “But I do it as a tease, and to remind ‘er she ain’t who she’s pretending to be, and she doesn’t ‘ave to be false with me. You do it to annoy ‘er.”

“I do almost everything to annoy her,” Hastings agreed without remorse. “There isn’t much to do for entertainment in the country.” He swung his legs down as he sat up, facing Essie. “All right, then, let’s begin my lessons for you.”

“Oh God.” Essie groaned and dropped her head back roughly against the tree trunk

she was leaning on as she sat on the ground. Her legs were stretched out in front of her, ankles crossed, and though he hadn't known her that long, Hastings didn't think he'd ever seen her so relaxed. This place had that effect on people.

"Don't make me do anything too bloody stupid," she grumbled.

"I won't tell Mads that you just cursed," Hastings told her with a smile.

"I'm only supposed to not curse in front of the parson," Essie told him. "You, she don't care about."

Yes, I know, Hastings thought ruefully. Every day, in small ways and large, Madelyn Hyde made it clear she did not care for Hastings.

"So what do I 'ave to do?" Essie asked with resignation.

"First of all, stop dropping your H s," Hastings told her. "Is she making you read any of those books you're carrying around on your head?"

"No, thank the parson's Lord for that." Essie made a disgusted, dismissive sound.

"Well, for me, you have to read." Hastings jumped down from the wall.

"I told you I wasn't going to do anything too bloody stupid," she said, crossing her arms and glaring at him.

"I know it seems foolhardy, but you have to trust me, Es. Reading will teach you what you need to know."

"I already know anything they could possibly put in those stuffy old books," she assured him, leaning her head back again and closing her eyes.



“I like reading.”

Hastings and Essie both startled at the sound of Miss Marlestone’s voice coming over the garden wall. Hastings spun around and she was behind it, peeking over the top.

“Aren’t you both supposed to be some sort of secret government agents?” she asked. “I just walked right up and neither of you heard or noticed me.” She shook her head and sighed. “I fear for England’s safety.”

“Now you sound like Sir Barnabas,” Hastings told her. “What do you want, anyway?”

“I came to see Essie.” She sent a reproachful look Essie’s way. “I’ve been waiting for you to call for days. Papa Kurt did say that we could call here instead, so I took it upon myself to call. Here I am.” She looked like an eager puppy when she smiled at Essie.

“We’re busy,” Essie told her.

Miss Marlestone climbed up onto the garden wall and imperiously held a hand out to Hastings. He offered her one and helped her jump down on their side. “I know. I heard. Do you want to borrow a book? I have lots.” She sighed dramatically. “There isn’t much to do here.”

“I do not want to borrow a book,” Essie assured her.

“What have you read recently?” Hastings asked Miss Marlestone. “That you liked, I mean.”

“There is a wonderful book we read not long ago. It’s called The Modern Prometheus . Have you read it?” She marched over and sat down next to Essie. Essie cocked an

eyebrow at her and then ignored her.

“I haven’t,” Hastings said, “but I heard about it. It’s about some doctor who makes a monster, isn’t it?”

“ ‘ere, what?” Essie said, opening her eyes and raising her head. “Nobody writes books about that.”

“Yes, that’s what it’s about,” Miss Marleston told them. “But really, it’s about obsession, and ambition and ignoring morals and integrity to achieve your ends only at your peril,” she said. “But mostly about monsters, whomever you may think they are.” She settled comfortably against the tree next to Essie and imitated her by crossing her ankles.

“That sounds good,” Hastings told them, rubbing his hands together. “I think Stephen has it, doesn’t he?”

“Oh, yes,” she said. “We read it together, with my mother and the duchess and Mrs. North.” She was watching Essie while trying to pretend she wasn’t watching her.

“Es, I’m going to go fetch the book from the library. I’ll only be a minute,” he said over her objections. He wanted to laugh out loud at her expression as he left her alone with her admirer.

He headed into the library, which was just a small alcove off the parlor, to find the book. He turned the corner quickly and ran right into Madelyn, who was standing on a little stool, reaching for a book from the top shelf. Her cry of alarm had him grabbing her before she fell to the floor. Her arms flew around his neck and his back slammed into the bookcase; Madelyn clutched to his chest.

He stood there, stunned for a moment. They were both panting with the shock of

what had just happened, and it didn't take long before he became aware of how she felt in his arms. She was light as a feather, for starters. Her bosom was pressed tightly against his chest, and he could feel each breath she took. Her arms remained tight around his neck, her warm breath scalding his ear. One of her hands slid up into the hair on his nape and he shivered. Her heartbeat, which had begun to slow—he could tell because he was holding her so tightly—suddenly quickened. His arms jerked her closer in response.

“Put me down,” she said breathlessly, taking her arms from around his neck and pushing on his shoulders. She's too weak to get away like that . Even as he had the thought, he ripped open his arms and let her feet drop to the floor. She scrambled away until her back hit the wall behind her, and they were facing off like opponents in a ring of books. “What are you doing here?” she demanded, her voice still breathless. “You nearly killed me.”

All he could do was stare at her. No words came. He was trying to resist the urge to drag her back into his arms. His body seemed to have a mind of its own suddenly. What an inconvenience this blasted desire was.

“Well?” she snapped. She straightened and reached down to give her skirts a shake, as if dusting him off her. Her movements broke the spell he'd been under, and he quickly straightened as well, running a hand down the front of his vest as he glared at her.

“What were you doing blocking the doorway like that?” he snapped. “You're lucky I was able to catch your fall.”

“Lucky? When you caused the fall to begin with?” she accused, slamming her hands onto her hips in a very aggressive manner.

“Me?” he asked incredulously, thumping his hand on his chest. “I was innocently

coming in to get a book off the shelf. Only to be blocked by you. On a stool. In the doorway. What kind of nonsense is that?"

"I wasn't in a doorway!" she said, eyebrows lowering. "And how else am I supposed to get a book off the top shelf? I'm not abnormally large like some people."

Well, that hurt . "Abnormally? Are you calling me abnormal? Is that what you're saying?" Here he was lusting after her and she apparently found him abhorrent.

"Well, if the enormous shoe fits," she said in an annoying, sing-song voice. "A normal person would have had plenty of room to get through the doorway around me."

Hastings hooked a foot on the stool, yanked it over to the doorway and then brushed her hands off her hips and lifted her on to it. She yelped satisfyingly and grabbed his hand to steady herself.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, not letting go of his hand.

Hastings crowded into the doorway in front of her, so they were pressed nearly as close as they'd been after he'd caught her. She was standing on the stool now, her head just barely higher than Hastings's.

"So, you think a normal-sized person could get through here?" he asked sarcastically. "A normal-sized infant perhaps."

"Again, if the shoe fits," she said, sounding a bit breathless.

"Now I'm a child?" Hastings asked, his voice deeper and not nearly so angry. He was suddenly aware of her again, the sweet, flowery smell of her—why did she have to smell so good—the feel of her flesh and bones under the palms of his hands, the heat

of her.

This is a terrible idea , he thought. Then he watched her throat move as she visibly swallowed nervously, and when he looked up he could see her pupils had grown large, leaving only a thin ring of blue. His conscience died quietly in the wake of his arousal.

“You’re behaving like one,” she told him, her voice whisper soft. She’d let go of his hand and was now clutching his shoulders tightly, her fingers digging into the muscles there, as if she was trying to anchor them in case they decided to stray. He grinned.

“What?” she asked suspiciously. She didn’t let him answer. “Let me down.”

“No.” He stepped closer, and she tried to step back, clearly forgetting she was on the stool. She nearly fell again and grabbed him for balance, and he used the opportunity to wrap her tightly in his embrace again.

“What are you doing?” she asked softly. Their faces were so close he could feel her warm breath on his cheek and suddenly it was his heart that was racing.

“I think it best if you start thinking of me as a man,” he told her, looking at her lips, which parted under his gaze and she licked them, biting down on the bottom one.

“I know you’re a man,” she whispered. “I meant you were acting like a child.” She hadn’t removed her arms from around his neck, and one of her hands, which had been clutched in a fist against his back, unfurled, and he felt the heat of her palm through his clothing as she slid it downward, bringing herself closer to him. The other hand was at his nape again, feather light in the hair there.

“Shall I act the man, then?” he asked, his voice as low as hers. He was fascinated by

her damp, full, glistening lips, making his body warm and restless. Conscience and propriety and common sense be damned, he was going to kiss her. Her lips parted and she lowered her face to his, her eyes drifting shut.

The kiss was hesitant at first, as if neither one knew what to do in this situation. God knew he'd never imagined he'd be kissing Madelyn Hyde, and he supposed from the way she always acted around him, like a scalded cat, that she'd never imagined it, either. But here they were. And she was delicious. She tasted like sweetened tea and Mrs. Tulane's biscuits. Hers were the softest lips he'd ever kissed. He'd noticed her full bottom lip the first time they'd met, and he'd been thinking about what it would feel and taste like ever since, though he'd deny that. And it was as soft and full as it looked, but far more delicious than he could have imagined.

She twined her arms tighter around his neck and pressed full against him, her breasts searing his chest with heat through the layers of their clothes. When he'd held Stephen, he'd believed he'd never desire a woman again. He'd been wrong. He desired Madelyn Hyde with a ferocious, devouring intensity right at that moment. He wanted to push her against the wall, lift her dress and slam into her. He'd never wanted a woman this much.

He tore his mouth from hers and stared at her as her lashes fluttered open, and her eyes, with heavy lids and a little unfocused, met his stare. It took a heartbeat before he saw her register what had just happened between them. He didn't give her time to say anything or pull away. He cupped the back of her head and pulled her back to his mouth and kissed her with all the desperation he was feeling. Why her? Why now? He couldn't care, not when the heat of her and her soft, damp lips were pressed against him.

### CHAPTER 18

Essie almost scrambled to her knees and ran after Hastings as he jogged slowly to the house. Esme's hand on her arm held her back.

"Why didn't you come to call?" Esme asked. She didn't sound coy, just curious.

"I've never called on anyone in my life," Essie said uncomfortably. "It seemed like a lot of bother."

"Oh," Esme said, as if she understood something that even Essie did not. "Well, it's all very simple. You just come 'round during visiting hours—that's from around noon to three at our house. Mama and Father and Papa aren't very formal about it. Then we sit around and drink tea and have sandwiches and cakes and talk. Haven't people been coming by the parsonage to see you?"

"Not me," Essie said, using her good hand to roll over and come to her knees. She leaned on the tree as she stood. "I've bolted out of sight as soon as the knocks come." She shuddered. "I've no desire to do any of that with strange people come to gawk at me." She walked over and leaned against the garden wall. She felt more relaxed with some space between her and Esme.

Esme laughed. She didn't seem put out by Essie's abandonment. "Oh, they mean no harm. They'd gawk at you no matter who you were. We don't get many strange visitors here in Ashton on the Green. I mean, someone from London always seems to be dropping by, but it's people we know. Have known for quite a long time, actually. It's just the excitement of new faces, who might have news that hasn't reached us

here yet, or some exciting stories to tell, or someone to make another place at a dinner party.”

“A dinner party?” Essie exclaimed in horror. “Surely no one expects me to do that?”

Esme nodded. “I’m afraid the time will come,” she told her. “You’ll be invited as a guest of Mr. Matthews.”

“God no,” Essie said, closing her eyes and dropping her head back on her shoulders. “I’d rather have another knife fight.” Essie made an effort not to drop her H .

“Well, the widow O’Bannon just died, and she’s the only one around here who might have done so. You’ll have to settle for dinner.” She sounded very amused, and Essie cracked an eye open at her.

“Oh, you’d enjoy that, wouldn’t you?” she accused Esme. “Watching me fall on my face around all the genteel folk.”

“What on earth are you talking about?” Esme asked, her face scrunched up in what looked like genuine confusion. She was so damned pretty sitting there in a blue plaid dress with a matching ribbon on her bonnet that Essie had to remind herself how young she was. Think of Mary Peppers , she told herself, trying and failing to recall the exact shade of her lady love’s hair, or how she looked in the sunlight.

“If I haven’t called on anyone, I’ve certainly never been to a dinner party,” Essie told her a little too sharply.

“Well, you were at the picnic,” Esme said. “That’s no different. It’s worse, actually, because the duke and duchess were hosting it, and even though they are dears—did you know the duchess’s father was the parson here when she was young?—it can be nerve-wracking to be entertained at the Park, especially the first time. Isn’t the duke



one of the most imposing people you've ever met? I've known him almost my whole life, but those eyes." She shivered. "It's like he can see into your soul."

"The duke?" Essie asked in confusion. "The redheaded fellow? He seemed all right to me." She shrugged. "Not afraid of anyone looking into my soul, that's for sure. I've had too many people after what I've actually got to be worried about something I can't see or feel or am even sure I have. He can have my soul, just leave my lunch and coat alone, thank you."

Esme laughed, as Essie had wanted her to. "The duke would be more likely to buy you a grand lunch and a new jacket, just on a whim. That's the sort of thing he does and expects nothing in return."

"Nothing in return?" Essie frowned. "Everybody expects something, sometimes they just hide it better."

"I think you'll find the duke is not one of them," Esme told her quietly. "But," she said, her voice rising cheerfully to the gay tone Essie was used to from her already, "what I was going to say was that the rest of us here in Ashton on the Green are far more informal than they are at the Park. So, you needn't worry about going to dinner parties. As a matter of fact," she said, clapping her hands together, "I shall have Mama invite you first! What a splendid idea. And you can sit next to me, and I shall help you get on."

"Where is Hastings with that book?" Essie muttered, turning toward the parsonage. Things here were going from bad to worse.

"Why don't we go and see if he found it?" Esme said, standing up and dusting her hands and dress off. "If he can't, I shall lend you my copy."

Essie was surprised the girl wanted to leave their isolated spot. "I...yes, let's go find

him.”

“And I shall say good afternoon to the parson,” Esme said with a sigh. “Mama is always telling me to greet the parson.” She turned to Essie as she passed her and then in a flash reached out and captured Essie’s free hand. “He introduced Mama to Father and Papa, you know,” she continued without missing a beat, dragging Essie behind her. “He knew they’d be perfect for each other.”

“He what?” Essie asked, shocked to her core. The sweet, kind, innocent, don’t-swear-in-front-of-him parson introduced Esme’s mother to both men? Fully intending that she involve herself with both? The shock made her follow Esme tamely. Every time Essie thought she understood someone, they surprised her without fail.

“Hastings, have you found that book?”

Maddy heard Essie calling out from the hallway and jerked away from Hastings. She’d kissed him. What on earth was she thinking? This was Hastings. The bane of her existence, the thorn in her side, the man who was chasing after the parson. Her parson. Why was he kissing her? Why was she kissing him? Had they both gone mad? Whatever was happening to her around him felt like madness. She’d vowed to be better about her tendency to take what she wanted when she wanted it and damn the consequences. And now look at what had happened.

“Let me down,” she whispered.

He picked her up by the waist without a word and plopped her down on the floor. It was so abrupt she stumbled but this time he just grabbed hold of her hand. He had very strong hands, with long fingers that wrapped around hers and held her steady. It calmed her nerves.

“That’s not a book,” Essie said sarcastically from the doorway. “It’s Madelyn.”

Maddy snatched her hand back from him. “Essie!” she said, pasting a smile on her face. “There you are! I fell off the stool. I’m so grateful Hastings was here to catch me.”

“I’m sure you are.” Essie’s voice was so dry it made Maddy thirsty. “And you were standing on a stool in the middle of the doorway because...?”

“Oh, no,” Maddy rushed to assure her. “No, I was trying to get a book off the top shelf. I wasn’t here. Originally, I mean. I was over there. But now I’m here. How did I get here?”

“Really?” Hastings asked, his tone nearly identical to Essie’s. It must be something they taught them at shadowy government agent school. “Can you really not do better than that?”

“I say, Mrs. Higgs, he’s not wrong.” Miss Marlestone stepped into the parlor behind Essie. “It’s a good thing I’m not Mr. Matthews. He’d never have believed that.”

Mr. Matthews . Maddy could feel the blood draining from her face. What was she doing ruining her chances with the good parson? For Hastings, of all people? He was exactly the same as every man she’d ever known—arrogant, judgmental, vicious. He was the kind of man she was running away from. She’d promised never to get involved with his type again. Now he was going to run and tell Mr. Matthews what a strumpet she was. She’d never get her perfect romance now, never have a chance at a sweet man, even temporary as it was bound to be. Everything was ruined, because she couldn’t control her unruly nature. She was always, always ruining everything.

“Mads?” Essie asked, stepping toward her. “Are you all right?”

“Madelyn?” It was Hastings’s voice right next to her that pulled her out of her own head.

“You,” she said, turning on him. “It’s all your fault.” She took steps away from him. “You’re trying to ruin it, aren’t you? That’s what all this was about.” She waved vaguely in the direction of the stool and the bookcase to indicate what had just happened between them. “Well, I’m not some country simpleton to fall for your schemes. Do you hear me? You’ll have to try harder than that.”

“I wasn’t trying at all,” Hastings said, sounding so smug and annoying he made Maddy grate her teeth. “When I do, you’ll know it.” Something flashed in his eyes that could have been hurt at her accusation, belying his tone, but Maddy ignored it.

“Ruin what?” Miss Marlestone asked, sounding quite curious.

“You don’t want to know,” Essie told her. “I don’t want to know. Come on, let’s go ask the parson if he even has the book.”

“He’s in his office,” Hastings told her, his eyes on Maddy. “Working on his sermon. Or writing letters. He’s always writing something.”

“Probably a book,” Essie said with undisguised disgust. “Everyone here seems obsessed with books.”

“He’s in there with Mr. Schillig,” Maddy told them.

The two young women left amid a flurry of whispers on Miss Marlestone’s part and Essie’s loud comments about people who should know better.

“Mads,” Hastings began, his gentle voice grating on her nerves, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

Of course he didn’t. No one ever means anything by it. She tipped her chin up and went to make a scathing reply, but the words jammed in her throat. Instead, she spun

around and took two more steps toward the window. She stared out at the front lane, the garden beyond, on the left. She'd watched Hastings and Essie through the window this morning, just sitting out there together, having a grand time talking.

"Don't ruin this for me," she finally said, hating how small she sounded. "This is all just temporary. You know it is. I've no idea where I'll go or what will happen after Sir Barnabas catches my...Bleecker." She had enough control to turn back to face him. "Maybe it's all pretend, but I want to pretend for a little while. I want to pretend I am what he tried to make me, just a silly lady with nothing to do but read books and flirt with a handsome parson and make some friends. With no past and no regrets, and a bright future. I won't take anything away from you, Hastings. I promise." She laughed, and it was tinged with self-deprecation. "I probably won't even be able to teach Essie a damn thing, either. So you won't have undo any damage I might cause."

### CHAPTER 19

Did she think this was how he lived his life? She and Hastings came from the same place. Didn't she realize this was as temporary for him as it was for her? She'd already ruined it for him. She'd brought the reality of his life and who he was and what he did roaring back just when he'd begun to feel like this was where he belonged.

She was right about one thing—people like them did not belong in places like this. With people like Stephen. Not even people like the duke, who was so worried all the time about protecting everyone in his little kingdom here in Ashton on the Green, and up at the Park. Hastings belonged back in London, with the murderers and thieves and generally low people he normally associated with, and he was including Sir Barnabas and some of his agents in that description. People like Essie, who understood that this was not her place and never would be and would never let herself want it.

Hastings could see on her face that Madelyn wanted it, just as much as he did. In that moment he knew that if he had to kill for her, he would do it gladly. No one—not Hastings, not some faceless bastard out to get her—would take this away from her.

“Essie will never learn,” Hastings said, not answering her plea directly. “We should probably just call the bet a draw already. Neither of us is going to win.”

“We...we can try,” Madelyn said, a catch in her voice. “I'm going to try. Essie deserves that. The trying, I mean.”

“Yes, she deserves that,” Hastings agreed, but he was talking about something and someone else.

Madelyn wiped her cheek off with her right hand. “I think my posture lessons were a dismal failure,” she said with a watery laugh.

“Yes,” Hastings agreed with a weak smile, glad she’d changed the subject before he said something, anything, that he’d regret later. “And I don’t think her posture is terrible, honestly. You can’t throw a straight knife with a hunched back or get a good hold around someone’s neck.”

“No, that’s true,” Madelyn agreed, as if she knew what she was talking about. “It was just that posture is so very easy to teach.” She met his gaze with a rueful look. “I’m not sure how to teach her anything else.”

“I’m going to make her read me a book,” Hastings told her. He could have bitten his tongue off right after he said it. Madelyn suddenly looked very keen and interested.

“What book? Why?” she asked, taking a step closer to him.

Something inside him relaxed when she moved nearer. He hadn’t liked the way she’d distanced herself, as if she feared him, or being near him.

“We’re trying to find *The Modern Prometheus*,” he told her. “It’s a gothic tale about a doctor and the monster he creates.”

Madelyn’s eyes went wide. “It sounds positively ghastly.” She paused and quirked her head to the side with a puzzled frown. “How is that going to teach her to be a lady?”

“It’s not,” Hastings said with a shrug. “It’s going to teach her to think, and she’s

going to pick up words and phrases from the reading. I just started with this book because it sounded like something she'd enjoy reading. After this one, we'll read something else."

It was how he'd learned so much. Sir Barnabas had put a pile of books in front of him and told him, "Read." And he had, everything he could get his hands on. He'd learned how to fish, how to build a sturdy barn, the mathematics of the constellations, the philosophy of Thomas Paine, a history of the English church, and so much more. He'd learned how to talk like an educated man, how to carry himself properly in society, and his value as a man and an individual. He'd learned why he should even care to keep England safe. And he knew that the same method was the way to teach Essie all she needed to know. She was older than he'd been when Sir Barnabas had taken him under his wing, but not too old to learn new tricks.

"I'm reading Marmion," she said. "It's a romantic poem by Sir Walter Scott." She bit that tempting lower lip nervously. "Mr. Matthews told me about it. 'What a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive!'" she quoted triumphantly.

"I've never heard of that one," Hastings said, trying not to look skeptical. "Poetry really isn't my favorite."

"Oh." She looked a little crestfallen. "I quite like it. What I've read so far, I mean." She paused again, and she looked like she was thinking. "I may have seen the book you're looking for," she finally said. She headed toward the bookcase again and began slowly running one index finger across the spines on one of the shelves. "Are you sure Essie can read?" she asked almost absentmindedly.

Hastings froze. "I hadn't even considered that."

Madelyn looked over at him curiously. "Well, I'm sure she must be able to, if only a little bit. We all pick it up here and there, don't we? And the more she reads the better



she'll get. Here it is!" She pulled a slim volume off the shelf. "It was written by a woman?" she asked, surprise in her voice.

"So Miss Marlestone tells us," Hastings said, reaching for the book. "She recommended it. I've never read it."

Madelyn handed the book over and their fingers touched. They both jerked back as if they'd been burned, and the book fell to the floor with a loud bang.

"Good heavens," Stephen said as he walked in. "Have you started throwing my books around now?"

Essie was standing behind him, her arms crossed and a smug look on her face. It was clear she'd tattled on their argument. Miss Marlestone was peeking around the parlor door. Kurt Schillig was with them. Hastings felt like a bug pinned to a board as they all stared at him and Madelyn.

"I can certainly throw better than that," Madelyn said. "I was just trying to hand Hastings the book he was looking for and it slipped out of my hand."

"And I fumbled it," Hastings said with a smile of apology. "I wasn't fast enough to catch it." He bent over and picked it up, then inspected it carefully. "No damage done."

"That's good," Stephen said slowly. "I knew I still had my copy somewhere in here." He walked over and took it from Hastings, flipping through the pages. "It was quite good. I think you'll like it. All of you." He turned and smiled at Miss Marlestone. "Although, Esme, I know you've read it already."

"She recommended it," Hastings said, taking the book back. He deliberately slid one hand under Stephen's as he did so, cupping his hand as he used the other to lift the

book away. Stephen just looked at him, a question on his face at the intimate gesture. The contact made him vividly recall the dream he'd had the last few nights, of laying in Stephen's bed, their naked bodies pressed together as they kissed ravenously. He awoke every time with the ghost of Stephen's hand on his arse, so real he could almost feel it. He dropped Stephen's hand and opened the book, flipping through it as Stephen had to curb the arousal caused by the memory of the dream.

"Did she?" Stephen said. "Then I second that." He looked around. "Madelyn, are you going to read with them? I think you should. You'll like it, too."

"Do you have more books by female authors?" Madelyn asked.

"Of course," Stephen told her. "I have Miss Austen's work, and *The Mysteries of Udolpho* by Mrs. Radcliffe, of course, and Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, but that might be too dry. Hmm." He went over and looked over the bookshelves. "Evelina by Frances Burney, and Clara Reeve," he said. He had pulled the books out from the shelves just a bit, so they stood out and were easy to find. "Not many, I'm afraid, although I do have all of Miss Austen's." He smiled ruefully. "I'm sure the duke has many more than I do."

"I had no idea so many women wrote novels," Madelyn exclaimed. "How wonderful!"

"I've read them all," Miss Marlestone said. "I can recommend the better ones."

"Oh, yes, do," Madelyn said eagerly, and Hastings couldn't help but smile.

"Esme always has her nose in a book," Schillig said proudly. "She is very well-read."

Hastings caught Stephen looking at him, but he couldn't decipher what he was feeling. Glad Madelyn and he weren't fighting anymore, most likely.

“I have to go and finish my correspondence,” Stephen said, turning way away abruptly. “But I shall join you later for supper.” He stopped by Miss Marlestone. “Esme, my dear, Kurt, you’re welcome to join us if you’d like.”

Schillig shook his head. “We are expected at home for dinner.” He smiled at them all. “I am to invite you to dinner this coming Wednesday, Mrs. Higgs, Miss Waters. My darling Leah instructed me to extend the invitation. As a matter of fact, we hope you will all come.”

Miss Marlestone clapped her hands. “Splendid!” she said. She turned to Essie. “I didn’t even have to ask. Oh, say you’ll come. Please?”

“I...” Essie looked like a rabbit about to run from the hounds.

“She’ll be there,” Hastings said. “We’ll make sure of it.” Essie glared at him, but he was undaunted. Miss Marlestone wasn’t a threat, and Madelyn would enjoy getting out of the house and playing lady somewhere else. But he didn’t want to take her out without Essie there with them for added protection, just in case.

“Wonderful news,” Schillig said. “Come along, Esme. Let us leave them to their reading. Mama will be cross if she is forced to hold dinner for us.”

“Oh, dear,” Stephen said. “Run along then. As a matter of fact, let me write a note for Leah accepting the invitation. Come along.” He ushered them out ahead of him, not looking back.

“Let’s begin your book, Essie,” Madelyn said, the same eagerness in her voice he’d heard a moment ago. “I still can’t believe a woman wrote it!” She plucked the book out of Hastings’s hands and then dragged Essie over to the sofa and sat down next her, handing her the book. “You start. When you get tired, Hastings or I will take over.”

Hastings briefly thought about taking Bronny for a ride, but wandered over and sat in the chair next to Essie instead. He leaned back and closed his eyes, crossing his ankles and clasping his hands across his stomach as he prepared to listen to a good book.

### CHAPTER 20

Stephen stood and stared out the window of his small office. There was barely room for him to stand with his desk and chair and a little three-shelf bookcase filling the space. His desk was piled high with papers and books. Hastings often teased him about it, how untidy it was, so out of character. If only he knew. Most of the time, Stephen felt untidy.

His feelings were certainly out of order, and always had been. He tried so hard to be what people needed. His father said he'd always tried too hard in that respect. And in so doing, he'd never discovered what he needed. Well, he was partly right. Stephen knew what he needed. It was the getting of it that he always failed at.

He loved his life. He loved the village and the parsonage and his garden. He needed those things. Wanted them. But they didn't fill all the emptiness inside him. How he wished he could fill that space with his faith. Faith was as integral to his being as breathing, but it wasn't enough. Quite simply, he wanted to be loved.

He was most definitely beloved by most people in Ashton on the Green. Several families in the village considered him one of their own. But he wasn't. He wanted his own family. The problem was he hadn't met anyone here that he wanted that with. Local girls had made forays over to see if he might be receptive, but they did nothing for him except bring out his protective feelings, like a shepherd with his flock. And the duchess was always throwing one unlikely lady in his path after another, but those encounters were more awkward than not, and those ladies were not interested in a gardening parson from a small village.

He'd accepted he was destined to be alone among his flock. Then Simon had given him Hastings, and from the minute they'd met it was not the caring love of a shepherd he'd felt for this particular lost lamb. More like lost wolf, actually. He chuckled drily to himself.

He turned to face his desk, arms crossed, lower lip pinched between his fingers. He'd kissed Hastings in the maze the other day. It wasn't the first time he'd crossed that line with Hastings, of course, but Hastings was clear-headed in the maze. Stephen had never really wanted to cross that line before, despite the large group of friends and acquaintances he knew who did on a regular basis, and with his blessing. But Stephen did not take physical intimacy lightly. He was, after all, a man of God, and he truly believed that when you gave your body to another it should be an act of profound love and commitment. He had done so once without those feelings and had found it a wholly unsatisfying and depressing encounter. But it had been different with Hastings.

Ever since the other night he'd been grappling with his feelings. When he had kissed Hastings in the maze without thinking about the consequences or what it would mean to either of them, had that been an indication of his true feelings? The night they'd been intimate, well, that could be explained away through Hastings's drunken state and Stephen still being half asleep. Or were both encounters just the sexual desires of a healthy man in his prime, left long unsated? And if he had those kinds of rare, deep feelings for Hastings, then why was he also attracted to Madelyn? For a love-starved parson, it seemed it never rained but it poured.

He honestly wasn't too surprised that these two appealed to him so strongly. After all, the three of them had a great deal in common, though both Hastings and Madelyn would laugh at the very idea they had something in common with Stephen. Quite annoyingly, they both thought him a saint. But the three of them were aching, blindingly alone. Abandoned by his mother, Hastings pushed everyone away when given the opportunity, finding solace in the ultimate isolation of killing. And

Madelyn, well, she'd been abandoned, too, though in a different way, and then outright rejected by everyone on either side of the equation. She'd yet to open up completely to Stephen, but he knew her life had not been an easy one from what she had told them. Stephen, on the other hand, had had an idyllic childhood, marred only by the death of a sister when she was still a baby. His parents had doted on him, and he'd followed in his father's footsteps into the church. But they had both died when he was still a young man, and it wasn't until they were gone that he'd realized how much they had filled his life, so the dearth of any other family was never felt. With no one and nothing, he'd gone to war.

The war had changed Stephen in fundamental ways. He'd found a new family, he'd found purpose, he had taken life, and he had saved it. But it was the quiet, devastating moments he'd spent with the dead and dying that had left him scarred, not bullets or sabers. The horrific injuries, the pain, the anguish, the fear. The final confessions. Stephen had never understood until the war the weight of the burden of confession that ministers must bear.

Like so many veterans, Stephen had retreated to the country. When Freddy had offered him the living—a gift from Freddy's older brother, Bertie, taking care of all of them from the grave—Stephen had jumped at it. And here, in Ashton on the Green, Stephen had found his place, and his people. And he found his solace in gardening. There was something so holy in bringing forth life, year after year, in tending his flowers and his vegetables, even his trees and shrubs, the same way he did his congregation. He was giving back, giving everything he could to create beauty and abundance in a world in which he'd seen the ugliest a man could bear witness to, a world lacking in the sustenance of the soul.

And so here he'd been just waiting, it seemed, for Hastings's arrival. And he had opened his home and his life, the beauty and abundance here, to a man who was starving for it. And in the process, it seemed, Stephen had also opened his heart in an unexpected way. He understood Hastings more than Hastings understood himself.

Stephen had been as empty as Hastings once, as hollow, and now he wanted to give Hastings everything, fill him up with joy and happiness. And he was beginning to feel the same attraction to Madelyn. He could see how hard she was trying to be good, to turn the page on her old life. When she didn't know he was looking at her he saw that familiar hunger in her eyes. How she wanted. How she needed. Her hunger cried out to him.

Not just to him, it seemed. He'd seen the new tenderness in Hastings's face when he looked at Madelyn. Stephen had had to retreat, to regroup and assess his feelings. How did he feel about the possibility of Hastings and Madelyn finding the love Stephen longed for in each other's arms? Was he prepared to be the outsider again? The counselor, the friend, and not the lover? Of course, the other side of that equation was the question of whether he was prepared to be the lover. A not insignificant question. And if so, with whom?

Lord, help me find the answers I seek , he prayed silently, not truly expecting an answer. He knew very well that God expected men to find their own answers. He had weightier things to worry about than whether Stephen took a lover. Stephen was sure the Church of England cared more about whether he took a lover than God did.

"You don't seem to be doing much writing."

He looked up in surprise to see Madelyn at the door. "My dear," he said with an automatic smile. She smiled back, looking so guileless and happy. He hadn't seen her look so relaxed before. Without the wary look on her face, she was even more beautiful. "Don't tell me you're bored with Prometheus ?" he asked with disbelief. "I thought it a very engrossing tale."

"Oh, no," she assured him. "I'm quite enjoying it. The doctor is so arrogant, is he not? No, we just thought you might like to join us for a little while." She reached out her hand to him. "Come. We are all tired of reading but don't want to put the story



down.”

He laughed. “I see. I’m being recruited for your pleasure rather than my own, is that it?” He reached out and took her hand, because why shouldn’t he? That was the pleasure he sought, after all.

She laughed and looked coquettishly over her shoulder at him as she led him out of his office. “Why, of course,” she said. “You must just trust me that in my pleasure you shall find some of your own.” She seemed to realize how that sounded and blushed as she quickly looked forward. “I mean, I know you shall enjoy reading as much as we will enjoy you doing so.”

He wanted to kiss her so much right then it was a physical ache.

“I will, of course, enjoy anything that pleases you,” he agreed instead, following in her wake.

“That Frankenstein is a right bastard,” Essie commented from the chair in front of the window.

Stephen was sitting on the sofa reading and Hastings had thrown himself down next to him, feet up on the arm, head in Stephen’s lap, when he’d gotten tired. No one had said a thing. Hastings knew from his days at the orphanage, if you wanted to stake a claim on something, you just had to act like it was yours. Everyone in this room understood that—other than Stephen, that is.

Madelyn had come over and sat down on the floor on Stephen’s other side. At first, she’d leaned against the arm of the sofa, but as the poor bugger monster had started murdering people she’d slid closer and now leaned against Stephen’s leg. Hastings found he didn’t mind sharing him. Like she said earlier, it was temporary, for both of them, really. The likes of the two of them ought to be happy they had any time with

someone like Stephen.

“It is the monster who is killing the doctor’s family,” Stephen said, but it didn’t sound judgmental.

“With reason,” Essie said, leaning forward in her chair, a frown on her face. “I’d have just killed him, of course, and not innocent people if I could help it, but him being a monster and all, he don’t know any better, does he?”

“I think they are both monstrous,” Madelyn said, resting her head on Stephen’s thigh. “But the fault lies in the doctor for both their actions.”

“Exactly,” Essie said.

“I’m hungry,” Hastings said. He leaned his head back and moved the book out of his way so he could see Stephen’s face. “Where’s Mrs. Tulane?”

“Mrs. Tulane has the evening off,” Stephen informed him. “Her sister was feeling ill, and she went to help feed her brood.”

“What?” Hastings sat up. “What are we supposed to eat?”

“Have you gone so soft you can’t feed yourself?” Essie asked with a snort. “God save us if I ever get so helpless.”

“So you’re going to make dinner?” Hastings asked. “Can you even cook?”

“I can buy food,” Essie retorted.

“I can cook rat over an open flame, but I’m pretty helpless in the kitchen,” Madelyn said.

Hastings had to take a moment or two to process that. “Rat?” he finally settled on.

“It’s stringy,” she said with a face.

“Someday you will tell us more about your life,” Stephen said when Madelyn didn’t say anything else.

“Maybe,” was all she said as she came to her knees. “I’m sure there’s some cold meat and cheese and some bread we can toast.”

“You all do realize we are talking about Mrs. Tulane, correct?” Stephen asked with amusement. “I was told there’s a nice meat pie that should still be warm in the oven, and she’s left some sugar biscuits on the sideboard.”

“Dear sweet Mrs. Tulane!” Madelyn said with a laugh as she started to get up.

“Hear, hear,” Hastings agreed, reaching out a hand to help her. The shock of her warm hand in his made him tighten his grip and Madelyn responded in kind before they both hastily let go. He looked at Stephen who was smiling at them.

“We can all go into the kitchen and get it, then, shall we?” Stephen said. He put the book down on the sofa. “That’s enough murderous monsters for one day.”

Hastings set the table with Essie’s help, using the opportunity to show her where things were kept and to teach her, without letting on that he was doing so, of course, how to lay a place setting. He could hear Stephen and Madelyn in the kitchen laughing as they prepared everyone’s plates.

“Wine?” he yelled into the kitchen.

“Yes, please,” Stephen yelled back, and Hastings went over to choose a bottle.

Stephen had excellent wine, thanks to Freddy's cellars. A box full was sent over every week. Hastings liked that everyone around here seemed to take care of Stephen. He deserved it. And, of course, Hastings benefitted, too.

"What are you about?" Essie asked him quietly as she leaned her back against the sideboard as he opened the wine.

"What do you mean?" he asked, tugging on the reluctant cork of an excellent burgundy.

"First you're kissing the parson and today you're kissing Mads," Essie accused him, her voice still quiet. "I don't like it."

"First of all, you have terrible timing," he corrected her. "And second, where my lips wander is no one's business but my own." Especially when he had no explanation for what he was doing.

"You're like a piece of candy to those two," Essie told him. "Neither of them has had a lot of sweets. You're too tempting to resist."

"Thank you," he said, surprised. She looked at him in disgust.

"It wasn't a compliment." She sighed. "Look, Mads has had it rough, all right? Watch yourself. And the parson? He's as defenseless as a babe with someone like you. Be careful you don't ruin him and what he's got here. That's all I'm saying. Look before you let your lips wander."

"Maybe I've had it rough," Hastings said, not looking at her, pretending the bottle of wine was harder to open than it was. "Maybe I'm defenseless."

"You're like me," Essie said. "Born with murder in your eye, and a knife under your

swaddling. Don't try to convince yourself otherwise."

"Just because we were born that way doesn't mean we have to die that way," Hastings said, yanking the cork out. "Maybe I don't want to be that way." There was a tightness in his chest he didn't care for.

"Course it does," she said. "People ain't going to let us change, Hastings." She put a hand on his shoulder. "They need us just the way we are."

And that was the problem, wasn't it? He didn't want to be that way, but he had to be if he was going to protect Madelyn and everyone else.

"Then perhaps you need to stay away from the innocent Miss Marleston," Hastings said, changing the subject as he grabbed four glasses and moved over to the table.

"I'll reserve judgement on the innocent part," Essie said. "But trust me when I say, I'm trying."

"Here we are," Madelyn said cheerfully as she came into the room carrying two plates full of steaming, aromatic pie. Stephen was right behind her. "Who's hungry?"

"Me," Hastings said. Oh, he was hungry all right, hungry for what he knew he shouldn't want and couldn't have, but, by God, he was going to get as much as he could before they dragged him away.

### CHAPTER 21

“What’s your favorite flower, Mr. Matthews?” Maddy asked. She was sitting on a blanket in the garden while he tended his flowerbeds. He was pulling weeds and trimming off dead flowers. Maddy couldn’t tell the difference between the weeds and the flowers. Some of the weeds were even flowering. What made them weeds instead of flowers, she had no idea. As with most things in society, there was a fine line between the two distinctions that she could not fathom.

“I’ve told you to call me Stephen,” he said, glancing at her over his shoulder with a distracted smile.

“It isn’t proper,” she told him. Mrs. Delancey had beaten that into her head. To call a man by his first name was to invite all sorts of familiarity. Based on what she’d seen here in the little village, which, admittedly, wasn’t much, it was just as wrong here as anywhere else. She couldn’t even imagine Mrs. Tulane’s reaction if she heard Maddy call the parson Stephen.

“Don’t you think I’m a rather good arbiter of what’s proper and what’s not?” Stephen asked. Maddy liked to call him Stephen in her head.

“Ha!” Hastings let loose with an amused shout from where he was balancing on the garden fence, walking it like a circus performer. He had the hardest time just sitting still. She’d never seen anyone so anxious to jump up and do something—anything—all the time.

“Do they pay you to be the sheriff?” she asked him, leaning back on her hands as she

watched him balancing. “Because I haven’t actually seen you doing any sheriffing since I’ve been here.”

“I know,” Hastings said without a single shred of embarrassment. “It’s ridiculous. But if they’ve got to pay someone to do it, might as well be me.”

Maddy picked up a little pebble and threw it at him. He dodged it expertly without losing his balance. She gathered a few more and took better aim.

“He sheriffs,” Stephen said without looking up. “He just likes people to think he doesn’t. I heard you checked in on Grady and Tuck the other day, to make sure they were getting along.”

“Tuck still hasn’t built that wall back up,” Hastings said. “Someone’s got to get him to do it, or Grady will be shooting him in the dark one night as he’s stealing his sheep again.”

“From what I’ve heard, Grady ought to shoot him,” Maddy observed. She pinged Hastings in the side with a rock and grinned as he glowered at her. Besting Hastings was more satisfying than almost anything else she could think of right then.

“No one should be shooting anyone here in Ashton on the Green,” Stephen said, sitting back on his heels and dusting his gloved hands off. He had his ridiculously large, straw hat on and Maddy wanted to crawl across the grass and tackle him for a kiss. He had the most outrageous freckles across his nose and cheeks, just begging to be kissed. “Besides, they’re cousins. Can you imagine how devastating that would be for the family if they started shooting one another?”

“I knew a boy, Riggins, who shot his brother Tate over a girl and fifty quid,” Maddy said. “We just figured it was all within the family, so it wasn’t any of our business.”

“Rightly so,” Hastings agreed. “That sort of business is best left alone. But if I let Tuck get away with not fixing the fence he damaged, then people will think I haven’t got the authority to back up my decisions. And if I let Grady shoot him as a result, I’ll have lost all authority here and people will begin settling their own disputes, and pretty soon it will be chaos and then the duke will have to come down out of his castle and bang some heads together, and no one wants that.”

“Freddy does tend to bang heads together when his peace is disturbed,” Stephen agreed with a chuckle. “And he doesn’t live in a castle.”

“Maybe not to you,” Maddy told him, searching the ground for more rocks. “But to me,” she looked up at Hastings, patiently waiting on the wall for her to find more rocks, “us, it is.”

“You must admit it’s not as grand as St. James,” Stephen said. She saw him slyly watching her out of the corner of his eye.

“I’ve seen St. James,” she admitted, willing to give him that much information. “It’s all right for some, I suppose.”

“What a nightmare, living in a place like that,” Hastings said, dodging another pebble. She had no idea how he didn’t fall off the wall. It was grossly unfair that he was handsome and unduly coordinated.

“I wouldn’t like it either,” Maddy agreed. “You could hear your voice echo in the halls, I wager. And a stranger around every corner wanting to clean up after you. The horror of it.” She shuddered. “Too many people in my business, and too much territory to keep a look out for.”

“Exactly,” Hastings said. “I don’t like strangers in my business either.”



“It must have been very hard, then, to go to Sir Barnabas for help with such personal information,” Stephen observed, not bothering to hide his scrutiny of her now.

“Go to him?” she responded with a snort of amusement. “He laid a trap for me and lured me with promises.” She gestured around the garden. “He promised he’d protect me in a safe environment.” She pointed at Hastings. “With only his best agents to guard me.” She tossed a rock in the air, absentmindedly catching it over and over. “He promised I’d never have to go back.” She caught the rock one last time and looked over at Stephen. “I’m not sure how he’s going to keep the last one.”

“He will,” Hastings told her. “Sir Barnabas doesn’t make promises he can’t keep.” He sat down on the brick wall, his legs dangling over the edge and almost touching the ground. He was so bloody tall. She couldn’t even imagine being that tall. You could see anything coming your way and no one would try to bully you into doing something you didn’t want to do.

“Everyone makes promises they can’t keep if it furthers their own agenda,” she told him, hating how jaded she sounded. She didn’t want that to mar the perfection of her time here. “Anyway,” she covered her lapse, “you didn’t answer my question. Stephen.” She looked pointedly at him as she said his Christian name for the first time out loud. He laughed as she’d hoped he would, distracted from trying to pry information about her past out of her.

“What was the question?” Stephen asked, a frown wrinkling his noble brow. His eyebrows were only slightly darker than the strawberry-blond hair on his head. He peeled his gloves off and set them down beside him.

“What’s your favorite flower?”

“What’s yours?” he asked instead of answering as he gazed around his garden. Not all the flowers were in bloom anymore. The weather was still warm, but it was

heading into fall. This was Maddy's favorite time of year, always had been, and she knew it always would be now, because she'd been here, with them, during it.

"I like wildflowers," she said impulsively. She'd never really thought about it before now. "They'll just grow anywhere, won't they? I've seen them coming through the cracks in the dingiest alleyways, just struggling to survive and putting out blooms no matter what got thrown at them. They look so delicate, and yet they always survive, don't they?" She gestured at the pile of Stephen's pulled weeds. "I'd have left most of those alone. I figure if a plant blooms, it's a flower and it's earned the right to exist."

"Well, I am put in my place," Stephen said, nodding as he looked at the pile of weeds. "I shall never pull another flowering weed without a measure of guilt." He took his hat off and set it on the ground by his gloves, and then ran his hands through his damp hair. He looked sweaty and delicious, his movements unconsciously seductive, and Maddy was enthralled.

She laughed. "I imagine that will be the first thing you'll ever do to cause you a moment's guilt," she told him.

"If you believe that, then you don't know me at all," he said, his expression grave.

"There's nothing you can tell me that will shock me or make me think you less than a saint," she assured him.

"I am not a saint," he insisted firmly. "Nor do I want to be. I'm just a man, and I like it that way."

I like it just fine, too, Maddy thought. When their gazes clashed, she was shocked at the heat in his. He hadn't looked at her like that before, with such obvious attraction. Her heart began to pound with surprise and elation.

“I like trees,” Hastings said. “Does that count as a flower? Some of them have flowers.”

Maddy watched Stephen switch his attention to Hastings, his gaze not losing any of its heat. It was almost as if he wanted her to see it, to see the desires that made him a man, and very much not a saint.

“They are indeed plants,” Stephen said, “so I will concede the appropriateness of your choice. What do you like about them?”

“They’re always there,” Hastings said simply. “They don’t really die, even when the leaves fall off, do they? You can come back in a year, and unless some damn fool has cut them down, you’ll find the same tree in the same place, looking the same. You can watch them bloom, die, and come back again in the spring. It’s like they’re eternal. Everything else changes, but the trees remain.”

“You’re right,” Maddy agreed, staring at the apple trees across the lane, and a couple of giant oaks in front of the parsonage. “I’ve never really thought much about trees. There weren’t very many where I grew up. They are very reliable and trustworthy.”

“Exactly,” Hastings said. He looked at Stephen. “Your turn.”

Stephen smiled and looked at them both. “I like any flower, or plant, that needs tending.” He turned and cupped a bright pink blossom in his hand. “I enjoy the act of nurturing them, helping them to grow and thrive, showing the world their beauty, or even their usefulness. I have no favorites. I love them all.”

“Spoken like a true minister,” Maddy said wistfully. “I don’t understand how someone like you exists in the same world that I live in.” She looked away and was ensnared in Hastings’s knowing and sympathetic gaze. She couldn’t even begin to imagine what it was like growing up some place where they just expected you to

follow your natural inclination to be good and kind. She might as well imagine living on the moon.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” Stephen said, surprising her with his impatience. “I wish you would stop doing that.” He crawled over to the blanket and kneeled next to her.

“Stop doing what?” she asked, bewildered by his tone. He never spoke like that.

“Stop putting me on a damn pedestal,” he told her. “Madelyn, I went to war. I killed. I saw death and destruction, and I reeled from the horror of it. I drank, I was with...women, and I cursed God. The only heroic thing I did was come back and dedicate my life to trying to help people. It was the only thing I knew to do after what I’d been through. But I dragged myself through the mud before I got here. I’m no better than any other man.”

“I...” She didn’t know what to say to that. Stephen shouldn’t have to endure that much pain and heartbreak. Someone like him should never see death like that, or ever have to kill. That wasn’t for the likes of him. “I’m sorry,” she finally whispered, reaching out and placing her hand on his upper arm.

“Don’t be sorry,” he said, grabbing her by the shoulders. “Treat me like a man, not some blasted saint you’ve built up in your head.” Then to her shock, he pulled her to him and kissed her.

### CHAPTER 22

Stephen couldn't believe he'd given in to the desire to kiss Madelyn that had been simmering below the surface for the last few weeks since her arrival. He'd been thinking about what he should do about her and Hastings for days, and then, just now, he'd stopped thinking and just let instinct take over. He wanted to kiss her, so he kissed her.

And it was glorious.

She was lean and yet so soft in his arms, yielding to him as she let him bend her slightly backward, her balance dependent on him. Her hands were clutched at his waist in the rough-spun jacket he wore for gardening, and after a moment she slid them around his body. Her surrender made him gentle the kiss, and he slanted his mouth across hers with a mere brush of his lips.

Her arms crept higher, tucked under his, her hands now on his back as she tentatively touched her tongue to his lower lip. He felt it like a brand, full of heat and shock. He wasn't very good at this kissing business, having only the two experiences with Hastings. He hadn't kissed the woman he'd been with during the war. It had seemed too intimate, and she did not want it. He followed Madelyn's lead, tasting her lips with a gentle glide of the tip of his tongue against the soft, damp, heat of her mouth. She opened her mouth then with an almost imperceptible, breathy moan, and Stephen slid his tongue inside, the act feeling far more decadent and invasive than it was, making him think of rougher, deeper, sinful intimacies. Intimacies that he very much wanted to enjoy with her.

She touched her tongue to his tentatively, and he kept the kiss soft and gentle. Even so, his breathing quickened, and he nipped her lip lightly in an effort to control his desire. She pulled her arms from around him and he ended the kiss, but she placed her hands on his cheeks and pulled him back down to her mouth, never opening her eyes. As their tongues met again, surer of themselves this time, forceful with desire, she plunged her hands into his damp hair and cupped his head, holding him in place as if she feared he might try to get away.

Stephen didn't want to get away. He wanted to lay her down and feel her soft and warm and willing beneath him. He wanted to slide his cock inside her and finally, at last, feel what everyone else felt in that moment—desire, passion, connection, love. He ran his hands down her back and cupped her backside, pulling her against him, wanting her to feel how much he wanted her, the physical evidence of what kind of man he was, and what she did to him. She moaned deeply, roughly into his mouth and tried to get even closer, climbing onto his lap, straddling his legs, riding him. She wrapped both arms around his neck and held him so tightly he could barely breathe. He loved every moment of it.

She rubbed against him like a cat begging for attention and he pulled one hand from her derriere and cupped her breast. It fit perfectly in his palm, and he could feel her nipple through her clothes, hard and demanding. She reached down and pressed his hand tighter around her breast, until they were squeezing it. She broke the kiss with a gasp.

“God, yes,” she moaned. “You feel so good.”

She took his hand and awkwardly shoved it down the front of her dress, and he knew what she wanted, the same thing he did. Flesh to flesh, palm to breast, Stephen to Madelyn. He crammed his hand under her shift and cupped her breast roughly, just as she'd taught him moments ago, and this time they both moaned. She was soft, her skin smooth, her nipple like a hard pebble hot against his palm, and he suddenly,

desperately, wanted to feel it against his tongue. But she was there at his mouth, taking him in a desperate, rough, wet kiss and Stephen fell into the sensations of her.

“Anyone coming down the lane can see you.”

It took a moment for Essie’s voice to penetrate the haze in his head. He yanked his mouth off Madelyn’s, but the sight of her full, red lips looking so thoroughly kissed, and the slightly dizzy look on her face as if she was drunk on their passion, almost made him ignore the warning. He wanted nothing more than to lay her down on the blanket and cover her with his body.

Madelyn was panting in his arms. Stephen had never had a woman panting in his arms before. It was exhilarating and he could finally understand the addictive nature of it that he’d heard other men speak of. His own blood was singing in response. Madelyn glanced around and noticed Essie, which made her frown.

“Where’s Hastings?” she asked, her voice weak and breathy, and Stephen nearly moaned at the sound. Which wouldn’t do at all, of course, Essie still standing there. But hearing her say Hastings’s name in a voice breathless with their shared passion almost undid him.

“How should I know?” Essie asked, resting her arms on the garden wall as she watched them.

“He was here,” Madelyn said.

“Course he was,” Essie said drily. “It’s the only way to kiss in the country.” She looked pointedly at Stephen. “I think you can take your hand out of her dress, parson. Her titty isn’t going to fall off.”

Stephen cleared his throat self-consciously and pulled his hand out, hating the cold,

emptiness of his palm as he did so. He lowered Madelyn to the blanket. He thanked the heavens for his loose breeches, which would hopefully disguise his arousal from Essie, although considering the way she'd found them it was no secret.

At the thought of what Hastings must have seen, guilt ravaged Stephen. What was he doing, kissing Madelyn right in front of him? Deep inside Stephen recognized that he'd kissed Madelyn in front of Hastings for a reason. He wasn't sure what that reason was yet. He just knew he'd wanted Hastings there, and he'd wanted him to see it. He hadn't thought much further than that.

"That was wonderful," Madelyn said. "I've never been kissed like that." She looked up at him with wonder and delight on her face and he couldn't help but smile at her, despite his new worries over Hastings and how this kiss had complicated matters.

"I have never kissed a woman like that," he admitted. "It was spectacular."

"Oh, Lord," Essie mumbled. "Here we go."

Stephen looked at her reproachfully. "If you haven't anything constructive to say, then perhaps you might give us a moment of privacy."

"I'll be right over there," Essie said, pointing to spot not too far away. "I can't leave you two alone or you'll be entertaining the whole parish here next to the road."

"I think I can control myself," Stephen assured her, his tone almost as dry as hers.

"I'm not," Madelyn said, still looking at him as if he'd hung the moon and stars.

"That's what I'm afraid of," Essie said. She stomped off and stood in her designated spot, glaring at him.



“Madelyn,” he said, not sure what he was going to say. He was trying to keep up the momentum of not thinking too hard about this, but it simply wasn’t in his nature. There was an urgency in him to find Hastings, but at the same time he didn’t want to leave Madelyn’s side. This was the dilemma that had been keeping him awake at night lately.

“I want you to kiss me again,” she told him, having no problem articulating her desires. “Touch me like that again. Not here, of course. Essie is right. We can’t have your reputation ruined. Later. Tonight. Meet me in the parlor after midnight.”

“What?” he asked, not sure he’d heard correctly. Was she trying to plan an assignation with him? His arousal, which had begun to fade, flared to life again. Clearly his body liked the idea. He had no shame and certainly no conscience.

“Midnight in the parlor,” she whispered, looking over her shoulder at Essie. She held out her hand. “Now help me up.”

He did as she asked, pushing to his feet and then reaching down to pull her up. She kissed his cheek and with a smile turned and walked in Essie’s direction.

He had a midnight rendezvous. Staid, boring Stephen Matthews was going to make love to a woman at midnight in the parlor. He grinned as he watched her walk away. He ought to ignore his head and lead with his heart more often, it seemed. Neither his head nor his heart, however, knew what to do about having feelings for both Madelyn and Hastings. Had he not just had an illicit sexual encounter with Hastings just days ago? And yet, he wanted Madelyn as much as he wanted Hastings.

After he put his gardening tools away, he followed Madelyn inside, not sure how to behave with a woman you’d just kissed senseless and touched intimately. He needn’t have worried, because she had retreated to her room with Essie. He couldn’t find Hastings, either, which was worrisome, but he did find Mrs. Tulane. Which wasn’t

hard what with all the banging of pots and pans in the kitchen. He followed the racket and stood in the doorway, prepared to listen to whatever was bothering her. She ignored him. That was never a good sign.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Tulane,” he ventured.

“Humph,” she grunted, still not looking at him.

“Is there ought amiss?” he asked, knowing from experience that she had to say her piece or she’d be impossible.

She slammed a heavy pan down on the stove and glared at him. “Kissing that strumpet in the garden for anyone to see,” she hissed. “What will people think? And Mr. Hastings right there?”

“You will kindly refrain from referring to Miss Hyde as ‘that strumpet’,” he said firmly. “And I suppose people will think that I’m kissing her in the garden. Where is Hastings?” He had a sinking feeling in his gut given Mrs. Tulane’s reaction.

“Well, he ran off, didn’t he?” she cried in distress, dabbing the corners of her eyes with her apron. “The poor boy’s heart! You’ve broken it, you have.”

“He hasn’t gone back to London, has he?” he asked, his chest heavy with dread.

“No,” Mrs. Tulane said. “He’s off riding that hunter of his.” Stephen immediately felt lightheaded with relief.

“Do you think he has feelings for Miss Hyde?” Stephen asked. He’d suspected as much, but Hastings hadn’t told Stephen that he was going to pursue her. Had he misread the situation?

“For her? Oh, what a fool you are,” she snapped. “Can’t you see the nose on your face?”

“Mrs. Tulane, are you advocating for Hastings’s...feelings for me ?” he asked incredulously.

“Here he was thinking he’d found himself a place, and then she waltzes in and steals it, pretty as you please.”

“No one has stolen anything,” Stephen argued. “Everyone has a place here who wants one.”

Mrs. Tulane threw her hands up in the air. “And it’s that way, now? And you the parson!”

“What does that mean?” Stephen was completely lost in this argument. He wasn’t even sure they were having an argument. He couldn’t follow Mrs. Tulane’s logic when he was worried about Hastings, and Madelyn, and about what he’d just done. His feelings were as tangled as this conversation.

“I can’t look away from the shambles you’re making of it all,” she lamented, crushing her apron in her fists.

“Shambles of what?” he begged, more confused than ever.

“Well, if you don’t know, I’ll not be the one telling you,” she told him, turning back around to bang the pot on the stove again.

“But you are telling me,” he said, quite logically, he thought. He pinched his nose. He could feel a headache coming on.

“No, I’m not,” she said, shaking her head. “Now get out of my kitchen. I’ve got to feed everyone and I’ve only an hour or so to get it done.”

“How is your sister?” he asked, retreating to solid ground.

“And isn’t she wearing herself down with all those children of hers?” She tutted in disapproval. “And that husband of hers as useless as they come.”

“Mr. Pickering seems rather industrious,” Stephen said, surprised to hear the good farmer maligned so. “His farm is quite prosperous, and I’ve heard nothing about any bad habits that might affect his marriage.”

She turned and pointed at him. “And that’s like a man, thinking if he’s working the farm he’s doing his share. Five children she’s got to look after, and the house and garden too! And not a soul there to help her.” She shook her head sadly. “She’ll be in an early grave if she doesn’t get some help.”

“Would you like more time to go and help her?” Stephen offered.

“Me?” she said, rearing back as she looked at him wide-eyed. “And who would take care of you and the parsonage? Her?” She pointed to the ceiling. “Don’t be counting on that. I don’t think she knows the first thing about taking care of a house or a man, or anyone other than herself.” She sniffed.

Stephen did not want to return to their conversation about Madelyn. “Perhaps I should talk to Mr. Pickering about getting a girl in to help your sister.”

“Well, that would be most generous of you, Mr. Matthews,” she said politely, and Stephen knew he’d hit on the right solution. “I’m sure Doris would be very grateful if you gave him the idea.”

“I’ll go and see him before the end of the week,” he promised.

“Dinner will be ready in an hour,” she said with a smile, shuffling the pots around, the banging at an end.

Stephen retreated to his study. He still had to finish his sermon for next Sunday, and Mrs. Tulane, in her oblique and cantankerous way, had given him even more to think about.

### CHAPTER 23

Hastings sauntered into the dining room whistling. He'd been in a fine mood all afternoon, ever since Stephen had kissed Madelyn. He'd nearly fallen off the wall when Stephen grabbed her and kissed her. He thought he might have to intervene because Madelyn hadn't struck him as the kind of woman who appreciated being grabbed and kissed, but he needn't have worried. She grabbed back on to Stephen and gave as good as she got.

Hastings had quietly left them to it. He'd been surprisingly unbothered at the development. Stephen wanted to be kissed? Well, Hastings could do that, too. After that moment in the maze, Hastings knew Stephen was more than willing to kiss him. He'd imagined kissing Stephen a thousand different ways, so they still had nine hundred and ninety-nine to go. And it wasn't as if he hadn't known Stephen was attracted to her. Who wouldn't be? She was damned beautiful, and intelligent, and sharp-witted. As he liked to remind them, Stephen was only a man, not a saint.

Hastings was not discouraged by their kiss. He thought he'd be jealous of the two of them. Had been just a day or two ago. But he didn't mind the two of them kissing now. It was what Madelyn wanted, what she'd been worried Hastings was going to ruin for her. And Hastings understood. He knew exactly what she was feeling. This place, Stephen, it got to you. When you came from nothing, had nothing, had no one, and suddenly you were plunked down right in the middle of heaven, well, you wanted your piece of it, didn't you? He couldn't deny her that. She deserved it as much as he did. They were the same, he and Madelyn. They both were searching for something, and they'd found it here. But they also knew that what they'd found here, in Stephen, could only be theirs for a short time.

Oddly, by kissing Madelyn in front of Hastings, by not excluding him or doing it in secret, Stephen had made him a part of what was happening between them. And if Stephen wanted her, well then Hastings wanted her for him. It wasn't just what Madelyn deserved, but Stephen, too. It added one more layer to this strange reality he found himself in. And, if he was completely honest with himself, he wasn't averse to sharing the space in Stephen's bed, as well as his affections.

Seeing the two of them kissing had aroused Hastings. He wasn't surprised. He was drawn to them both, so it only made sense. All around them people were having such love affairs. Why not them? But it was too soon to tell if Stephen and Madelyn wanted the same thing. That question had been going round and round through his head as he'd raced Bronny across the harvested fields and sheep meadows. He'd learned to jump the low, stone walls, and it never failed to thrill him, making his heart pound with excitement.

"What are you so happy about?" Essie asked sourly.

"What are you so sour about?" he asked.

"These two were kissing in the garden," Essie said, waving a finger between Madelyn and Stephen. "And I caught them."

"You really, truly have the most horrible timing of any person I've ever met," Hastings told her, shaking his head as he sank into his seat. Madelyn and Stephen were both blushing and refused to meet his eyes. "Did you tattle on all the other children when you were younger? Is that why you have no friends?"

"Ha!" Essie said triumphantly, sitting back in her chair and crossing her arms. "You knew. She said you were there, but I thought you'd left before the kissing began."

"Once again, my whereabouts in regard to any kissing are none of your business."

“Yes, exactly,” Madelyn said, crossing her arms, mirroring Essie across the table from her. “In regard to me and kissing, you also have no business in it.”

Hastings shook his head as he frowned at her. Sometimes the way she phrased things was damned odd. Must have something to do with those lady lessons she took. Hastings was beginning to think old Bleecker had been swindled by some old lady who knew as much about being a lady as he did about being a gentleman. But she did look irresistibly militant as she glared at Essie.

Mrs. Tulane marched in and set the serving plate on the table with a loud thump. “And I think that’s enough talk of kissing at the dining room table, wouldn’t you agree, Mr. Matthews?”

Stephen was pinching the bridge of his nose as he was wont to do when he had a headache. “Indeed, Mrs. Tulane, perhaps just for a few minutes we could concentrate on the lovely meal you’ve made.”

“Humph,” she said, stalking out.

“It is a lovely meal,” Hastings called after her. “I could have eaten at the pub, but I wouldn’t do a thing like that and miss your cooking.”

Mrs. Tulane bustled back in bearing a plate of bread, all smiles. “Aren’t you sweet?” she said to Hastings, setting the bread down next to him. “As if they could feed you properly at the pub.” She tsked and patted his shoulder.

“Yes, thank you for a lovely supper, Mrs. Tulane,” Madelyn said politely. She sounded like someone’s great aunt again, and Mrs. Tulane sniffed and stalked back to the kitchen.

Madelyn shook her head. “I just don’t understand why she doesn’t like me,” she said.



“If she weren’t feeding us all from the same plate, I’d worry about poison.”

There was a gasp of outrage from the kitchen and Madelyn had the sense to look alarmed.

“It’s a territorial thing,” Essie said, taking a large helping of meat and potatoes from the platter. “She’s a woman who has been in charge here for many years, and she fears the arrival of another woman and the loss of her power here.”

“Then why doesn’t she fear you?” Madelyn asked. Essie cocked an eyebrow at her.

“Do I look like someone who will take another woman’s power away?” she asked.

“She’ll come around,” Hastings said, taking some warm bread from the plate beside him. He passed it to Stephen, but not before taking another long sniff of the delicious smell of fresh baked bread. He’d never known the joy of that.

He watched as Madelyn very carefully took a helping of dinner. He could see her calculating exactly how much she could take and still leave enough so as to avoid any unpleasantness. It was how she’d eaten since her arrival. He knew she wanted to take it all and hoard what she didn’t eat. She’d been hungry—many times. He recognized the look of it. She was too skinny, anyway. The brown and cream dress she wore was very becoming on her, with her pale skin and hair those blue eyes, but it couldn’t disguise how thin she was.

“Take some more,” he told her when she stopped after a pitiful amount.

“I couldn’t,” she said, lowering her hands to her lap. “It’s fine. I’m not that hungry.”

He reached over and took the platter and then doubled the amount of food on her plate. “Whatever you don’t eat, I’ll finish,” he told her, and then filled his own plate.

Stephen was watching them, his elbows on the table, hands folded in front of him, chin resting against them. “Yes,” he said, lowering his hands and fussing with the napkin in his lap. “We have plenty. I’m sure Mrs. Tulane has more in the kitchen.”

“Where were you today?” Hastings asked Essie.

“I was scouting around, a few miles out in every direction,” she said. “There’s too many places to hide around here. I don’t like it.”

Madelyn had been happily eating, but at Essie’s comment she set her fork down. Hastings frowned. “Eat,” he told her, and she picked up her fork again.

“Perhaps in the short term,” Hastings said. “But not for a real ambush, not here. Too many people out and about, nowhere to eat or sleep or take care of business without giving yourself away. Remember, I’ve been here for a while. I’ve learned the lay of the land, and the habits of the people.” He took a bite and savored the salty mutton. “The most they could do is hide themselves for a minute or two to prevent discovery. No, if they’re going to come, they’ll do it boldly or in the dead of night.”

Madelyn put her fork down again. “Boldly, I think. Most of his people believe themselves invincible despite being proven wrong again and again.” She paused. “But that’s Bleecker’s men. I don’t know about the ones that others may send. They may be more...experienced.”

“So am I,” Hastings told her with a smile. “I’ve killed my share of men like that, and I can take care of any more they may send.” He pointed to her plate. “Eat.”

She watched him for a second and he could see the moment she decided to trust him. Her face cleared and she picked up her fork and began to eat again. Hastings didn’t bother to examine the satisfaction he felt at both her trust and her eating. It had nothing to do with any feelings he may or may not have for her. He was here to take

care of her, after all, and that was what he was going to do. It was his job.

He felt Stephen's eyes on him, and he glanced up and caught his gaze. Heat flashed between them. And that , Hastings thought, is my reward .

### CHAPTER 24

Madelyn had gone to bed suspiciously early, with a lingering glance at Stephen, who blushed and wouldn't meet anyone's eyes. Hastings knew immediately they had plans for later. He sat in the parlor as dusk turned to dark contemplating Stephen reading a book and wondering when he ought to make his move, before Stephen and Madelyn had their little secret rendezvous or after. If he did it before, well then, he'd get his first, wouldn't he? And that was a nice thought. But he'd just be warming him up for Madelyn, wouldn't he? And if he waited until after, well, he wouldn't know how long a wait that might be, but Stephen would be hot and bothered and ready for more, if he was like Hastings.

Never having planned the seduction of a man, Hastings was in relatively new territory. Honestly, he'd never had to work at seducing anyone before. His type was fast women who knew what they wanted and if he gave the go-ahead the game was on. He wondered if Madelyn was that type. With other women, Hastings usually just showed up, pounced on them and the rest came naturally. Madelyn didn't seem the pouncing kind, although she hadn't seemed to mind Stephen's abrupt kiss today.

As far as Stephen went, well, an inexperienced country parson was out of Hastings's depth. And Stephen was inexperienced, no matter what he'd said this afternoon about being with a woman. Hastings's guess was it was some camp follower during the war, which was quite a long time ago. Stephen had revealed a little of what he liked in the maze and with Madelyn. Very little up-front work before getting down to business. Don't think, don't ask, just do, which was Hastings's specialty. Most people made love the way they wanted to be made love to. Their first kiss in the maze had the same quality to it. It had just happened without premeditation on either of their

parts. Of course, Hastings was doing some serious premeditation now, but Stephen wasn't. At least not about Hastings.

His biggest worry was that if he pounced on Stephen now then he wouldn't go to Madelyn after. Hastings had vowed, to himself at least, that he wouldn't ruin it for her. So, the best way to make Stephen see that he could have them both was to let him go to Madelyn and then approach him after.

"Would you stop staring at me?" Stephen asked, not looking up from his book. "It's unnerving."

"Why?"

"Why what?" Stephen snapped his book closed and looked at his watch.

"Why is it making you nervous?" Hastings asked, wondering what time he was supposed to meet Madelyn. It was only half past ten. That seemed early.

"Because people staring at me makes me nervous." Stephen sounded exasperated. "It either indicates that something is wrong with me, or something is wrong with them, and neither is pleasant."

"There is absolutely nothing wrong with you." Hastings grinned at Stephen's suspicious look.

"Then what's wrong with you?" he asked.

"I was wondering if I should kiss you now or wait until after your secret rendezvous with Madelyn." There . Hastings had hit on the correct plan. Let Stephen go to Madelyn, but make sure he's thinking about Hastings, too. He was impressed with his own brilliance.

“Whether you should kiss me now ?” Stephen asked, shock in his voice. “You have hardly paid a moment’s attention to me since the maze, and now you want to kiss me?” He stood up and put his book down on the seat and then faced Hastings. “We should talk about what happened earlier today. Is this because I kissed Madelyn? Some sort of jealous retribution? If you don’t want me, I can’t have anyone? Or are you trying to make me forget her because you want her?”

“Me? I don’t want her. Well, not like you do.”

Stephen laughed at his denial. “Yes, you keep telling yourself that, but it is patently obvious to anyone else.”

“How? How is it obvious?”

“The way you look at her, the way you’ve begun trying to take care of her, like at supper tonight.”

“It’s my job to take care of her,” he argued.

“Not like that.” Stephen tipped his head to the side and regarded him as if he were trying to solve a puzzle. “Can’t you tell the difference? Or do you always worry about whether the people you’re guarding are eating enough?”

“It’s my job to protect her.” His argument sounded weak to his own ears.

“Yes, but it’s not your job to make her happy, is it? And that’s what you’ve been trying to do. Reading books with her, making sure she eats enough, letting me kiss her. You don’t even argue with her anymore. Not a single protest to my having an assignation with her later.” Stephen walked over to stand in front of him. “Is this attraction to me simply a reaction, a denial, of your attraction to her?”

“No,” Hastings said firmly. “I wasn’t sleeping naked in your bed every night before she came here because I was preemptively denying her when I didn’t know she existed. And I am not jealous of her.”

“You were drunk.” Stephen sighed and started to turn away. “It’s all right, Hastings. Really it is. If you just give your feelings for her a chance, you will make her happy.”

Hastings grabbed his arm and turned him back around. “ You make her happy,” he told him. “I can see it in her face every time she looks at you. And you at her. If you want her, I want her for you.” He let go of him and took a step back. “It’s better for you. Better than me.” He looked away. “Look, part of my job, protecting her, you probably aren’t going to like me much afterward.” He met Stephen’s gaze. “I’m going to have to kill somebody. There’s only one reason Sir Barnabas sends someone to me and doesn’t tell me not to kill anyone. And that’s because he knows there’s someone who needs killing.”

“You can’t know that.” Stephen grabbed his forearms and shook him. “You can’t know that will happen.”

“Yes, I can.” And Hastings did know. He’d been dancing around it in his head for weeks. “And I have to find out who. I have to interrogate her and dig all her secrets out, and she’s going to hate it. She’s going to hate me. And she might even hate you because you’re going to let me. So, I let her have the last few weeks. I let her have you. She deserves it because I can tell that she’s had a rough go of it, and I understand that. I understand wanting the fantasy of you and this place. But neither of us can have it. Not for long anyway. Don’t you see?”

Stephen cupped Hastings’s face in his hands. “I’m not a fantasy. I’m a man. How many times must I tell you that?”

“The two don’t cancel each other out,” Hastings told him. “I know you’re a man. I’ve

never wanted a man like I want you. And frankly I don't understand it. You are the very antithesis of me. Everything about you is soft and kind and good and I am not, nor have I ever been, any of those things." He shook his head, but Stephen didn't let go. "You make me want impossible things."

Stephen wrapped his arms around Hastings then, and pulled his head down as he moved even closer, pressing their bodies together from chest to toes. "Now I want to kiss you ," he whispered. "And just so you know, nothing is impossible."



### CHAPTER 25

The kiss started hungry and urgent. There was no gentle slide into passion. It slammed into them and had them grabbing each other tightly as their lips and teeth clashed in a mad tangle. Hastings had never been kissed like this before, as if he was air to a drowning man who was pulling him under with him. He couldn't get close enough, couldn't hold Stephen any tighter, couldn't pull his mouth off Stephen's if the parsonage was on fire.

Suddenly Stephen was yanking at his jacket, trying to get it off his shoulders and Hastings stepped back awkwardly, unwilling to break the kiss while he tried to help get it off. The jacket would not cooperate, and he finally had to break the kiss with a gasp to rip the offending garment off. Stephen did the same, turning his inside out as he tore it off and then threw it away. Then Stephen began to unbutton his waistcoat, his chest heaving with his panting breaths.

"Yes," Hastings said, his own breathing erratic. He'd never felt desire like this. He was a mad man and the only thing that would calm his savage desire was the feel of Stephen's skin on his. He began to fumble with his own waistcoat, tore it off and then unwound his cravat.

"This is madness," Stephen mumbled as he pulled his shirt off over his head. "I don't know what I'm doing."

"Shut up," Hastings said. "I want to feel you."

"God, yes," Stephen said breathlessly. He reached over and helped Hastings pull his

shirt off and at last they were both bare chested. Hastings had never admired a man's chest, but from the way his heart pounded at the sight of Stephen's, he knew he'd compare every man to him forever after.

Stephen's gardening showed in his arms and chest. Hastings had seen him laboring, pulling, toting, pushing his wheelbarrow around, all the physically demanding tasks the garden required daily. His arms and chest were well-muscled as a result. The curling mat of blond hair adorning his pectorals looked soft enough to rest his cheek on, but he wanted to rub every inch of his body on it. Just the thought made him shiver in anticipation. Stephen's dark pink nipples were beaded, and Hastings wanted them against his tongue. He reached for Stephen, grabbing his upper arms and yanking him close. When their chests met Stephen cried out, but quickly muffled the sound by biting his lip. Hastings took a moment to enjoy the feel of him, closing his eyes and letting his head fall back on his shoulders. Then he felt Stephen's mouth on his neck, and he wrapped his arms around Stephen's shoulders and kissed him again.

Was his skin as hot as Stephen's? Were his nipples as hard, so hard that Stephen could feel them, just as he could feel Stephen's like twin brands on his chest? Was the hair on his chest a rough caress on Stephen's? Everything about their embrace was new, exciting, exhilarating. It was Stephen in his arms at last and he couldn't get enough.

Stephen's arms were wrapped tightly around his waist as he kissed Hastings back. It was all desire, no finesse, and the finest kiss he'd ever had. Stephen bit his lip just shy of too hard, then plunged his tongue into Hastings's mouth with a moan. He sucked on Hastings's tongue, and then his upper lip. It was as if he wanted to taste and experience everything his mouth could find, and Hastings knew he was doing the same thing. He clutched the back of Stephen's head, his thick, wavy hair crushed against his palm, so soft and damp.

Stephen put a hand on Hastings's backside and squeezed hard enough to make him

gasp, and Hastings thrust against him in reaction. It brought his aroused cock into contact with Stephen's through their trousers and they both moaned at the same time into each other's mouths. Stephen put his other hand on Hastings's bum and pulled him in tight, grinding against him and Hastings saw stars it felt so good. Who knew how good that would feel, another man's cock on his own?

Stephen broke away from the kiss and began to kiss Hastings's cheek, neck, anything his mouth could reach while keeping their groins pressed together, rubbing wildly against each other. Hastings just kept his hand on the back of Stephen's head and enjoyed the feel of his mouth, his chest, his hands, his cock, everything about him, pressed against Hastings.

Stephen was panting into his neck, his hips wildly undulating against Hastings's. There was a thin sheen of sweat on his skin now and Hastings enjoyed that, too, the slippery feel between them. He leaned down and licked Stephen's shoulder and Stephen whimpered, his hips jerking. The saltiness of his skin was a delectable treat and he wanted more. He pushed Stephen away so he could lick down his chest, and he rubbed his cheek against that damp, curling chest hair that had fascinated him so.

It made him feel feral, how much he wanted to roll around on Stephen, coating himself in his smell and his sweat. He rubbed against Stephen's nipple, and Stephen whimpered again. He took the hard nub between his teeth and flicked it with his tongue, and Stephen's fingers dug into his backside, keeping their hips and cocks anchored to each other.

Stephen was breathing so hard, and it took a moment for Hastings to realize he was, too. Their rough, heavy breathing cut the quiet in the parlor like sharp blades. He bit into the muscle of Stephen's chest, trying to rein in his desire before he spent too soon. Stephen's chest was heaving under his mouth. He couldn't remember ever being this hard, wanting someone this much. He couldn't picture a single person he'd ever been with, couldn't remember names or faces. Just Stephen. Just his face, his

body, his scent, his sounds. He found his mouth again and held him tight as they kissed some more, their original ardor not slaked at all, rather more frantic and rougher.

“Here,” Stephen gasped as he broke away from the kiss. “Feel you.” He was fumbling at the buttons on Hastings’s trousers and Hastings let him go to help him. When they were undone Stephen shoved them down his thighs, his hands brushing against Hastings’s bare bottom, and he thought he was going to lose his senses right then. Stephen began roughly yanking the buttons open on his own trousers and Hastings had to grasp his shoulder to stay standing. Stephen shoved his trousers down his thighs as well, and the sight of their two bare cocks so close together made Hastings’s breath stutter in his throat. Stephen stepped closer again and used both hands to hold their cocks together and they both moaned at the feel of it.

“Christ,” Hastings said, his voice guttural as he stared down at the sight of Stephen’s large, rough hands holding them together. “So good. I can’t last. I can’t.”

Stephen laughed breathlessly, sounding almost drunk. “Yes, yes it is,” he agreed breathlessly. “I didn’t believe them when they told me how good it was.”

“What? Who?” Hastings asked, trying to concentrate on something, anything, other than how good Stephen’s hands and cock felt against him.

“Just...just everyone,” Stephen said.

Stephen stroked his hands up and down along their pressed-together lengths and they both gasped. Hastings felt a shiver race along his spine and knew it wasn’t going to be long. “I’m going to come if you keep doing that,” Hastings warned, grasping Stephen’s shoulders to stay upright, his fingers digging into him, feeling the muscles there move as Stephen stroked his hands up and down.

“That’s the point, isn’t it?” Stephen asked, his voice low and hungry. “I need it. I want to see you. I want to feel. I just want.” Hastings felt the same sort of shiver that afflicted him race across Stephen’s skin.

“I’m going to do it,” Hastings said breathlessly. “All over us.”

“Yes,” Stephen hissed. Hastings could see him bite his lower lip and that did it for him, the sight of Stephen’s sharp, white teeth biting his plump, kiss-red lip as he stroked their cocks.

“Stephen,” he managed to gasp, and then his vision grew foggy as he came harder than he’d ever come in his life. His back spasmed as his ballocks pulled tight and his cock jerked as he jetted his hot release onto Stephen’s hands.

“Oh,” Stephen gasped, and then he was coming too, still squeezing and gripping their cocks, his forehead resting on Hastings’s shoulder as he watched himself come.

When it was over they just stood there for a moment, plastered together with sweat and heat and their combined release. Hastings slowly became aware of their surroundings, shocked to find them still standing where they’d begun in the middle of the parlor. Their clothing was strewn about the room where they’d thrown it, and Hastings thanked Stephen’s deity they hadn’t tossed something onto a candle and started a fire. Although a fire had begun here, to be sure.

Stephen cleared his throat and straightened. “That...I’m sorry.”

“What?” Hastings asked. “Why?”

“I...we didn’t really talk about this. I mean, I just grabbed you and...”

“And here we are, sated and spent,” Hastings said. He stroked his hand through

Stephen's hair, quite damp with sweat now, and Stephen closed his eyes and leaned into the caress. "I can't regret it. I've wanted it for ages. What about you?"

"Yes. Yes to both." He gave a small laugh. "I don't think I envisioned it here, standing up. And even now all the reasons we shouldn't have done it are crowding my mind, but, no, I can't regret it."

Hastings pulled Stephen's head back with the hand in his hair, and leaned down and kissed him, gently this time, and Stephen kissed him back, which caused a tension he hadn't even realized he held, to relax. "Good," he whispered against his mouth. "Are you going to let go of my cock anytime soon?"

"Yes," Stephen said, laughing against his mouth. Hastings like the feel of that. "I need a handkerchief."

When he let go, Hastings immediately missed his warmth and the feel of his rough palms. But he pulled his trousers up and found his jacket and his handkerchief and handed it to Stephen.

"Thank you," Stephen said, and with a charming blush began to wipe his hands and cock off.

"Mine, too?" Hastings asked, stepping in close. Stephen hesitated just a second before he took Hastings gently in his hand and wiped him off. By the time he was done Hastings was half hard again. From what he could see, so was Stephen. "I think I could do this with you all night," Hastings whispered.

Stephen reached up and kissed Hastings, not as gentle as their last kiss but not the frantic kisses they'd begun with. A kiss of exploration and discovery.

A small sound from the doorway had Hastings turning quickly, so that he blocked

Stephen with his body. He saw Madelyn standing there, wide-eyed.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean to...I’ll just go.” She turned and fled.

“Oh no,” Stephen said softly, clearly distressed. “I should go to her.”

“You should not,” Hastings told him, regretting their rash encounter. He hadn’t meant to hurt Madelyn or ruin tonight for her. “Give her some time.” He let Stephen go. “She won’t want to discuss it in front of Essie, anyway.” He sighed and began to search for his discarded clothes. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to complicate things between you and Madelyn.”

Stephen touched his shoulder and then grabbed it when Hastings didn’t turn around right away. He forced Hastings to face him. “I’m not,” he said firmly. “I told you I don’t regret this. I’ve wanted it for a long time.”

“Have you?” Hastings asked with half a smile. “And how did it measure up to your expectations?”

“It surpassed them,” Stephen said, putting a hand over Hastings’s heart. Hastings became self-conscious under Stephen’s regard and looked down. Stephen tipped his head back up with a finger under his chin. “And you?”

“You’re a dream come true, parson,” he said with a wink. He feared his words were more accurate than he’d like, and that too soon this dream would end.

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### CHAPTER 26

Stephen sought Madelyn out first thing the next morning. But when he knocked on her bedroom door there was no answer.

“Madelyn?” he called softly. Again, there was no answer. With a frown he headed downstairs to the dining room. He was surprised to find Madelyn and Essie already at breakfast when he got there.

“Good morning,” he said cautiously. To his surprise Madelyn gave him a bright, welcoming smile.

“Good morning, Stephen,” she said, quite chipper. Stephen wasn’t sure what to make of her mood.

“Is it?” Essie said sharply, glaring at him.

“Yes?” Stephen replied. He slid into his seat, still cautious. “You are both up early today.”

“So are you.” Essie said it like an accusation.

“I have to go and check on a few parishioners today,” he explained. “I’m behind in my rounds. I need to bring some of the produce from the garden and I have some remedies from Mrs. Tulane and the apothecary to deliver.”

“How wonderful!” Madelyn said with what seemed like genuine delight. “Do you do



that sort of thing often?"

"Yes. At least once a week, sometimes more. Although during the winter I haven't as much produce to deliver. Just whatever we can spare from the storeroom. More often than not, I have woolens and blankets and scarves to give out then, from the ladies of the parish who work on them over the spring and summer."

"That sounds delightful," Madelyn said wistfully. "Everyone must be so happy to see your arrival. And you get to go visiting so often!"

"Would you like to come with me?" Stephen asked. It was the perfect way to get her alone to talk about what she'd seen last night, and he was enamored of the idea of Madelyn making his rounds with him, as if she was his wife. Just the thought gave him a thrill. It confused and excited him. He'd just been with Hastings last night and here he was this morning longing for Madelyn's company. Bouncing back and forth between the two was making him dizzy. He didn't want to examine it too closely. For now, he was just going to enjoy all these new and exciting feelings.

"Oh, yes," Madelyn said, her face aglow.

"No," Essie said at the same time in a firm voice. "It's bad enough we've had people from all over coming to visit and gawk at us. She doesn't need to go parading around the neighborhood with the eligible parson, advertising her presence here."

"Oh," Madelyn said, visibly deflating. "Essie's right. It isn't safe."

"I'm sure the neighborhood is safe," Stephen argued.

"You don't know that," Essie argued right back. "And you can't guarantee that something someone says about her isn't going to reach someone who ought not to know."

It was Stephen's turn to sigh in defeat. "No. I can't guarantee that."

Madelyn put her hand over his on the table. "Don't worry, Stephen. I'll be all right here. And tonight we are to dine with the Westridges."

"You can come with me some other time," he promised. "After this is all over."

She smiled wistfully. "Of course I can."

He could tell by the way she said it that she didn't believe it. At that moment he vowed to make it happen. She may not yet believe she belonged here, but Stephen believed it and was determined to make it a reality.

After breakfast, Stephen left and Essie went to check for any messages from Sir Barnabas and to "scout the area some more," whatever that meant. Maddy was relatively sure it hadn't changed since the last time she'd done it.

Maddy wandered upstairs with a book, planning to hide in her room. She wasn't ashamed to admit it. She'd put on a brave face with Stephen this morning, but she didn't think she could fool Hastings. She was glad he hadn't appeared at breakfast. She was devastated about what she'd witnessed last night. Whatever was between Stephen and Hastings wasn't merely a flirtation, or a simple case of physical attraction. She'd seen the way they'd looked at each other, the way they kissed. Whatever it was that Stephen felt for her, it could never compete with what she'd seen last night. And no wonder, given who she was and the circumstances that had brought her here. What had she been thinking, to ride out with Stephen today? This place and her confusing feelings for him and Hastings were making her foolish.

Seeing them together had destroyed her hopes, but at the same time it had been thrilling and arousing to watch the two men love one another. Maddy had known of it, had heard talk of men being together that way, of course. But they were both so

attractive, so desirable, and to see them like that, half naked and enjoying each other physically, had made Maddy ache with longing. She couldn't think of anything better than being held and loved like that by those two men, each extraordinary in their own way.

When she was outside Hastings's door she looked over and froze. The door was open, and Hastings was standing there in his shirt and breeches. Their eyes met and they stood looking at one another for a moment before Hastings turned away, grabbed a brush from his washstand and began to brush his hair. Maddy was fascinated by his dark, wavy hair the same way she was with Stephen's freckles. She wanted to be the one to brush it; to run her fingers through it. She sidled over and leaned on the doorframe, openly staring.

"I'm sorry," she finally said.

"For staring?" he asked, setting the brush down. "I don't blame you. You got quite a look last night." He turned and leaned back against the dresser crossing his arms.

"That's what I'm sorry about. Last night." She clutched the book to her chest defensively. "I didn't mean to intrude."

"No?" he asked. His eyes saw too much as far as Maddy was concerned. He looked as if he could see right down into her soul sometimes.

"No," she affirmed. "If I had known that you and Stephen were—" She stopped abruptly. "What I mean to say is that I would not have disturbed you."

"If you had known that Stephen and I were what?" Hastings asked.

"Indecent," she answered primly, blushing. Her reluctance to say exactly what it was, and her embarrassment, were foreign to her. She'd always spoken plainly. But to put

it in words seemed to demean it somehow.

Hastings stood straight and took a step toward her. “Indecent? Is that what you think? That we were indecent?”

“No,” she said softly. “I don’t.”

“What did you think?” he walked closer while he was saying it, until he stood next to her.

She just shook her head, too embarrassed to put into words what she’d thought when she’d seen them. Hastings leaned one arm on the doorframe over her head and she was surrounded by the rich, dark smell of him. “Did you want to be me?” He leaned over and whispered in her ear. “Did you want to have Stephen like that?”

“You know I do,” she said with false bravado. Why did Hastings reduce her to this? She’d taken on bigger men, men much more frightening than him. And yet with him she wanted to surrender. She shook off the lethargy assailing her. “But obviously it will never happen,” she added firmly. “Now that you two are...together, I won’t pursue it.”

“Oh, I think you should,” Hastings said quietly. He hadn’t backed away from her. She was caged by his arm, his body, his scent, the heat of him. “I think he’s half in love with you already.” He gently kissed her temple and her heartbeat quickened. “Can’t say I blame him.”

She sighed in frustration. “I know you have feelings for him,” she argued. “Why would you say something like that? I know you don’t trust me. You’ve said as much. And you don’t seem to like me that much, either.”

“Don’t I?” he asked, easing back a little to look down at her. “I liked you plenty when

I kissed you the other day.”

“That?” She dismissed with a look. “That’s nothing. Men kiss girls all the time and they don’t mean a thing by it. You said so at the time. ‘I didn’t mean anything by it.’ That’s what you said.”

“People are always throwing my words back at me,” he said. “As if I’m supposed to remember everything I’ve ever said. And if the truth be known, I don’t think you trust me, either.”

She looked away, debating whether she trusted him or not. She was surprised to find that she did. And it wasn’t just because Stephen obviously trusted him. “His name is Harold Pinter. Lord Harold Pinter.” She looked back at him and he seemed confused.

“Who is Lord Harold Pinter?” he asked.

“The man who also wants me killed. Besides my father, I mean. He has a position in the Colonial Office.”

Understanding dawned in Hastings’s eyes. “Why does he want to kill you?”

“Because I know he had Bleecker kill someone for him. Someone he needed to get out of the way so he could get his position. Unfortunately for him, it also meant Bleecker now owns him. They cut a deal, and he secretly trades goods meant for the colonies to my father. For a price, of course. He...courted me, for lack of a better term, while they were arranging things. And because I acted the stupid, docile criminal’s daughter, they talked freely around me. From Pinter, I learned the names of other men who have similar deals with my father.”

Hastings tapped her temple. “You do know an awful lot, don’t you?” he whispered. “And why are you telling me this now?”

“Because I do trust you,” she told him honestly. “I think I always have. With my life.”

### CHAPTER 27

Hastings paused as he was tucking a stray hair behind her ear. “Do you?” he said in a casual tone, but she could tell from his stillness and his refusal to meet her gaze that the question was important.

“Yes,” she said simply. “I do.” He looked at her then, and his hand came to rest on her shoulder. “You and I are very much alike,” she told him a little sadly. “Our lives have been parallel, really. And we do not trust easily.” We do not love easily, she thought. “I did not want to care for a man like you.”

“Did not or do not?” he asked. He did that often, she noticed, responded with questions rather than sharing his own thoughts. But his questions could be quite revealing.

“Did not,” she whispered. “I have never wanted a hard man, a distrustful man, a man who has seen too much and bears the scars. A man very similar to me.”

“And now?”

“Now, to my utter dismay, I find I want you as much as I want Stephen, who is the very essence of the kind of man I want to care for.”

“Yes,” Hastings said softly. He reached down and took her hand in his, lightly tracing the lines on her palm, making her shiver. He wrapped his hand around hers then. “He is all that is kind and generous of spirit. And trusting, of course.”

“With very fine features and a strong well-muscled body,” she added with a sly little smile. Hastings looked up and met her gaze with a chuckle. He brought her hand to his lips and kissed the back of it.

“Yes, there is that,” he agreed. “You are a good match, I think, for you also have fine features,” he traced one of her brows, “and beautiful hair,” he caressed the side of her head, “and a very fine figure.” His hand came to rest on her hip, and he stepped closer. “I fear that both of you are exactly the kind of people that I want.”

“To care for?” she asked, her heart in her throat.

“Just want,” he said and the look in his eyes was hot, and she could see his want there.

Want is enough, she told herself. This is not the kind of man you need.

“Kiss me, then,” she whispered to him. “Show me.” There was a thought—in the back of her mind, and quickly dismissed—that she wanted what Stephen had found so irresistible last night. She wanted another taste for herself. She wanted to be held by him. Loved by him.

There was a slight hesitation and then he leaned down and kissed her. The kiss was sweet, soft, gentle. And not at all what she wanted from him.

“I’m not your maiden aunt,” she chastised him when he pulled away. “There was no want in that kiss.”

He raised a brow as if she’d challenged him, which she had. Then he wrapped his arm around her waist and tightened his grip on her hand and yanked her into his body. There it was, the want, not just in his embrace but she could feel his arousal against her stomach. It thrilled her, and she grew hot and heavy between her legs. When she



met his gaze, he leaned down and kissed her. This kiss was need. This kiss was want.

She wrapped her free arm around his shoulders and buried her hand in his hair and kissed him back with all the pent-up desire that had been thwarted last evening. She was confused as her desire for Stephen and her desire for Hastings seemed to combine in a thundering tide of passion that swept her away. Their lips and tongues tangled as they tried to get impossibly closer, their hands clutched tightly at their sides, as if they were both trying to maintain control. She didn't want that. She tugged her hand free and buried it, too, in his sinful hair and his other arm joined the first in wrapping tightly around her, so tight she was bowed backward by his embrace.

She moaned into his mouth at how good he felt, the heat and hardness of him pressed against her, her very balance at his mercy. He broke the kiss, his breathing heavy, and slid her into the room, softly closing the door. She'd forgotten they had been standing practically in the hallway. The small click of the door lock had her body on fire and her breathing ragged.

Hastings's hands slid up her torso until he palmed both of her breasts through her clothing. "Oh," she said with a broken sigh. "Yes."

She placed her hands over his and squeezed tightly, wanting to feel the rough pressure, hoping it would ease the ache. Instead, the ache spread from her breasts to the juncture of her thighs, where her heartbeat now resided. She rose on tiptoes and kissed him again, biting his lip before she thrust her tongue in his mouth in time to the beat between her legs. He let go of her breasts and lifted her, spinning so that her back hit the wall by the door. Then he leaned over to the side and grabbed the hem of her dress and lifted it, putting both hands on her hips under her skirts, pressing his leg between hers. When his well-muscled thigh met the heat and heartbeat at the center of her, she gasped into his mouth. His kiss turned rough and hard, and she met it with a need equal to his.

“I want to make you come,” he said in between kisses. “Use my leg.”

“Yes,” she agreed because she wanted that, too, more than anything right now. She took one of his hands and dragged it back to her breast, and she squeezed tightly while she rode his gloriously hard thigh. They kissed as if their lips alone were keeping the other alive, and it wasn’t long before she felt the throbbing release rush through her. She made a high keening sound into his mouth, clutching his thigh between hers and rubbing against it, prolonging the ecstasy.

When it was over she felt weak but still wanting. As if he knew, he withdrew his leg from between hers and then his hand was there, his fingers gliding through the lips of her sex through the slit in her drawers. She shivered and then he plunged a finger inside her and she bit back a cry of pleasure. She was practically climbing him, one leg raised and wrapped around his hip as he thrust his finger in and out, spearing her deeply with pleasure, and then she came again.

“Hastings,” she said breathlessly against his mouth. He slid his lips across her cheek, kissing her softly.

“So perfect,” he whispered in her ear. “So soft and willing and wet. Christ, I want you.”

“Take me,” she said, her passion rising again at the thought of him inside her. “I want you, too. Please take me.”

Hastings knew he should stop. She wasn’t for him. She was Stephen’s. But just this once, he wanted her for himself. It was selfish, he knew it. He also knew that Stephen wouldn’t mind. He knew that because he didn’t mind that Stephen wanted her, that Stephen would have her, too. That she wanted Stephen. It was a muddle inside him, but something about it made his desire for her even more powerful. He wanted to fuck her and then he wanted Stephen to fuck her knowing Hastings had been inside

her. She would be theirs in a way no one else ever could or ever would. And she wanted him. Despite everything and every reason she shouldn't, she did.

Her hands were working the buttons on his breeches, and he didn't stop her. When she had them open, he pushed them down just enough to get his prick out. He rested his forehead on hers. "Are you sure?" he asked, giving her one more chance to reject him and how messy and complicated everything was going to become.

In response she wrapped her arms around his neck and tried to crawl up the front of him, wrapping her legs around him and scooting up to try to line things up the way they needed to be. He grabbed ahold of her bottom and helped. Her skirts brushing against his prick were almost too much to bear, but then there she was, all damp, wet heat, sliding against him. He was breathing so heavily you'd have thought he'd just run a race.

"Now," she said, desperation in her voice. "Now, now, now."

He guided her onto him and slid inside and they both gasped. He could feel her trembling in his arms. She buried her face in his neck and bit him gently as she whimpered against his skin.

"Is this all right?" he asked, freezing where he was, afraid to move, afraid he was hurting her.

"Yes," she said, her breath against his neck giving him gooseflesh. "It's fine. It's perfect. It's..." He began to move, pressing her against the wall, holding her bottom tight as he thrust inside her. "Oh, yes," she murmured. "Yes."

He began to move faster, harder, because he couldn't help himself. She gripped his shoulders tightly and moaned and in moments she was making that erotic little cry he'd heard when she'd come the last time. He'd never known a woman as responsive

as she was. Of course she'd be perfect. Of course.

Her cunny squeezed his prick and he felt it along his length as he continued to move within her. On one hard thrust she gave a cutoff little shriek and bit his shoulder to silence it as she trembled in his arms and kept coming on his prick. He couldn't last, couldn't deny his release, and so he came inside her, letting himself feel every moment of it, of her, of their joining. He ground against her and she wrapped her arms tighter around him and sucked on his neck as she moaned.

When it was over they stayed like that for a few moments while they both caught their breath. Her head thunked back against the wall, and when he looked, her eyes were closed, her lashes resting on her flushed cheeks. He looked closer and saw that she had tears on her lashes and smeared on those pink cheeks.

"Oh God," he said, panicked. "Did I hurt you? Are you all right?"

She shook her head and then said, "Yes." He wasn't sure which to believe.

"You're crying," he said, and it sounded like an accusation. He inwardly cursed himself. "Why? Why are you crying? Are you absolutely sure I didn't hurt you?"

She smiled and it was a little lax, almost dreamy. "I'm perfectly fine, Hastings." She opened her eyes. "Better than that, even. I'm perfectly wonderful. You're perfectly wonderful." She leaned forward and gave him a soft kiss. "I never knew it could be like that."

"It should always be like that," he told her, although it hadn't been for him, either. He'd never had it like that. He'd never had anyone as perfect as her.

She laughed and there was a sharp edge to it. "If only all men felt that way." She squirmed in his arms and he reluctantly pulled out of her with a wince. He was

sensitive in the best way, making him shiver and grit his teeth. She shivered, too.

“I was too rough,” he said, setting her feet on the floor. She wobbled a little, so he held on.

“I don’t know another way to say perfect,” she said, exasperation in her voice. “What words would make you believe me when I tell you it was perfect?”

I love you . He immediately shied away from the words. He didn’t want her to say that to him. He didn’t want her to get hurt when he went back to London, which he inevitably would. “I believe you,” he said gruffly.

“That was everything I wanted it to be,” she told him gently, leaning down so she could look into his eyes, which were downcast. He thought he’d outgrown that tendency, to cast his eyes downward when he was facing a situation he didn’t want to be in. But he wanted to be here, with her, didn’t he? His feelings were all confused.

“I grew up on the streets, Hastings,” she told him. “I let men have me if they had something I wanted. None of them, not a one, ever treated me like you just did and made me feel that way.”

“They were fools,” he told her earnestly.

“I’m glad you’re not,” she said, and they shared a smile that settled inside him, where he hoped it would stay so he could take it out on occasion and remember this perfect moment.

### CHAPTER 28

Stephen hadn't gotten back from his rounds until it was almost time to leave for the Westridges's, so he didn't have time to talk to Madelyn alone about last night. He knew he needed to. She and Hastings were acting very odd with each other and with him. Essie had been giving them all strange looks in the carriage.

"I can't believe you're making me do this," Essie grumbled to no one in particular.

"It will be fun, Es," Madelyn told her. "I know it will." Madelyn seems nervous, too, and it sounded like she was trying to convince herself.

"It will be fun," he told them. "The Westridges are very informal, and they like conversation over dinner. Be careful, Valentine will talk your ear off about his horses and his hounds, Kurt will bore you to tears with talk of schooling and education and Bastian's—that's their son—accomplishments at school. Leah will talk about the children and books as well as fashion and the latest gossip. And Leah's mother, Mrs. Northcott, I don't believe you've met her yet, will agree with all of them. She'll most likely sit next to Esme because she's losing her hearing and Esme, sweet child that she is, doesn't mind repeating everything for her. And after dinner we shall play some games."

Madelyn had been listening as if there was going to be an exam over the material. Essie looked appalled. "How many blasted people are going to be there?"

"That seems like the logical number of people, Essie," Madelyn told her seriously. "We met most of them at the picnic, remember? Except for Mrs. Nor..cott?"

“Northcott,” Hastings said. “Like that devil North, but with a cott.” He had been quiet the entire ride until this comment. Madelyn smiled at him.

“Northcott,” she said. “North—Northcott. That’s a brilliant way to remember. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Hastings went back to staring out the window.

“What’s your problem?” Essie asked him rudely. “You look like you’ve swallowed a toad.”

“Well, I’m not ready to croak,” Hastings assured her. “I’m just not very good at these social obligations, either.”

“Just don’t get drunk,” Stephen told him. “That seems to be when you commit most of your social infractions.”

“I’ll try not to crawl naked into anyone’s bed at Cantley House,” Hastings drawled sarcastically.

“I should hope not,” Stephen said. “That is something that should be reserved for the parsonage.”

Everyone in the carriage looked at Stephen in astonishment, but before they could reply they rounded the corner and the Westridge’s came into view.

“Here we are,” Stephen said happily. He clucked to the horses, and they pranced the short distance to the door and then he pulled them to a stop. “Everyone behave themselves to the best of their abilities.”

“Can we bet on the games after dinner?” Essie asked.

“Why are you forever wanting to place bets?” Madelyn asked. She was eyeing the house as if it had teeth.

“I’m lucky,” Essie said. “I make a bit of coin on the side with it.”

“Yes, well, only if the Westridges wish to,” Stephen told her. “And be careful of Kurt. He’s very sly when it comes to that sort of thing.”

“Duly noted, parson,” Essie said, winking at him. She rubbed her hands together. “Now this evening just became entertaining.”

The Westridge home, known locally as Cantley House, was quite nice, but not grand. The nearest house to it was the parsonage. It was a typical country manse, just three floors with about five acres of property surrounding it. Just enough for Valentine to raise horses, for his own enjoyment and that of his family and friends—mostly for hunting—and dogs, which he did sell on occasion. He adored his golden retriever pups, and they were allowed to roam freely in the house. It made visits here interesting if nothing else. Leah had her own terrier, which quite literally terrorized the retrievers and was the undisputed king of Cantley.

“It’s beautiful,” Madelyn said, looking at the house, which was lit up with lamps outside for their arrival. It was a pretty house, the sandstone exterior glowing softly pink in the light. The outside was landscaped mostly with ornamental trees such as holly, yew, beech, and birch. They had some Scots pines lining the side of the small flower and shrub garden in the back of the house. Stephen had helped landscape that garden.

“Do you not like the parsonage?” That had never occurred to him. Perhaps she wanted a larger house, like Cantley? With a frown, he turned to her in the back seat of the carriage.



“I love the parsonage,” she assured him, reaching out and taking his hand. “And your garden is far superior to this one.” Her answer satisfied him because it was true. His garden was superior.

The door opened and Kurt and Esme were standing there. They both came out to the carriage to greet them.

“Good evening,” Kurt said with a little bow, every inch the German bürger . “We have been waiting for you with excitement.”

Esme was all smiles. “Yes! I thought this evening would never arrive.” She leaned on the edge of the carriage and beamed at Essie, who frowned back.

“Evening always arrives,” Essie grouched. “No slowing the clock.”

After that it was a flurry of greetings and disembarking from the carriage to hand their coats off to a servant in the small vestibule.

“Come in, come in,” Valentine urged them from the door of the salon. “We shall have a drink to warm you up, and then we’ll eat. Leah has prepared a feast!”

Stephen kept Madelyn by his side with her hand on his arm, and Hastings hovered nearby.

“I’m starving,” Hastings said with approval to Valentine’s declaration.

“Good,” Valentine said with a smile. “I like a man with a good appetite.”

Dinner turned out to be a lively affair, conversation not a problem at all much to Stephen’s relief. He was surprised by Hastings’s interest in Valentine’s horses. Freddy had gifted him with a fine steed when he became sheriff, and Stephen knew

that Hastings had been riding him all over the surrounding countryside. Hastings had never shown an interest in Gideon's horse farm, but then that was Gideon. He didn't think Hastings and Gideon would ever get along. And Gideon raised carriage horses, not hunters.

It warmed his heart to see that Madelyn had sat on the other side of old Mrs. Northcott and was making sure to involve her in the conversation. As a matter of fact, she, Esme and Mrs. Northcott had been in animated conversation most of the meal. Bless Leah for talking with Essie about The Modern Prometheus. Essie was quite engaged in that discussion, as she had a lot of opinions about Dr. Frankenstein.

"So all of your flock are settling in, hmm?" Kurt murmured to him. Stephen looked over at him in confusion. "I see you watching them all," Kurt said with a shrug. "All is well. Everyone talks and has very pretty manners."

"I wasn't worried," Stephen lied. Kurt just laughed.

"Are you involved with Mrs. Higgs?" Kurt asked.

"Yes," Stephen told him, seeing no reason not to.

"I see," Kurt said, his voice bland, his face blank. Both were unusual for Kurt, so Stephen was easily able to translate his comment as disapproval.

"She is a lovely woman," Stephen told him. "She is unsure of herself in company. But you will find her to be quite kind once you get to know her."

"She is lovely," Kurt agreed, although that wasn't what Stephen had meant by his comment. He wasn't talking about her outer but her inner beauty. He let Kurt's misunderstanding go. "There are some in the neighborhood who worry about her past."

“So Freddy told you?” Stephen asked with an inward sigh.

“Yes,” Kurt said. “We did not know whether to reveal our knowledge of her true identity and situation.”

“There’s no harm in it,” Stephen assured him. “It will make it easier as far as remembering to call her the correct name.”

Kurt laughed again. “Which is?” he asked.

“Hyde. Miss Madelyn Hyde.”

“Ah,” Kurt said, nodding sagely. “She is unmarried then.”

“Yes.”

“That kind of subterfuge is not your forte,” Kurt said, stating the obvious. “It is why we all knew something strange was going on. She and Hastings and Miss Waters handled it well.”

“It is their job, after all,” he reminded Kurt. “And it’s Madelyn’s life, so it follows that she would do her best to maintain her disguise.”

“True, true,” Kurt agreed. “You are not worried about her situation?”

“Not in the least,” Stephen lied again. Kurt had no idea how many lies he’d told in the last few weeks. He feared he was becoming more adept at it than anyone suspected. “With Hastings and Essie here to protect us I’m sure everything will be fine.”

“Of course,” Kurt said, but neither his look nor his tone conveyed confidence.

\* \* \*

Essie quite liked whist. She'd deny it, of course, since it was a nob's game for ladies and feeble gentlemen. But she liked the element of misdirection involved. With so few players and play moving quickly it was difficult to not give your hand away and still win. The parson was right. Kurt Schillig was very sly.

"I grew up playing German card games," he told her when she complimented his play. "We are very cutthroat about our cards." He smiled.

"Papa Kurt is dastardly when it comes to card games," Esme told her. "He and I usually make a team when we're in company, but not when we play with Mother and Father. They won't let us play together because they say we're too good."

"No, we say you cheat," Mrs. Westridge called from the other table, where she and Madelyn were playing against Mr. Matthews and Mr. Westridge. Everyone laughed at her comment.

"We don't cheat," Esme said defensively. "We just never lose. That's different."

"You're losing now," Hastings told her, amusement in his voice as he took another trick. Mr. Schillig looked quite pleased with his partner.

"Essie's never played," Esme said. "I think it's very poor manners to taunt her so."

"I've played," Essie said. "It's not my favorite game of chance, but when it's offered, I play."

"Oh," Mr. Schillig said with interest. "You like to wager on your play?"

Essie forced herself not to smile. He'd taken the bait like a fish on a hook. Hastings

just looked at her with a raised eyebrow. He was wise to her.

“I do,” she said simply. “Makes the game more exciting, don’t you think?” Esme was giving her measuring look and Essie was pretty sure she might be on to her as well.

“I do,” Mr. Schillig said. “Perhaps you would like to make a small wager on this game?”

“Kurt,” Mrs. Westridge said, clearly disapproving.

“I would,” Essie said quickly. “Perhaps just a small one? Maybe a bob?”

“Of course,” Mr. Schillig said. “A bob it is.”

Hastings just shook his head and lowered his cards to the table. He knew better than to play Essie for money. But he wasn’t going to give her away. He knew the deal.

Esme was delighted when they suddenly began to win. Mr. Schillig, as expected, grew more frustrated with each hand and refused to end the wager out of pride. Classic play. Finally, Esme put her cards down.

“I think that’s enough for tonight,” she said firmly, looking at Essie. “Essie, would you like to see the house and grounds?”

“It is late,” Mr. Schillig said sternly.

“I would also love to see the house and grounds, if I might intrude on your tour, Miss Marlestone,” Madelyn said. Essie could have kissed her. She did not want to get caught alone with Esme again.

“And I would like to stretch my legs a bit,” Mr. Matthews added. “So I shall also

intrude.”

Esme looked resigned to having her plans thwarted. Essie rather thought her obvious plans of a seductive nature were often thwarted.

“In that case,” Hastings said, rising from the table. “I’ll go, too. Can we see the stables?”

### CHAPTER 29

Essie tagged along behind with Esme. She wasn't too worried about the girl with so many chaperones around. Mr. Westridge had come to show Hastings the horses. He was becoming horse mad, like the squires here. Mads and the parson were up ahead with them, half a dozen hounds dancing around them, vying for Westridge's attention. Madelyn was studying everything, trying to commit it all to memory. Essie knew she was going to use it to play the lady once she left here. The thought made her sad. She'd enjoyed her time here with their little makeshift family at the parsonage. But she was itching to get back to London.

"You're not interested in the horses?" Esme asked. She sidled closer and took Essie's arm, like she was a proper gent out on a stroll with a young lady. Esme did smell good, and Essie liked the way she fit beside her.

She shook off those thoughts with alarm. Esme was not for her. She had Mary Peppers waiting at home for her and she'd not betray her with thoughts of another girl.

"No," Essie finally answered after she realized she'd been quiet too long. "I don't much like horses. Didn't grow up around them except the carriage horses in London, and those can be right dangerous."

"They can all be right dangerous," Esme agreed. "I stay clear of Father's hunters. I have a gentle mare that I ride, as does Mama."

"Smart," Essie said.

They walked in silence for a bit as Essie took in the grounds and the exterior of the house. Esme had no idea how lucky she was, growing up here. She had the confidence and pretty looks of a well-loved child, who'd never known hunger or fear. Essie was glad for her. She didn't want Esme to suffer those things as she had.

Suddenly Esme grabbed her hand and ran behind one of the outbuildings and then began running along a row of tall pines, dragging Essie with her.

"What are you doing?" Essie said in a low, urgent voice, trying to stop without tripping Esme.

"I just want to be alone with you," Esme said in a hushed whisper. "So we can talk freely."

"I can talk freely no matter where I am," Essie told her. "Hold up." This time she pulled Esme to a stop. They were both breathing heavily from their brief run. "Here is fine." She looked over her shoulder and couldn't see the others.

Esme laughed. "All right." She took Essie's hand and began strolling casually around a good-sized garden, with a labyrinth of paths winding their way around small patches of flowerbeds. When they came to a bench between two beds that both had high trellises Esme pulled Essie down to sit beside her. "How long are you staying?" she asked.

"Tonight? I don't think that much longer," Essie said, looking around for the others again.

"No, silly. I meant here. In Ashton on the Green."

"Oh." Essie was suddenly uncomfortable. "Not long, I don't think. Mads has to get back to..." Damn, she couldn't remember where she'd said they were from.



“Northumberland,” Esme said drily. “You can drop that silly story. I know that Mrs. Higgs isn’t her real name and that you’re here protecting her.”

Essie looked at her in surprise. “Who told you?”

“The duke came to talk to Father and Papa Kurt and I overheard them,” Esme said without a trace of embarrassment. “Is she safe yet?”

“Not yet,” Essie confessed. “But soon, I think. And then I’ll go back to London.”

“And Mrs. Higgs?”

Essie shook her head. “No, I don’t think she wants to go back. I think she wants to stay here.”

“I think the parson would like that, too,” Esme said. “And what about the sheriff?”

Essie glanced over at her. “You know far too much.”

“That’s what happens when you keep a smart girl trapped in a boring little village,” Esme said with a sigh. “I know everyone’s secrets.”

“If it’s boring they can’t have too many,” Essie pointed out.

Esme made a face. “You’re right. At least, not ones that everyone doesn’t know already, although they all pretend not to.”

“Essie,” Esme said after another moment of silence which Essie could tell had been Esme building up her courage, “since you’re going to be leaving soon, I don’t suppose you’d kiss me, would you?”

Essie was shaking her head no before Esme even finished. “No. I really can’t, Esme. I know you’re not a child, but you are young, and I’d feel bad about it because of that. And I really do have a girl in London. Mary Peppers. She’s a nanny for some people I work with.”

“Oh.” Esme sounded so dejected even Essie felt sorry for her. “Not even one little kiss? It doesn’t have to mean anything. I’d just like to kiss you, and...and see what that feels like. With someone older, I mean, who’s done it before.”

“All right,” Essie said with a sigh. “One kiss, and then we go back to the others. Understand?” She figured it was an easy deal to make. What harm could one kiss do?

“Yes, just one,” Esme agreed quickly. She scooted closer on the bench and leaned in, her lips puckered.

Oh, Lord, Essie thought. This one was even more inexperienced than she’d thought. She slid her arm around Esme’s waist and tipped her chin up and kissed her puckered lips.

A moment later Essie wasn’t sure what had happened. She’d meant to just give Esme a sweet little kiss, and suddenly Esme’s arms were wrapped around her neck, her tongue was in Essie’s mouth and Essie was on fire from her mouth to her mound.

Esme climbed onto Essie’s lap and straddled her legs on the bench and ate at Essie’s mouth like she was starving. And Essie responded, damn her traitorous body. Esme was soft and plump and ripe and smelled so good and tasted like pudding. How was she supposed to resist that? She gripped the edge of the bench with both hands and did her best.

A wet nose and then a lick on her hand and a happy little bark brought her a reprieve. She tore her mouth from Esme’s and looked at her wide-eyed, panic filling her. She

glanced around and saw only a few dogs sniffing around them, not Esme's fathers.

"That's enough," she said in a voice roughened by desire and shock. She set Esme back on the bench beside her. Esme was grinning from ear-to-ear, her cheeks pink, her eyes knowing.

"If you say so," she said, and primly smoothed her skirts out.

Essie narrowed her eyes at her. "'Just one'," Essie said, imitating Esme's earlier plea. "'So I can see what it's like.' You've been kissed plenty."

Esme laughed. "Yes, well, you managed to trick Papa Kurt earlier. I thought I'd see if I could do the same to you."

Essie shook her head. She'd gambled and lost here. "I can't believe I fell for it, like a simple rube," she lamented.

"I know I won't be able to do it again," Esme said with obvious regret. "But at least now you'll have that to think about when you go back to your Mary Peppers."

Essie was afraid that was exactly what was going to happen, because Mary Peppers had never kissed her like that.

Maddy was watching Hastings pet one of the horses. Like most city dwellers, she had a distrust of equines. She'd almost been run over as a child running from the law one too many times not to have a healthy respect for how dangerous they were. But Hastings seemed to have quite an affinity for them. Mr. Westridge had proudly shown him all the horses in the stable. There were so many Maddy had stopped listening to him list the attributes of each one. She was sitting on a bench with Stephen now.

“I’m sorry,” Stephen said softly.

“I don’t mind,” Maddy assured him. “He’s having such a grand time seeing the horses.” When she had watched him riding out on his big hunter the last few days, Maddy had felt a thrill race down her spine at how splendid he looked. It was clear he adored that horse.

Stephen was quiet and Maddy turned to see him looking at her in confusion. “I meant about last night.”

Maddy felt her face flame. He was apologizing for what had happened between him and Hastings, but wasn’t what happened this afternoon worse? She’d fucked Hastings against the wall like a common street girl. Regret and shame filled her.

“Stephen, don’t,” she pleaded, covering his hand on his thigh with her own. “You don’t have to apologize. Truly. I understand.”

“Do you?” he asked, glancing over at Hastings. “I’m not sure I do.”

Maddy followed his gaze to see him crouching down next to Westridge, examining one horse’s shod foot.

“He’s very hard to resist,” she said, longing for Hastings filling her. Then Stephen put her hand on his thigh and held it there, and she felt the muscles flex, and she wanted Stephen as much as she’d wanted Hastings a moment ago. “It’s all so confusing,” she said, voicing her feelings.

“Yes, I suppose it is,” Stephen agreed. “But I want you, too, Madelyn. You mustn’t doubt that. I just...I have feelings for Hastings, as well.” He shook his head. “You’re right. It’s all so confusing.”

Maddy couldn't bear the guilt a moment longer. "I was with Hastings this afternoon," she blurted out.

"Did you two make amends?" Stephen asked hopefully. "What did he say?"

"You misunderstand me," Maddy said, terribly uncomfortable that she'd have to do more explaining. "I mean, yes, I was with him. But I was also with him."

"Yes," Stephen said, clearly confused. "You were with him. I heard that."

Maddy licked her lips and turned to face Stephen directly on the bench. "I was physically intimate with Hastings this afternoon, Stephen. I was walking by his room, and he was in there half-dressed, and I stopped to apologize for intruding last night, and then, I don't know, suddenly we were in each other's arms and I took him against the wall." She couldn't meet his eyes. That ought to give him a clear picture of what kind of person she was. "I'm so, so sorry. I know you have feelings for him, and for what's it's worth, I think he reciprocates those feelings. But there's been strong feelings between us since we met, and it overruled our common sense today."

Stephen was silent for so long Maddy finally glanced up. He looked stunned. "But that's marvelous," he said. He didn't look like it was marvelous. He shook his head. "A little unexpected, but I'm not entirely surprised. I knew you had those strong feelings between you."

"Please don't be hurt," Maddy begged, taking his hands in hers. "We didn't mean to hurt you. I won't let my unruly nature ruin everything. I'll be good, Stephen. It will never happen again, I swear. "

"What won't happen again?" Mr. Westridge said. Maddy looked over in horror to see he and Hastings standing not two feet away. She couldn't think of an answer.

“She’s going to talk to Essie about tricking Kurt into wagering tonight,” Stephen finally said. “It won’t happen again.”

Mr. Westridge laughed. “It will, I’m sure. He can’t resist a friendly wager at cards. Say no more about it. It is of no concern.” He waved it away.

Maddy could see Hastings studying both her and Stephen. He knew. He knew she’d told Stephen, and he didn’t look happy about it.

“We should go,” Hastings said. He looked around. “Where are Essie and Miss Marlestone?”

Mr. Westridge sighed. “I can only imagine.” He turned and headed out of the stables. “We shall have to launch a search party.” He didn’t sound too upset about it. Maddy hoped he understood that Essie was trustworthy.

Hastings didn’t say anything to them. He walked out after Mr. Westridge and Maddy and Stephen followed. Maddy had no idea what was going to happen next. That was up to Stephen. But she very much hoped his reaction tonight meant he wouldn’t hold it against Hastings. And there was a little bit of her that hoped she might still have a chance with him if he didn’t hold it against her.

To their collective surprise Essie and Esme were already back at the house when they got there. They were sitting in the salon having tea with Mr. Schillig and Mrs. Westridge. Essie looked nervous and Esme looked like the cat who got the cream. Poor Essie. They took their leave, and it was a long, silent drive home.

### CHAPTER 30

M adelyn went upstairs with Essie as soon as they got home, much to Stephen's frustration. He needed to talk to her about what happened between her and Hastings. And he needed to speak to Hastings.

"Hastings, if I might have a moment," he said as Hastings tried to slink off after they got home.

"I've got to...go," Hastings said unconvincingly. "And do something."

"No, you don't," Stephen said. He was holding the horse's bridle and Hastings came over and snatched it out of his hand, making the horse neigh an objection over the too-sudden movement.

"I've got to put the carriage away," Hastings said.

"I'll come with you," Stephen offered. Hastings stopped.

"Just give me a minute, Stephen," he snapped. That stopped Stephen in his tracks.

"I didn't mean to upset you," he told Hastings. "I just think we need to talk."

Hastings sighed. "You're right, of course. But I really do need a minute to collect my thoughts, if that's all right."

"Of course. I'll just wait in the parlor." Stephen watched him walk away, his heart

heavy. Hastings was clearly rethinking their relationship now that he'd been with Madelyn. Stephen couldn't blame him. She certainly had more in common with him and was a far more suitable match as far as society was concerned. It was no wonder he'd decided she was the better choice.

When Hastings came into the parlor he looked as downcast as Stephen felt. Stephen decided he should lead the conversation so Hastings wouldn't have to upset himself more. Stephen was nervous and feeling a little sick over it all. He'd taken off his jacket because he was sweating over having to have this conversation.

"I know what happened between you and Madelyn this afternoon," he said immediately.

"I figured as much," Hastings said. He stopped and they faced one another across the room. "If you want me to go, I understand. I'll have Sir Barnabas send another man."

"If you want to go, I won't stop you," Stephen said, trying to hide his breaking heart. "But I'm not sure it's a good idea to move Madelyn yet."

"You're going to kick Madelyn out?" Hastings said with angry surprise. "I'd have thought better of you."

"Of course I'm not kicking her out," Stephen said, confused. "Don't you want to take her with you?"

"Why would I do that?" Hastings seemed genuinely confused. "She wants to be with you."

"But she was with you." Madelyn was correct about how confusing this all was.

"Yes, but she doesn't want me. Not really. She said as much today. I'm not the kind



of man she wants to care for. You are.”

“She obviously cares for you,” Stephen told him. “Don’t be an idiot.”

“I’m not an idiot,” Hastings said. “I just know that you’re better for her, and she’s better for you.”

“Well, maybe that doesn’t matter to us,” Stephen said with blinding clarity. “Maybe we want you anyway.” Despite everything, despite Madelyn, despite knowing Hastings was going to leave him, he wanted him. Hastings thought he was bad for Stephen, and Stephen agreed. But for very different reasons. Stephen knew when Hastings left it would break his heart. He very much feared it was too late to prevent that.

“So, you agree I’m bad for both of you,” Hastings argued.

“You are putting words in my mouth,” Stephen told him. “I have feelings for you and Madelyn. I don’t care if it’s wrong or right or they damn me for it.”

“Well, then, it’s a good thing I’m here to do the right thing for you if you can’t do it for yourself.” Hastings was mad and so was Stephen. Hastings unbuttoned his jacket and pulled it off with sharp, angry movements before throwing it on the sofa.

“I’ll tell you what I told everyone else, it’s my life and I’ll damn well do what I please. And if that is to love both you and Madelyn, then I’ll do it.” He hadn’t meant to mention love.

“You can’t be in love with me,” Hastings told him. “I’m all wrong for you. I’m a man, first of all, and that is not a good thing despite what all your friends have going on. And secondly, I’m a killer. Don’t forget that, Stephen, because I don’t, not for a second.”

“You are a man who has been forced to kill by circumstances and Sir Barnabas James,” Stephen told him. “That is not the same thing as being a killer.”

“It is,” Hastings said vehemently. “I shouldn’t even be allowed to touch you or Madelyn. I’ve done some awful things, Stephen.”

Stephen quickly walked over and took Hastings’s hands in his. “I don’t care. The past is the past. I care about the future. Our future.”

“There is no our future,” Hastings said. “I’ll be going back to London, and you’ll stay here, where you belong.”

“You belong here, too,” Stephen tried to tell him, but Hastings was shaking his head.

“No. You and Madelyn belong here. She wants so badly to fit into this life with you. Did you see her tonight? I’ve never seen her so happy.”

“You have been happy here, too.” Stephen pulled him close. “I want to make you happy here.” After a moment’s hesitation, Hastings wrapped his arms around Stephen and rested his forehead against the side of Stephen’s head. Stephen turned so his lips rested against Hastings’s cheek.

“That’s not going to happen,” Hastings said softly. “But I’m glad you feel that way.”

“Am I interrupting?”

Stephen jerked away and saw Madelyn in the doorway.

“Not at all,” Hastings said. He separated himself from Stephen, but not too far. Madelyn was no innocent, Stephen supposed, nor was she a fool. She knew exactly what they’d been up to.

“Then may I join you?” she asked, and without waiting for an answer stepped into the parlor and closed the door behind her.

Maddy felt Hastings watching as she walked over and sat down on the sofa. She had to move a jacket to do so, and just held it out, waiting for one of them to take it. Stephen had spun around so his back was to her, so Hastings walked over and took it from her. He tossed the jacket on the table in front of her.

“Thank you,” he said politely.

She could tell he wasn’t sure what was about to happen. She enjoyed unsettling the sharp Hastings, who thought he knew it all. She wasn’t upset, though she ought to be. She’d been so worried that day she’d almost fallen off the stool that Hastings would ruin everything. Wasn’t this exactly what she’d feared? But Hastings wasn’t the only one culpable. She’d ruined it, too, because she wanted him, and so she’d taken him. She’d always been impulsive like that, unable to resist whatever she desired when it was within her reach.

She’d followed their voices to the parlor when she’d come looking for Stephen. She’d stumbled on the two men having a heated, intimate discussion. Whenever she found them together there was passion of one kind or another, and she was not unaffected by it. When she saw them in an embrace, an echo of the embrace she’d witnessed before, Maddy couldn’t have made her feet carry her away if she’d set them on fire.

She’d see many undressed men before. She’d worked the docks with the pickpocket crew, and they’d slept all in one room many a time when she was young. She’d had bare-chested brutes come after her more than once. But she’d never looked twice at them, not even the ones she’d had physical relations with. It had never been a case of desire on her part—just a means to an end, a way to protect herself and survive a hard life.

No, what had slammed into her as she'd watched these two men last night had no relation to anything she'd ever felt before. And even now, when they were in shirtsleeves and their embrace had been tender rather than carnal, Maddy found herself wanting them. This was desire, she was sure of it, more even than what she'd felt with Hastings, and that had been madness. She was positively burning up with the need to be with them, to see them, touch them, do what she'd done with Hastings earlier, and what she'd been dreaming about doing with Stephen. The possibilities before her were endless and arousing.

She watched Stephen's strong back. He was so well-built it was almost impossible to believe he was a parson. He looked more like a stevedore. She'd noticed the other night that the freckles on his face were repeated on his shoulders. She wanted to lick every one of them. As she watched he put his hands on his hips, still facing away from her and she saw him take a deep breath. She bit her lip to keep her smile in check. If she had to hazard a guess, he was trying to control his arousal before he turned back around. He needn't have bothered, of course—she'd seen such things before. Her sensibilities could withstand the hint of it beneath his clothes.

Hastings had taken a chair across from the sofa and was taking his cravat off as he sat there. He probably didn't feel the need to cover up any arousal he was feeling. Which, really, he shouldn't. He was not as muscular as Stephen, but he had a whipcord strength about him, as if his energy was just lying in wait until he snapped it out and cut you with it. It was exciting in a different way than Stephen's bulk. Both men had hair on their chests and Maddy found that exciting, too. How different they were from her.

She let her gaze roam up from the small triangle of Hastings's chest that was now showing above his waistcoat, and she caught him watching her. She knew that Hastings saw through all her disguises. He knew who she was underneath all the pretense, and he hadn't shown her the door. Sometimes she hated that and sometimes it made her feel safer that he knew so much about her. Tonight, it made her feel better

about all she'd done and what she wanted to do with them, for some strange reason.

"Madelyn," Stephen said in a firm voice, turning to face her, his hands still on his hips. He's clearly come to some decision about what he was going to say to her. She cut him off.

"Maddy," she said, smoothing her skirt out and staring at his magnificent chest and arms. Good Lord, what a man.

"I beg your pardon?" he asked, a frown marring that perfect brow. He should be a model for statues of Greek gods.

"My name," she said with a sigh. "I've always been Maddy."

"Why didn't you ever tell me that?" Stephen asked, clearly upset.

"Or me?" Hastings looked equally stunned. She supposed he would be. They'd had sexual congress, for heaven's sake, and he hadn't known her preferred name.

"Because I thought I needed to be someone else here," she told them. "I thought I needed to be that person to fit in, to make you let me stay."

"Oh, Made—Maddy," Stephen said. "I would have let you stay no matter what your name."

"I know," she said. "Now. Now I know it. But when I arrived here I didn't. I didn't know you, or this place, or anyone, really. I was on my own and making it up as I went." She shrugged. "I've had a lot of practice at that, at taking care of myself, you know. And I thought it was important to hide who I really was and to be the person you wanted so you'd let me stay. That's always worked in the past. But I'm not that person I was pretending to be. The thing is, I'm not who I used to be before, either."

But what or whoever I am now, well, I'm Maddy."

"Mads," Hastings said quietly. "That's what Essie calls you."

"And you," she said, laughing a little. "That's a new one, actually. I hadn't heard it before. I kind of like it, something someone made up just for me." She paused for a moment "Stop feeling sorry for me," she told Stephen sharply, when she saw the pity on his face.

He shook his head. "I'm not. I won't."

"He can't help it," Hastings said, heaving a sigh. "It's how he was made."

"You don't," Maddy said.

"No, I don't," Hastings agreed. "I know where you come from, and I'm quite impressed at where you've gotten yourself. Also, with the fact that you didn't let it all turn you into a monster. I've seen that happen all too often."

"Yes. So have I." She pulled her legs up next to her on the sofa, tucking her skirt in like a lady would. "But my mother didn't, so I was determined not to, either." But she had let them turn her into a monster, hadn't she? She'd killed for them, lied for them. She wouldn't do it anymore. She couldn't, not after being here. Not after loving these two men. But she didn't tell them any of that.

"How do you know?" Stephen asked he was looking around for his jacket. He finally grabbed the jacket from the table and tried to put it on, but it was Hastings's, so it was far too small, and he had trouble pulling it back off. Watching his bumbling lightened her mood.

"What my mother was like?" she asked. "I asked people, and they told me. Most

people liked her very much, although there were one or two who thought her above her station, mostly because they didn't understand what her station was before she fell on hard times."

"Did they try to bring you low?" Hastings asked. He was watching Stephen, too. He'd finally found his own jacket and pulled it on. She didn't try to hide her admiration, which only made Stephen blush.

"Oh, yes, lots of them did. They thought I was above my station, too. So, I ran off to the docks when I was still small and joined a gang there. Still working for Bleecker, of course, but I was small and tough and smart, and I could pick a pocket with no one the wiser. My captain, Dickie Bales, he practically raised me, bastard though he was. But he was fair and kept a roof over my head and food in my belly."

"Good God," Stephen said quietly. "That's no childhood for a small girl."

"That's no childhood for anyone," she told him. "But it was my lot, and many more like me." She shrugged. "There were worse fates. I could have been sold to a madam."

Stephen paled noticeably, and even Hastings looked unnaturally grave. "You wouldn't be here today if you had been," he said. "I've seen what happens to those children."

"Anyway," she said, changing the subject. "I just wanted you to know who I am and why I am the way I am. That's all." She smiled at him. "And I'll stay or go, whatever you two want me to do." She held her breath, because the truth was she very much wanted to stay.

"Well, we want you to stay, of course," Stephen said, as she'd hoped he would.

“All right,” she said. “On one condition.”

“Ah,” Hastings said with a grin. “There you are. I knew there was going to be a snag somewhere.” He crossed his arms, causing his shirt to gape more over his rather divine chest. She caught his amused gaze and realized he was using her preoccupation with him to distract her. “What do you want?”

She pointed at Stephen. “Him.”



### CHAPTER 31

It took Stephen a moment to understand what she was saying. “You want me?” he repeated dumbly. “But...even after...what you and Hastings, that is, what you...you did? And this?” He gestured between him and Hastings. He knew he sounded like an untried idiot.

“Oh, love,” she said, a little London slipping back into her voice, “that just made me want you more.” She took a deep breath and closed her eyes as her shoulders rose and fell, a wicked smile on her face as if she was remembering he and Hastings together. “It’s all been absolutely delicious.”

Hastings laughed, and it sounded genuine and amused. “Yes, it has.” He was sitting there with his arms crossed watching her, a shrewd look on his face. “And you want another taste of it, do you? And in return?”

“In return, I’ll stay. I’ll stay and do whatever you and Sir Barnabas need me to do,” she said.

“Now, see here,” Stephen said, not caring for the way they were negotiating over his body and physical intimacies. Or at least, he felt he ought to protest, but the truth was he rather liked it, and found it a little arousing to be the subject of these two people’s desires. He was wicked and had been around his friends for too long, was all. It was time to put a stop to all this. It was bad enough he had given in to his desires with Hastings two times. And with Madelyn—Maddy yesterday.

Good God , he thought as the implications struck him, I’m already in too deep. It’s

too late to protest. I started it all.

“Don’t you want me?” Maddy asked curiously. “You kissed me yesterday as if you did.”

“Yes,” he admitted, not willing to lie to her. “I do.”

“All right then,” she said, turning back to Hastings, as if that settled it.

“That doesn’t mean I have to act on those desires,” Stephen reminded her, and himself.

“You already did,” Hastings reminded him.

“You certainly acted on your desires with him,” Maddy said, pointing to Hastings. “Why not me? Again?”

“Because you are a?—”

“If you say woman,” Maddy practically growled, “I will not be responsible for my actions. Women have desires, too, you know. I was with Hastings today, and I did that because I desired him. That was my choice. I desire you, too.”

“I’m well aware,” Stephen said. “But you are a woman. You can be more easily hurt, and there could be much more serious consequences. If people find out, I mean.”

“I know how to prevent a babe,” she told him, and Stephen’s heart stuttered a bit in his chest with pain, because even though he’d known she’d been with men in the past, he didn’t like to think about her circumstances then, or what she’d been forced to do. And that firmed his resolve.

“I won’t lie and say that I don’t want you both physically, and that I have given in to those desires already,” he said. “But,” he continued before they could say anything, “you must understand that physical intimacy means something to me.”

To his surprise Maddy laughed. “And it doesn’t to me? Well, that’s more than a little insulting.”

“I meant as a parson, a representative of the church,” he told her. “But also, to me, personally I suppose.”

Maddy’s look had grown darker as he was speaking.

“I’d stop now if I were you, Stephen,” Hastings warned. “You’re digging your own grave.”

“I’m sure you assumed I’ve been with loads of men,” Maddy told him. “I’m not going to lie and tell you I’m a virgin. That would be stupid, and too much trouble to maintain the lie. I’ve been with a few. But never because I wanted to for the pure and simple reason I desired them. I’ve never desired anyone like that. At least not until now. No, I was with them for safety, or because it was a trade for something else I needed, like food or shelter or a place to hide. I never got paid for it. I wasn’t a whore. But to be with someone just because I wanted to? I’ve never done that. So, I guess you could say physical intimacy between us means a great deal to me, too.” She looked over at Hastings as she said it and he returned her look with an enigmatic one.

“I didn’t mean to disparage you,” Stephen said, shame churning in his gut for hurting her.

“No, I know you didn’t,” she said. “You don’t have it in you. But you made assumptions there that I needed to set straight.” She leaned forward, her face serious.

“Hastings is right, people like us don’t get the chance to be with people like you in a place like this. This isn’t meant for us. But for a brief moment in time, I can have it. And I want it. I want you.” She sat back. “It’s as simple as that.”

“And then you’ll leave,” Stephen clarified. “You’ll have me, and then you’re planning on leaving. Correct?”

“Yes.” She was very matter of fact about it. “I don’t know how this is supposed to end, whatever it is Sir Barnabas has got me mixed up in, but I’m almost positive it doesn’t end happily for me. Most likely he’ll ship me off to Canada or America and wash his hands of me when he doesn’t need me anymore.”

“I will not let him do that,” Stephen declared vehemently. “He does not get to play God with your life. You will do what you want, where you want. I will see to it.”

“I don’t think the day has arrived,” Hastings observed, “where you are more powerful than Sir Barnabas James.”

“You’d be surprised,” Stephen said confidently, although he silently wondered exactly how he was going to pull it off.

“Yes, I would.” Hastings was looking at him sadly.

“This is why I’m hesitating,” Stephen told them, being honest because normally it wasn’t in his nature to dissemble, though lately he’d been learning. But with them he was determined to be honest. “I don’t know if I can be intimate with you and then let you go without getting my heart broken. That’s what I was trying to say. Physical intimacy, to me, very much involves my heart. And though you both have already captured a piece of it, to give in to my desire would all but ensure my unhappiness for a very long time. To be honest, I’m not sure it’s not already too late to prevent that.”

“You gave in to it with me not long ago,” Hastings said quietly.

“And now I already feel as if my heart is breaking because you’re talking about leaving,” Stephen confessed. He knew he was going to have to tell Hastings about their earlier night together. He wanted honesty between them all and had to start as he meant to go on. “I want to be with you both—which has ramifications I’m not willing to entertain at this time—more than I can say. But I can’t bear the thought of something so wonderful ending with me left here, alone.”

“I didn’t think about that,” Maddy whispered. “I only thought of what I wanted. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry for wanting me,” Stephen begged. “It’s very flattering. No one has wanted me like that before. I like it.” He looked between the two of them. “I’ve never felt more alive than I do with you both here and wanting me.” He shook his head. “You speak of a moment in time, but this is not that for me. This is my life. And I have to decide if I can continue here as I am after you are gone, if you’re determined to leave me.”

“I’m sorry, too,” Hastings said, rising from his chair. “I was fooling myself before Maddy arrived. Fooling myself that this could be my life, too, and I think I let you believe it as well. Even last night, having you in my arms, I was fooling myself. You’re right to protect your heart, Stephen. It is a precious thing. I’m sorry I treated it so lightly.”

“No.” Stephen stood as well. “No, you didn’t. My eyes were wide open. I’m a grown man, and I ignored everything about our situation except that I wanted you to stay, that you felt right here. I didn’t even ask if that was what you wanted.”

“You didn’t have to,” Hastings told him. “You knew it was, or I would have been long gone.”

Maddy leaned over until she lay sideways on the sofa, her cheek pillowed on her hands. "I guess this means your answer is no," she said quietly, her voice a little broken. "Don't worry. I won't be difficult about it." She sat up suddenly. "Can't we be like we were? When you kissed me yesterday? You don't have to do anything else, I swear. Just...just pretend. Can't we pretend we're sweethearts?"

"I can't pretend," Stephen told her. "Because you are. My sweetheart, I mean. What I mean to say is, I have feelings for you." He knew he was bungling this terribly.

"Hastings, don't leave," Stephen demanded as the other man began heading for the door. "I've handled this badly. I started this, and now I'm making a mess of it. You both must know how I feel about you. As Hastings has said on many occasions, I can't lie. And even though I knew where my feelings were leading, it still caught me unawares today when you told me what happened this afternoon. When I initiated kisses with you both I was following my heart and not my head. And now we're here and even though I know everything I've told you is true I still can't stop wanting you." He spun around, so he wasn't facing them and couldn't see them. "I don't know what to do. What am I supposed to do?"

He heard Maddy get up behind him and then her arms slid around his waist. She pressed her body against his back, and he reached down and held her arms in place.

"Silly Stephen," she whispered, "still thinking you can control your life." She sighed against him. "It's not in our control. Us meeting, neither one of us saw that happening. If life gives you something you want, take it. It's not going to offer again, at least in my experience. You get one chance. I don't just want to be intimate with you, Stephen. I want you . All of you. Everything you are makes my heart sing, and it's a song I've never heard before. I don't want to miss this chance. Do you?"

"I've had my chances," Hastings said flatly. "I'll leave you to it."

“Don’t you want more?” Stephen asked him, turning his head to pin him with his stare. “Don’t you want to take this chance with us?”

“Maddy doesn’t want me,” he said. “Despite what happened today. She wants you. She wants this.” He gestured around the room.

“You and I could have met a million different ways,” Maddy said, letting go of Stephen and turning to face Hastings. “Have you thought about that? We’re not too different in age. I know you were on the streets in London. I recognize that in you. You know Bleecker. You work the streets now, for Sir Barnabas. And yet we’ve never met until now, here, at Stephen’s, in Ashton on the Green. Why?”

Stephen’s heart was pounding. Was this leading to where he thought it was? Was he ready to go that far? He’d seen his friends find happiness this way. Could he? He knew without a doubt that if he took this step, he wasn’t going to let them leave. He wasn’t sure what he’d have to do, lock them up in Freddy’s dungeon, perhaps, but if they became his lovers, they were staying.

And he desperately wanted that, he realized. He’d been agonizing over his attraction to both of them, worrying about who might get hurt, and how on earth he was to choose, but he’d said it himself. He knew Hastings had feelings for Maddy. Today proved that. And he knew she trusted him. They had so much in common, including so much heartbreak locked inside. With Stephen’s help, they could heal each other.

Because all he wanted to do was love them and see them happy at last.

It was that thought, unbidden and heartfelt, that made up his mind. What he wanted and what he needed were in alignment here. By giving them both what they needed, Stephen was giving himself everything he’d ever wanted. It was, he realized, the reason he was here, in this place, at this time, with these people. As Maddy said, they could have met anywhere, but they met here.

“I guess you’re right, we were eventually destined to meet,” Hastings admitted to Maddy. “But here or there, it’s all the same. It doesn’t change what’s coming, Mads.” He sounded sad that he had to tell her that.

“Maybe not,” she agreed. “But it changes the present.” She laughed, but it was nothing more than a teary chuckle. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I want you, too. Still. Isn’t that just ridiculous? You’ve been a regular grumpy arse to me ever since I got here, and I thought I wanted Stephen. Just him. Yet, somehow, you’re a part of this.” This time she gestured around the room, just as Hastings had a moment ago.

“I have not been a grumpy arse,” Hastings protested, but his voice didn’t carry any heat.

“Yes, you have,” Stephen told him, grinning. “But we forgive you.”

“I think this place, the duke and duchess and Haversham up at the Park, and everyone else around here, has you both dreaming of impossible things.” Hastings crossed his arms and glared at him, and Stephen knew he was weakening. He wasn’t walking out. He wasn’t denying them.

“I told you nothing is impossible,” Stephen said quietly.

“You barely know how to kiss and now you’re going to take on two lovers?” Hastings asked incredulously. Stephen felt himself blush.

“I’m trying to learn how to kiss.” He refused to be embarrassed about his lack of experience.

“I think you’re a marvelous kisser,” Maddy told him, laying a hand on his arm. “I wanted to lay you down right there in the garden and fuck you silly.”



“I...oh,” Stephen said, a little shocked at her language and her admission. “Thank you.”

“And you,” Maddy said to Hastings. “When you kissed me over there the other day,” she pointed to the bookcase, “I wanted the same from you. And still I had to be the one to ask for it today.”

“What happened to never telling us what you were thinking or anything about yourself?” Hastings demanded, tossing his cravat back down onto the sofa.

“That didn’t get me anywhere,” Maddy said. “So now I’m trying honesty.” She was watching him stalk over to them. Stephen’s heart was racing as he waited, his body already aflame from Maddy’s words and the thoughts he was having about what he’d like to do with them, right now. His thoughts were a little vague, of course, but he trusted that together they could figure out where they were going.

### CHAPTER 32

“And do I make your heart sing?” Hastings demanded as he reached them and grabbed Maddy, dragging her into his arms. He bent her over slightly, holding one arm captive behind her back and it made her heart race in anticipation.

“You make it roar,” she told him. She reached up with her free hand and grabbed his lapel and pulled him down and kissed him.

The kiss was as good as she remembered. She did want Hastings, a shameful thing she’d only admitted to herself as she’d watched him and Stephen yesterday, and now, after their encounter this afternoon, she just wanted him more. He’d fascinated her from the start, like a caged beast, and she’d reacted as she always had to powerful men, with a knee to the groin and an instinctual avoidance. But he kept coming back and she couldn’t get away from him until she hadn’t wanted to. She’d watched him transform under Stephen’s regard and she wanted that, she wanted to be a part of it, of Stephen’s warm regard and the transformation he could ignite. She wanted to be transformed. And she had been.

She trusted Hastings and Stephen in a way she’d never trusted anyone. She knew they’d protect her, not just her life, but her secrets and her fears and even her weaknesses. She could be weak with them and not worry they’d take advantage of her. She could admire flowers in the garden and read books and they wouldn’t mock her. She could confess how much she wanted them, and they wouldn’t hurt her or take advantage. It was freeing, the idea that she could be herself and not have to pretend to be something else, something someone else had created because she wasn’t good enough. Here, with them, she was good enough.

Stephen stepped up behind her and freed her arm from Hastings's grip. He softly held her hand as he slid their arms around Hastings's waist and then he kissed her neck. She whimpered and Hastings broke the kiss, breathing heavily.

"Christ, yes," he said, his voice sounding like he had rocks in his throat. "Are you sure?" he asked, and Maddy wasn't sure if he was asking her or Stephen.

"Yes," she said. "Yes. Please."

"Stephen?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," Stephen said, and he did sound sure, no more hesitation as there'd been a few minutes ago. What had changed? Was it what she said?

"Why?" Hastings asked, and she knew he was wondering the same things she was.

"Because I was lying to myself that I could live without it," Stephen said. "I've been torturing myself for weeks over my attraction and growing feelings for you both. For a long time I've been, first and foremost, a man of the church. And I couldn't reconcile those feelings, my desires, with that man. The thing is, I've been telling you both I'm a man first, not a saint, yet I was still treating myself like I had to be one. A saint, I mean. And that isn't true. I've counseled others on their desires, assured them it was natural and right and good, and I wasn't allowing myself the same leniency. I was determined to be the man that everyone else wanted me to be, a paragon of virtue who had to be protected—from the harsh realities of life, of desire, of emotions—that I forgot to simply be myself. To accept myself." He rested his forehead against the side of Maddy's head. "I want this. I want you both. This is who I am."

"That's exactly how I feel," Maddy whispered. "I was so worried about being that thing other people were demanding—a lady, whatever that means. But I'm also a woman, and I need this in a way I've never let myself need something before. I feel

like you two know me better than anyone ever has, and isn't that odd, us having just met and all? But you want me . You want Maddy, and that thrills and excites me and also scares the hell out of me, the freedom of it. The freedom to tell you I want you." I love you.

"You're both daft," Hastings said. "I knew who you both were from the start. And Maddy, I've already admitted I didn't trust you at first."

"You shouldn't have," she told him honestly. "I'm a villain, Hastings. As much as Stephen's been a saint, I've been the very devil." It felt so bloody good to admit that. Someday she'd tell them how very awful she'd been. That she'd gone from picking pockets as a child to killing for Davy Bales and Bleecker when they demanded it.

Before she'd even finished speaking Hastings was shaking his head. "No, you're not. I am. And you'd both best remember it. As wonderful as this is, it's still a fantasy. There is not a happy ending here for us." He let them go, pushing their arms from around his waist. "I need you both to acknowledge that before we go any further. I'll not do this under false pretenses."

Maddy wasn't about to let this slip through her fingers. Not when she knew he was speaking the truth. "I know," she said softly.

"I know you think that," Stephen said. "I know you both do."

Hastings gave Stephen a skeptical look. "That's not exactly what I asked for."

"You've asked for a lot of things," Stephen said, snuggling Maddy into his body, rubbing his cheek in her hair and kissing her neck. Maddy watched Hastings react to it, his cheeks growing flushed as he frowned.

She reached out a hand and put it on the bare chest exposed by his open shirt.

“You are both trying to distract me,” Hastings said. He put his hand over hers and stepped in close to her again. “And I’m going to let you.”

Stephen huffed a laugh against her neck. “I thought you might,” he murmured. He slid his hands up and cupped Maddy’s breasts, and she gasped at how good it felt. He began to knead them, that firm touch she’d taught him in the garden, and it felt like a flame inside her was growing hotter and stronger.

“I’ve been with a woman once in my life,” Stephen whispered in her ear. “It was a dismal failure, if I’m being honest, and there was no warmth or intimacy to it. So, someone better tell me what to do.” The knowledge that she would be the first woman he would take to bed as a real lover, the first to learn the secrets of him and the first to share hers with him, made every touch more exciting.

Hastings stepped into her, pressing himself against her so that she felt his erection on her stomach through her clothes. Then he grabbed the side of Stephen’s head even as he slid his hand around Maddy and cupped her bottom, holding her to him.

“Telling you what to do is one of my favorite things,” Hastings growled, and then he kissed Stephen, and Maddy thought she’d faint from the rush of desire that went straight from her head to her sex.

### CHAPTER 33

Hastings couldn't believe that he had two incredible people in his arms, wanting him, wanting this. He'd told them both how terrible he could be, and yet they were still here. Stephen, my God, Stephen, in his arms. Again. What had happened between them before hadn't been a fluke, or a spur of the moment decision made rashly on Stephen's part and regretted later. And Mads, as much as he needed Stephen, he could tell that she needed him; needed them both. She was harder even than he was, ground down by life to be this sharp, blindingly bright treasure they held in their arms. How could she doubt that they wanted her? Why would they want anyone else when they could have her?

He pulled her closer as he ended his kiss with Stephen. Stephen's kisses were like sugared tea, so many flavors, soothing and sweet on his tongue, making him want more. "I lied," he whispered. "You can kiss. You can kiss like the very devil."

Stephen's soft laughter traveled through all three of them, and it made Maddy undulate against him. She caressed his neck as she kissed his collarbone. Then she bit it. Hastings's cock stood to attention at the whiplash from soft and gentle to rough and back again as she licked the sting of her bite away.

"Yes, well, I've had two very good teachers," Stephen told him. Stephen leaned down and breathed in the scent of Maddy's hair. She did smell lovely. Hastings saw her reach back so she could clutch at Stephen's hip, rubbing her bottom against Stephen's crotch, and Stephen nipped her earlobe.

"I like this," Hastings whispered. "Watching you two."

“See?” Maddy purred. “Now you know how I felt.”

“Not quite, but I’m going to,” Hastings vowed. He began to untie the laces on Maddy’s dress, but Stephen stopped him.

“As much as I would like to do this right here and right now,” Stephen said, “Mrs. Tulane is down the hall. I’m very grateful it was Maddy who found us yesterday and not her. But I do think we should take this upstairs.”

“You’re right,” Hastings agreed. He took a deep breath and let it out, and then let them both go. “I’d rather do this in a bed.”

“Some of the things I’d like to do can be done on my knees,” Maddy said with a secret little smile, and Hastings started to reach for her again as she laughed. Then he saw the puzzled look on Stephen’s face.

“Oh, this is going to be fun,” Hastings told her, grabbing her and spinning her around so he was hugging her to his chest while she faced Stephen. “The things we are going to teach him.”

Maddy stifled a laugh with her hand. “Upstairs, now,” she said when she had herself under control. “I can’t wait another second.”

“Why do I feel a little threatened?” Stephen said, his smile belying his words. “Lead on,” he said, waving them toward the door.

Hastings bent over and swept Maddy off her feet with an arm under her knees. Her arms closed around his neck, and she looked delighted. He was fiercely glad. There were things he wanted to do with Stephen, but there were many things he wanted to do for Maddy.

Stephen followed them out the door and up the stairs. When they got to Stephen's room, Stephen quietly opened the door and ushered them in, looking up and down the hallway before he stepped inside and closed it just as quietly.

"Essie?" he asked.

Maddy shook her head. "She and I had a long discussion after dinner, and she won't be bothered by us."

"Excellent." Stephen sighed, smiled, and then ripped off his jacket and tossed it aside.

Hastings could tell Maddy was as obsessed with Stephen's physique as he was. He set her feet down and patted her bottom, pushing her in Stephen's direction. "Go play," he told her.

She didn't need to be told twice. She crossed over to where Stephen stood in front of the windows with their half open curtains and placed both hands on his chest. Stephen closed his eyes and put his hands over hers. "That feels lovely," he said.

"It certainly does," Maddy agreed. She ran her hands up and down his chest and his arms, and then circled him, caressing his back. "You're lovely all over," she told him. "I thought all parsons were round, somber, old men until I met you."

"How many parsons have you known?" Stephen asked, a smile in his voice as he looked over his shoulder at her.

"Just you," she said, running her hand across his upper back. "That's just what I imagined, is all."

"Well, let me get the rest of my clothes off so you can judge me properly."



That made Maddy move quickly out of the way. “Yes, please,” she said eagerly.

Hastings pulled his shirt off over his head and tossed it onto the back of a chair, then beckoned Stephen over with a curl of his fingers. “Let me help,” he said. Stephen reached out and took his hand, letting Hastings pull him closer.

“If I remember correctly, you’re quite good at helping me out of my clothes,” he said to Hastings. As Hastings started to undo the buttons on his trousers, Stephen put his hands on Hastings’s chest and caressed his muscles, ruffling his chest hair and rubbing his nipples. Hastings’s heartbeat became a little erratic and his breath stuttered. Stephen leaned down and kissed his neck and then licked along his collarbone. “Salty,” he murmured, and suddenly Hastings felt like he was all thumbs and couldn’t work a button loose.

He felt Stephen’s hands at his waistband. “Let me return the favor,” Stephen whispered against his skin as he began to unbutton Hastings’s trousers. Suddenly it was a race to the finish, and Hastings shoved Stephen’s loosened trousers down over that glorious arse. When Hastings’s trousers were open Stephen took his time working them down, his hands brushing against his arse cheeks and sliding against his hips until Hastings was mad with wanting to be touched, his cock aching with need.

Suddenly Stephen gasped and arched his back. Hastings looked over his shoulder and saw Maddy caressing his bum. “I want to bite this,” she said, pinching one muscular cheek. “I want to rub my breasts against it.”

“Let me disrobe fully,” Stephen said, sounding a little breathless. “And then you may do whatever you like. I can’t imagine there is anything I won’t enjoy.”

Maddy suddenly stepped back and she looked a little uncertain in the candlelight. “Are you sure?” she asked. “You were with Hastings earlier. And you said you didn’t

enjoy it when you were with a woman before. I mean, if you prefer men, that's all right, truly."

Hastings paused as he was kicking off his boots, waiting to hear Stephen's answer. Maddy had just made him realize that, with Stephen's giving, nurturing nature, he might be doing this for them instead of for himself, no matter what he'd said earlier.

Stephen looked between the two of them. "For God's sake," he said impatience in his voice. "I've already told you I want this. How many times must I say it? Should I beg?" He got down on his knees and crawled awkwardly to Maddy. His trousers were tucked up under that amazing arse. When he reached her, he slid his hands under her dress and Maddy sucked in a harsh breath as she grabbed his shoulders tightly. "Please, please, please," Stephen whispered. "Have me, Maddy." He glanced over his shoulder with a teasing look. "Hastings, won't you please take me, too?" His teasing erased Hastings's doubts and stoked his desire.

Stephen turned and buried his face in Maddy's skirts, right at her cunt, and he rubbed his face there. "Parson, you are very naughty," Maddy said, her laugh breathless. "And I will absolutely do that." She dropped to her knees and kissed him, her hands going to the plump cheeks she'd admired earlier and squeezing. Stephen wrapped her tightly in his arms and all teasing was gone from their kiss.

Hastings kicked his boots off and pulled off the rest of his clothes. Watching Stephen and Maddy kiss was strange to him. It was exciting, and even though he wasn't over there with them, he felt a part of their embrace. He'd never felt that before when he watched people fuck. Oh, he'd seen it as a child, when he lived in tight quarters and there was no privacy to be found, and as an agent when he was spying on people. None of that had excited him. But these two kissing had the same effect on him as if they held his cock in their mouths.

When he was naked, he walked over to them and stood just to the side, so close his

erection was nearly touching their faces. They ended their kiss, and both were breathing heavily. Almost as one they turned to look at his cock, and both of their faces showed eager welcome.

“Show him what you can do on your knees,” Hastings told Maddy.

### CHAPTER 34

“I feel like a fool,” Stephen said, looking up at Hastings. “I’m older than both of you and yet I’m the untutored one here in the arts of love.” He was more than a little unsure of himself with these two, feeling every inch the provincial country parson.

“Arts of love?” Maddy said, sliding her hand from his shoulder down his arm until she clasped his hand in hers. “I like that. I like the way it sounds. So much better than fucking.”

“I like it, too,” Hastings said, and Stephen saw a smile cross his face, fleeting but genuine. “I honestly don’t think there’s ever been love involved before when I’ve shagged someone.”

Stephen couldn’t catch his breath. “And now?” he asked, nervously awaiting Hastings’s answer.

“What was it you said just a bit ago?” Hastings asked. “Oh, yeah. Your heart is involved in physical intimacy. Something along those lines, right? Well, my heart is involved.”

Stephen wrapped his arm around Hastings’s leg and pressed his face against the other man’s hip. “I’m glad,” he murmured, not wanting them to see how much even that vague confession meant to him.

Hastings tipped his head back with a finger under his chin. “Stephen, you had to know that already. I haven’t really tried to hide my feelings for you from anyone.”

Stephen closed his eyes and shook his head. "It's still good to hear the words."

"That doesn't mean—" Hastings began, but Stephen shook his head again as he interrupted.

"No. Don't say anymore. I don't want to discuss anything other than this moment, this togetherness, this act of love."

"All right," Hastings said quietly.

Maddy had been silent, letting them have that moment while she lightly ran her fingers across Stephen's upper back. Her nails were sharp, and she was almost tickling him with them. Now she scratched him like a cat and Stephen was shocked when his cock reacted with enthusiasm to the sting of pain.

"My heart is very much involved. I'd like my quim to be, too," she whispered archly, biting his earlobe. Her language shocked and thrilled him. His reaction made him feel more inexperienced than ever. Hastings just laughed.

"I'll bet you would," Hastings told her. Stephen saw him grab ahold of her hair, which was piled on her head in a fashionable style. He pulled her away from Stephen's ear. "Let's put that busy mouth to work." He took his erection in hand and pointed it down at Maddy.

Maddy leaned forward and, rising higher on her knees, took the tip of Hastings cock into her mouth. Every part of Stephen grew hot and heavy and aching watching her. Her cheeks hollowed as she sucked, and Hastings used his grip on her hair to move her head up and down, more of his cock disappearing into her mouth before she slid back to the tip and then forward again. Hastings hissed, but Stephen could tell it was pleasure.

“It feels that good?” he whispered, unable to look away.

Maddy slid all the way off and Hastings let her. “You’ve never had anyone suck your cock before?” she asked with obvious disbelief.

“No,” he said. “Should I have?”

“What on earth?” she exclaimed. “With a grand cock like you’ve got?”

“First he sucks mine,” Hastings said firmly. “Then he gets his.”

Stephen’s stomach was suddenly full of butterflies. “You want me to...to do what Maddy just did?”

“That’s right,” Hastings said. “I want to put my cock in your saintly parson’s mouth and fuck it.”

“Oh my God,” Maddy said, her eyes closing. “That is the naughtiest thing I’ve ever heard someone say.” Her eyes popped open. “And trust me, coming from me, that’s saying a lot.”

“Show him how,” Hastings said to her.

“You are bossy,” she replied, but she tempered it with a kiss on the side of his erection. “Come here, Stephen, love,” she told him. She pulled him up to kneel next to her. “All you have to do is take it in your mouth, like it’s a sweet treat you want to suck on, like sugar candy.” She took Hastings’s cock and guided it to her mouth and showed Stephen.

“Christ on a crutch,” Hastings muttered. “You’re good at that. You’ve got an amazing mouth.”

“I wish I could say I’ve never done this before,” she replied, her voice wry with regret. “But this is the first time I’ve ever wanted to.” She smiled up at him. “You’re clean and you smell nice, and you taste salty and sweet. And I like knowing it’s you in my mouth.”

“That sounds like a declaration of love,” Hastings teased.

She laughed and Stephen’s heart wrenched. She sounded so happy, so carefree. He’d never seen her like this, unconcerned with appearances and not trying to be something she wasn’t. It was as if she’d stripped herself bare before them, showing them what she’d kept hidden underneath. It made him want her more, so much more. He wanted to give her himself, and Hastings, and everything, anything she wanted.

He reached up and took Hastings’s cock from her. He’d held it earlier, and yet it still thrilled him, the act of physically loving Hastings. Now that he was doing it, he couldn’t believe he’d waited so long. Why had he waited?

With my body I thee worship, he thought. He leaned forward, and with his eyes locked on Hastings, took his cock in his mouth just as Maddy had done.

He swirled his tongue over the end, toying with the hood there, and he watched Hastings shudder with intense desire, his eyes like slits as he kept watching Stephen. “I’ve dreamed of this,” Hastings whispered.

Stephen slid his mouth down, taking as much of Hastings’s cock as he could. He held it there, and had to swallow, and Hastings cursed softly. Then he slid his mouth down and off. Hastings’s taste lingered in his mouth. Maddy was right, sweet and salty. Stephen could feel her watching him and it heightened his arousal and enjoyment.

“Did I do that right?” he asked, knowing that he had, enjoying being the tease.

“Any more right and you’d be swallowing something else,” Hastings said breathlessly. “Do you...is it all right? For you?”

“I like it,” Stephen said honestly. “I like pleasuring you. Giving you pleasure, I mean.” He rubbed his thumb over the tip of Hastings’s cock, sliding the hood back and a drop of moisture was there, as if just waiting for Stephen to taste it. So he did. He licked the end slowly, tasting Hastings’s seed, and it was so decadent his own cock jerked and ached. He hummed his pleasure and Hastings wrapped his hand over Stephen’s on his cock and squeezed tightly.

“I can’t last,” Hastings said with a groan. “Watching him enjoy my cock in his mouth has me ready to burst.”

“Untie my laces,” Maddy said to Stephen breathlessly. He turned to her, suddenly embarrassed because she’d witnessed his enjoyment. She was sitting back on her heels, cupping her breasts in her palms. “Hurry,” she said. “I want to feel you on my skin.”

Hastings leaned over and fumbled with the ties on her dress and then just ripped them open.

“My dress,” she hissed. “I only have the three, you know.” She was looking over her shoulder at the tattered laces of the brown dress he’d admired on her.

“I’ll buy you another dress,” Hastings promised. “I’m all thumbs right now. God, Mads, hurry.” He cupped Stephen’s chin and turned his face and guided his cock to Stephen’s mouth, tapping the end on his lower lip. It was so erotic Stephen moaned. “Open up,” Hastings whispered. “Let me in.”

Stephen opened his mouth and let Hastings slide himself inside. He tasted so good Stephen sucked on him as if he really was sugar candy. Hastings moaned and then he



began to rock his hips, moving in and out of Stephen's mouth, and Stephen knelt there and let him do it, let him fuck his mouth. It was erotic and thrilling and Stephen reached out and grabbed Hastings's legs, scooting closer, letting Hastings do whatever he wanted to him. He moaned as he felt Hastings's cock get impossibly hard in his mouth, felt the throb of his desire on his tongue, tasted his impending release.

Hastings was panting as if he was running a race. "I'm going to come," he said tightly.

"Of course you are," Maddy said, laughter in her voice. She scooted up behind Stephen. "I'm about to come, and he hasn't got his mouth on me." She leaned against Stephen's back, and he felt her bare breasts pressing into his skin, and all he could do was moan his pleasure around Hastings's cock in his mouth.

Hastings pulled out of Stephen's mouth and Stephen found that he was panting, too, that he missed the tangy hardness of him. He buried his face in the springy curls next to Hastings's cock as Hastings stroked himself. Then Hastings pushed himself back into Stephen's mouth and suddenly Stephen was trying to swallow a mouthful of his salty release. Maddy was leaning over his shoulder, her lips at his ear, panting as hard as he and Hastings was.

"That's right," she told him. She put her hand around his throat as he swallowed, and Stephen thought he was going to spend right then. When Hastings cock grew soft and his grip on Stephen's shoulder relaxed, Stephen let him out of his mouth.

"That was fucking perfect," Hastings told him, his voice thready. "I can barely stand I just came so hard."

Maddy moved away from Stephen so he could relax back on his heels. Then Hastings knelt in front of him and to Stephen's surprise he kissed him. He held Stephen's head

in both of his hands and ate at Stephen's mouth, licking every corner, tracing his lips, and soon Stephen was clinging to him, desperate for release, for more touching, more heat, and sweat, and Maddy and Hastings. Hastings broke the kiss and a gentle sound from beside them made Stephen look over at Maddy.

She was squeezing her breasts so hard it looked painful, but she had a look of ecstasy on her face. When she saw Stephen watching her, she reached out and cupped his cheek. "Come here," she said softly. "Come and taste me." She guided Stephen to her breast, and he licked tentatively at her nipple.

"You taste different," he said in wonder. Maddy laughed, but it was tremulous.

"Do I?" she asked. "I wouldn't know. Now suck on my breast like you sucked on his cock."

Stephen looked up at her with surprise. "Like candy?" he asked.

"No," she said. "Rough. Like a man who is making love to me and is desperate to taste my skin and make me wet."

"Christ almighty, Mads. The things you say," Hastings said. "Watch me," he told Stephen. He gathered Maddy to him and, leaning her over his arm, licked her other breast. Then he took most of it in his mouth and sucked, hard enough to hollow his cheeks.

"Yes," Maddy hissed. She buried her hands in Hastings's hair.

"I don't want to hurt you," Stephen said, unsure of how far to go.

"I like it," Maddy said breathlessly. "I can't help it. I'm sorry." She pushed Hastings off, and she looked upset.

“No, no,” Stephen said frantically. “I’m not judging you. I’ve just never done it. I don’t want to hurt you because I don’t know what I’m doing.”

Hastings had his forehead on Maddy’s shoulder. “No one is judging anyone,” he said as firmly as he could, although his voice was still a little weak. “He’s just learning his way, Mads.”

“Right, right,” she said, taking a deep breath. “I am, too. I mean, I didn’t know I’d like that. But it’s what I want. And when Hastings did it, I liked it. I want you to do it, too.”

“What have people done before?” Stephen asked. “I mean, just tell us what you want.”

“I am,” she said, frustration and a little anger in her voice. “I don’t know what I like. I’ve let a few people shove their cocks in me wherever they had a mind to and wherever I’d let them, and after they came, they went away, and I got whatever it was I needed from them. There was none of this. No pleasuring me.” She sighed. “I didn’t want it from them. I want it from you. So, I’m learning what I like. Is that all right?”

“Darling Maddy,” Stephen said, forcing the sorrow out of his voice at her confession. “Everything you want is all right. Tell me when I’ve gone too far, though, because I won’t know.” He took a deep breath and confessed his own desires; desires he’d denied himself until now. “The truth is, I want to do all manner of rough things to you both. I want to suck on you, and bite you, and take you from behind so hard you cry out from it.”

“Oh God,” she said breathlessly. “Yes, yes, yes.”

### CHAPTER 35

“Maddy,” Hastings asked, forcing her to look at him. “Has anyone ever kissed your cunt?”

“No, but I think I’d like it, your mouths on me,” Maddy said. She watched Stephen as she said it. His face was ruddy, his brow sweaty. He had his eyes closed like he was imagining it, his hands fisted on his knees. She smiled as she watched her very naughty parson. He liked the words, didn’t he? He liked to hear these things about her. He liked her. She cupped one of her breasts and her hand slid down between her legs. “I’m ripe now. God, someone fuck me.”

Stephen grabbed her unexpectedly and dragged her over to him, her knees burning a little on the rough carpet. She liked that, too. She liked feeling so much, liked being almost overwhelmed with sensation. Stephen stood up still holding her arm and she was forced to stand up with him.

“Let’s get you undressed properly, shall we?” he said in a polite voice filled with restrained need. He spun her around and pushed her dress and shift and drawers off over her hips in one motion. Then he pulled her after him to the bed and she nearly fell with the tangle of clothes around her ankles. Hastings caught her and picked her up from behind and followed Stephen, who hadn’t let go of her. Hastings threw her down on her back on the bed and she bounced a little with the force of it.

She loved every minute of it. Every sign they gave her that they were desperate to possess her. She wanted to be possessed. She wanted to be owned, to be claimed, by these two perfect men. One light, one dark, one sinner and one saint. And all hers

tonight. She might never have this chance again, to be with men like this, as herself, just wanting and not hiding anything. She knew she'd never meet anyone like them again, never have a night like this again.

Stephen had let go of her and he stood there staring down at her with hot, wild eyes. She shoved the clothes away with her feet, leaving her in nothing but her stockings.

"Hair down," Stephen said roughly. Hastings sat down beside her and began pulling the pins out of her hair gently, and she sat up and let him do it, her gaze caught by Stephen's like a rabbit with a wolf.

"I didn't know you'd be like this," she said, embarrassed at how breathless she was, how aroused his rough handling and demands made her.

"I...I didn't either," Stephen said, taking a deep breath. "I'm sorry." He turned away, hands on hips. She recognized that now, knew that was what he did when he was trying to get control of himself.

"Don't," she pleaded. "Don't control it. Take me with it. I want it. I want you to want me this much." These were the secrets she craved. No other woman had seen him like this. Only her.

Stephen didn't answer her. He just kicked off his boots and pulled the rest of his clothes off. When he was naked, he turned back to her and she could see how hard he was, his big, gorgeous cock standing up against his stomach. Her woman parts clenched in anticipation of holding that inside her.

"You are so fucking gorgeous," Hastings whispered, and he was staring at Stephen. "Do you even understand that?"

Stephen laughed, and it was deep and a little wild, not like his usual light laughter.

“You two are the only ones who think so,” he said in response. “And that is more than enough for me.”

“I cannot wait to watch you two fuck,” Hastings said, sounding like an eager little boy with a new toy. He’d finished taking down Maddy’s hair and was gently brushing it out with his fingers.

“This is not fucking,” Stephen said firmly. “I’m making love to both of you. Don’t forget that.”

Maddy’s heart constricted in her chest. “I’d like that,” she whispered. She was ashamed of how much she needed to be loved by him.

“Good. My God, you are beautiful.” He climbed onto the bed on all fours, until he was right over her, forcing her to lie under him. He bent and kissed her and Maddy could still taste Hastings in his mouth, and she whimpered at the heat that shot through her cunt. She wrapped both arms around Stephen’s neck and held him ferociously, digging her nails into his shoulders and biting his lip. He kissed her back just as roughly, biting her lips and clasp ing her to him with one arm so tightly she could barely breath. She was giddy with it, with him, with the heat and passion and desire, and it was Stephen, Stephen, and she clutched him to her as if she could climb inside his skin.

He let her go suddenly and she clung to him. “Let go,” he demanded. He cleared his throat. “Lie down, darling.” She reluctantly let go and lay back down. Stephen rose to his knees and looked at her from her face down to the juncture of her thighs. Then he leaned over and rearranged her legs, spreading them wider. She felt exposed, a tiny little thrill of fear as she wondered what would happen next and forced herself to just lie there and let it happen.

To her surprise, Stephen reached over and grasped the back of Hastings’s head. He

pulled Hastings's mouth to his and kissed him, a deep, slow kiss, and she could see their dueling tongues, watched as their mouths glided from one angle to another. Hastings came to his knees to face Stephen awkwardly because Stephen wouldn't relinquish his hold on the back of his head.

Maddy was so aroused by their passion she couldn't wait. She ran her hand down from her breast to her cunt and slid her finger through the cream there. Usually, she never got this wet until after she'd come. It felt so good, and she moaned as she rubbed the hard little button that she knew would give her what she craved. Then Stephen was there, pulling her hand away. He pulled it up to his mouth and sucked on her damp finger. When he released it, he held her palm to his chest, rubbing it over his nipple. She saw him shiver.

"Hastings," he said, or rather commanded. Hastings came closer and then Stephen was pushing his head down toward Maddy's cunt. Hastings didn't need to be told what to do. He put his mouth on her and Maddy couldn't control the cry she let out at the divine feeling of his tongue lapping her. She couldn't believe this was happening. That she was here with them, and they were loving her.

Hastings began to kiss her, his tongue sliding inside her passage, and then he tickled the hard bud in her crease. She dug her nails into Stephen's chest and held Hastings's head to her with her other hand.

"Yes," she panted. "This."

Stephen smiled. "Yes," he agreed. "This."

Then Hastings pushed his finger inside her and bit her bud softly and she broke into a million stars.

### CHAPTER 36

After Maddy came apart under him Stephen was frantic. He wanted her so much. He needed her in a way he hadn't known was possible. He was all desire and sensation, and it was making thinking hard to do. He couldn't, shouldn't, take her. If he did, he was honor bound to marry her. And of course, he did want to marry her. But she was not prepared to make that sort of commitment. She'd gone into this evening's lovemaking on the understanding that she would be leaving him.

But he understood from what she'd said and the look in her eyes that if he denied himself, she'd see it as a rejection and denial of her. And he wouldn't hurt her like that for the world. So, the logical thing was to make love to her and simply not let her leave.

But he had to give her fair warning.

"Maddy, darling," he said. He was alarmed at how tense he sounded, how much of his desire was seeping out in his voice.

"Yes," she said, as if she was answering a question he hadn't asked yet.

"You don't understand," he told her, talking very fast. Too fast. "If I, we, do this, then I'm going to marry you."

"What?" she asked, a little frown on her face. She was still panting from her release, and he could see sweat on her brow. Her blonde hair was spread across the pillow, and she was as enticing as Venus, as desirable, and he was having a hard time



remembering why he was hesitating.

“Stephen,” Hastings said, making Stephen look at him where he sat beside Maddy’s hip. He shouldn’t have. His lips glistened with Maddy’s cream, and Stephen groaned and leaned down and kissed him because he couldn’t not kiss him like that.

Hastings took his kiss, as he always seemed to do. He never pushed Stephen away or insisted on talking about it first. He was a man of action, and Stephen was starting to understand why. It was better to ask forgiveness than ask permission. But Hastings never required either. He just gave Stephen whatever he wanted and was happy to do so. Stephen tasted Maddy and Hastings all mixed up together in the kiss and it was heaven, and it was hell. He couldn’t give this up, he couldn’t. He broke the kiss and Hastings was looking at him sadly.

“Don’t,” Hastings whispered. “Don’t ruin it. Don’t try to make plans. Just...acts of love, remember?”

“Acts of love,” Stephen whispered to him, trying to make him understand that, yes, he did love them. He loved them to madness. This was madness. He turned back to Maddy and silently vowed, I will marry you. I will not let you go, nor Hastings. Neither of you shall ever leave me. Just saying it to himself gave him a sense of peace. He was flooded with the rightness of this, the rightness of them . This was meant to be, and Stephen needed to let his faith take the reins. All would work out as it should.

“Acts of love,” he said to Maddy, and she smiled.

“Yes,” she said, reaching for him. “Acts of love.”

When Stephen covered her with his body, and she enclosed him in her embrace it felt like home at last. Her warmth, her passion, her insecurities, all of them made her

perfect, made her meant for him. And he would give her all of himself, including his body. He'd given himself to Hastings in the same way. He owed Maddy nothing less.

She spread her legs and he tucked himself against her wet juncture, the vision of Hastings kissing her there making his head swim. His cock throbbed to be inside her. He rubbed against her, loving the feel of her wet pubic hair on the sensitive skin of his erection. "Is that all right?" he asked.

"Yes. It will always be yes for you," she said. Then she did the one thing that could make the moment more perfect. She turned to Hastings and held out her hand. "And you. Always yes. Whatever you want."

"Acts of love," Hastings said, taking her hand. He lay down beside her and kissed her shoulder. Then he leaned over and kissed Stephen's shoulder, too.

"Kiss me," she whispered to Hastings. "While he's inside me I want you to kiss me."

"Why do I feel like I've lost all control here?" Hastings murmured against her lips. "Both of you ordering me around all night."

"You love it," Stephen told him, and then he pushed his cock into the damp heat of Maddy's passage and lost the ability to speak or even think clearly. Maddy moaned into Hastings's mouth and then Hastings silenced her with a deep kiss as Stephen worked himself in and out several times, going deeper each time. She was so tight, so exquisite. It had not felt like this his one time before, not at all like this.

Maddy had one arm wrapped around Hastings and the other wrapped around Stephen, pushing the two men so close together that with every move Stephen made inside her his shoulder rubbed against Hastings's. He loved feeling them both like that. Maddy wrapped her legs around his waist and began to thrust against him, and it took Stephen a moment to adjust his rhythm to hers. When the perfect synchronicity was

achieved it was bliss. Unlike anything he'd felt before, even when he'd been with Hastings. Maddy broke her kiss with Hastings only to pull Stephen's mouth to hers. They kissed and made love like that, exchanging kisses among the three of them while Stephen moved inside her, until it grew rough, and his thrusts were harder. She broke away from Hastings's mouth with a cry and he put a hand over her mouth.

"Shh," Hastings whispered. "Don't wake anyone up."

Maddy moaned and Stephen thrust harder into her, wanting to fuck her right through the mattress. "Hold her down," Stephen said, in a gravel-filled voice he hardly recognized as himself.

Maddy moaned and arched her back, taking his cock with frantic movements of her hips. Hastings grabbed her hands and held them over her head, and she bit her lip, and Stephen leaned down and took her nipple between his teeth. Maddy growled, shaking her head as if she desperately needed to cry out again. He grabbed her hip and forced her to his rhythm. She made a keening sound, and then she was coming on his cock. He could feel the pulsing beat of her passion and he exploded inside her in a relief of heat and shuddering pleasure.

### CHAPTER 37

Hastings had never done this. Well, he'd done a lot of things tonight he'd never done, just like Stephen and Maddy. But this lying about and wallowing in the touch of each other was new to him. He didn't want to get up and walk away, which was what he'd always done in the past. He wanted to stay right where he was, sitting up, his back against the headboard, Stephen's back pressed to his chest and Maddy stretched out on top of Stephen.

He had one hand pressed to Stephen's chest, rubbing against that sinfully soft chest hair, and with the other he was combing through Maddy's hair, which looked like spun gold in the moonlight. It was curly, with big, full waves as he combed it out. It was longer than he'd thought, too. She looked young and beautiful and carefree. And in love. She looked like she was in love as she kept glancing between him and Stephen. Did he look like that, too? He was sure Stephen did. Stephen had declared himself to them both tonight. Hastings was too much of a coward.

Maddy started kissing Stephen's chest almost absentmindedly. She picked up Hastings's hand and kissed his palm and put it back on Stephen's chest.

"I like the fucking best," she said, and Hastings couldn't hold back a laugh. She frowned at him. "Stop it. There's nothing wrong with it. With me. I'm allowed to say that."

Stephen squeezed Hastings's hand. "Yes, you are," he told Maddy. She leaned up and kissed him softly. "I liked it, too. Very much," he said when she pulled away.

“What else did you like?” she asked. “I think you liked Hastings’s cock.”

“Hmm, did he now?” Hastings asked idly. He leaned down and bit Stephen’s earlobe gently. “I liked him liking it,” he whispered into Stephen’s ear.

“I did like it in my mouth,” Stephen confessed. “I enjoyed giving you both pleasure with my body.”

That made Hastings pause. “I guess I never thought about it like that,” he said. “But that’s what you did. You let me fuck your mouth and it felt amazing.” Stephen looked at him over his shoulder and Hastings couldn’t resist kissing that mouth again. He’d never get tired of it. When they broke the kiss Hastings was growing hard again.

“I’d like to fuck you both,” Maddy said. “I mean, I already have, but at some point, I want to fuck you both together. You know, both of you inside me.”

“What?” Stephen asked. Hastings was too busy imagining it to say anything.

“You know, one in my front and one in my back,” Maddy said. “I haven’t done it before, though lots of men have tried to get me to. But I’d like that with you two.”

“I’ve heard of it, but I didn’t know if you’d want that,” Stephen said. He sounded amazed. “I mean, yes, I’d like that.”

Hastings burst out laughing. “I’ve never done it, either, but I know I’d definitely like to try that.” He was ready to fuck Maddy right now, truth be told. She and Stephen had been amazing to watch. She was a wildcat in bed, and Stephen was her match.

Stephen sighed. “I have a confession to make.” He looked over his shoulder at Hastings. “Last night was not the first time you and I had sexual relations.”

“What?” Hastings was confused. “Me?”

Stephen looked away, but wrapped Hastings’s arm tight around him, holding it with both of his hands. Maddy looked as confused as Hastings.

“The night after Maddy and Essie arrived, before we went to the Park, you stumbled into my bed, naked and drunk again.”

“Well, I knew that,” Hastings said. “But I’d done that a dozen times before. I woke up there.”

“Yes, well, this time, you came with one clear objective. You woke me with kisses and one thing led to another and before I knew it, I was half naked against you and we had both...found our release.” He sounded embarrassed.

“Damn, I’m sorry, Stephen,” Hastings said. “I didn’t mean to force you like that.”

“Oh, no,” Stephen said, sitting up with Maddy in his arms. “It wasn’t like that. I may have said no to begin with, but once we started kissing, I was a willing participant. I felt like the worst sort of seducer, taking advantage of an inebriated man.”

There was a second of silence and then both Hastings and Maddy burst into laughter. “You?” Maddy asked in between giggles. “Taking advantage of him?” She just shook her head and laughed harder.

“I was literally naked when I crawled into your bed,” Hastings told him, still amused. “I couldn’t have made it any plainer what I wanted unless I’d said, ‘Kiss me and fuck me silly, Stephen.’”

“Still,” Stephen said. “You didn’t even remember it the next day, did you? I had no choice but to keep it to myself since it was clearly not your intention.”

“It has been my intention since the first time I crawled into your bed,” Hastings told him, exasperated. “Is that why you’ve been acting so odd lately?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Stephen said, though he clearly did.

“It is,” Hastings answered his own question. “You should have told me. And for your information, I started having some very vivid dreams about you after that night, which I now realize were probably memories. No wonder you tasted familiar to me. I just thought it was because I’d been dreaming of you like that for so long. How did I manage to get you so hot and bothered you couldn’t say no?”

“Truthfully? All you had to do was start kissing me.” Stephen sounded disgusted with himself.

“If only I had known it would be that easy,” Hastings said. He pulled Stephen back against him, but Maddy was frowning and did not follow him.

“I feel like I’m coming between you,” she said. “There was obviously something going on with you before I arrived.”

“Not this again,” Hastings groaned. He reached over Stephen and pulled Maddy back down, so she was stretched out across Stephen’s chest. “Neither of us knew you existed,” he told her. “And once we did, you got under both of our skins. There’s no getting out of this now, Mads. You’re in it.”

“Why do you both love it here so much?” Stephen asked a few seconds later. Maddy had laid her head down on his chest and it was Stephen who was now combing his fingers through her hair.

“It’s just so calm,” Maddy said in a dreamy voice. “It’s bright and sunny, and smells nice, and you can see things growing and hear the birds.” She rubbed her cheek on

Stephen's chest. "And no one here cares if I'm just Maddy. No one's trying to make me do bad things or change me. Everyone is so lovely and nice."

Hastings had forgotten what it was like not to have fresh air and trees and nice things. Sir Barnabas had picked him up off the street when he was young, younger than Maddy, certainly. And he'd given Hastings all those things. And a safe place. Well, as safe as you could be when you were a secret agent for the Home Office. He picked up one of Maddy's hands and kissed the tip of each finger and she giggled without looking up at him.

"I can tell that's Hastings," she said in the same dreamy voice. "I like that I can tell your kisses apart."

"What do you like about this place, Hastings?" Stephen asked quietly, still stroking Maddy's hair.

"You," Hastings said honestly. "And Maddy, too. And fresh bread."

"I think you're in love with Mrs. Tulane," Maddy teased.

"Maybe," Hastings said, closing his eyes as he leaned back into the pillows, getting more comfortable. "Maybe."



### CHAPTER 38

“G ood morning, Mrs. Tulane.”

Maddy was trying to speak normally, as Hastings had put it last evening. He said when she was trying to be a lady she sounded like someone’s great-aunt. Which was apparently not a good thing.

“Why do you sound strange when you’re talking to other people?” he had asked. Maddy had confessed she learned to speak properly as part of her disguise, and it was hard to forget it. “I read a dictionary,” she said as if confessing a dastardly crime. “I needed to improve my vocabulary, so I read Mr. Johnson’s English Dictionary .” But she had promised to try not to talk like that, and she was starting with Mrs. Tulane.

She hesitantly stepped into the kitchen. She realized she was twisting her fingers together nervously and forced her hands down at her sides. She’d killed men in the dark alleys of London’s stews, for heaven’s sake. She could take on one cantankerous housekeeper in the country.

Mrs. Tulane turned slowly from the work counter to face her, a scowl on her face. “What now?” she asked rudely.

Maddy’s heart was pounding in her chest. She knew she was being ridiculous about this. She took a deep breath and stood straighter. “I was wondering if you might be able to, perhaps, if you have the time, teach me how to make bread.” She was gripping the skirt of her dress in both hands, and she forced her fists open and smoothed the material. She couldn’t afford to ruin this one. She only had two left.

“You want me to what?” Mrs. Tulane asked, an incredulous look on her face.

Maddy gave up all pretense of confidence and clasped her hands at her waist again. “Teach me to make bread?” she asked, hating how meek she sounded. What on earth was it about Mrs. Tulane that made her so nervous?

“And why would you be wanting to learn that?” the housekeeper asked suspiciously.

“Well, Hastings...that is, Mr. Hastings, Sheriff Hastings, he said it was his favorite thing. Your fresh baked bread. And I thought, maybe, I could learn how to make it? For him? And Mr. Matthews, of course. And it would certainly, I’m sure, come in handy wherever I go. I mean, when I leave. Here. When I go.” She wanted him to remember her when she was gone, if not as a lover, as someone who had cared enough to give him this.

Mrs. Tulane stood there blinking at her. Maddy had no idea what was going through her mind.

“It was a silly idea,” Maddy said when she couldn’t stand the silence any longer. “I don’t know what I was thinking. I don’t know how to cook.” She was shaking her head. “I’m so sorry to have bothered you. Really.” She turned to leave, desperate to get out of this awkward situation.

“Stop right there, missy,” Mrs. Tulane ordered, and Maddy stopped as if she were on a leash. She slowly turned to face the older woman. “So, you want to make bread for Mr. Hastings?” Mrs. Tulane asked, a calculating look in her eye.

“Yes, ma’am,” Maddy replied.

“Does Mr. Matthews know?”

“That I want to learn to make bread?” Maddy asked. “No. I wanted to surprise him, too.” The biggest surprise would be if Mrs. Tulane agreed to teach her. Stephen would be delighted that the two women had gotten along long enough for that to happen. Perhaps not as happy as Hastings, but still.

“Hmm,” Mrs. Tulane said. She paced back and forth in front of the cupboard, pausing to look at Maddy every few steps. Maddy didn’t dare move until she gave her permission. After what seemed a considerable amount of time as she seemed to wrestle with something internally, Mrs. Tulane stopped and faced her.

“Fine. I’ll do it.” Her lips were thinned in a sour expression. She didn’t look happy at her decision.

“If it’s a bother, you needn’t go to any trouble for me,” Maddy said, inching a step backwards out of the kitchen. “I don’t want to interrupt your plans or schedule.”

“Don’t be a ninnyhammer,” Mrs. Tulane said briskly. “I’ve already said I’ll do it. If it was an imposition, I’d tell you that, too.” Maddy was quite sure she would.

“Thank you, Mrs. Tulane. I do appreciate it.” Maddy wasn’t sure what to do next.

“Well, don’t just stand there. Go wash your hands and then come over here so we can start. The bread’s not going to make itself for supper, and we’ve only so much time.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Maddy said, and barely suppressed a grin as she headed for the wash bowl.

An hour later she was leaning over, about to peek under the towel covering her rising bread dough when Essie came into the kitchen.

“What are you doing?” Essie demanded.

“Here, get away from there!” Mrs. Tulane said sharply. “You can’t peek. It needs the dark and the warmth to rise properly. Do you want to ruin it?”

Maddy jumped away from the counter. “No!” she cried out, wringing her hands. “I didn’t ruin it. I swear. I never looked.”

“Looked at what? What’s under there?” Essie came over and started to reach for the towel, and Maddy slapped her hand away.

“Don’t you dare,” she told her. “It’s my first loaf. Mrs. Tulane says I’m a natural.”

“A natural what? Lunatic?” Essie asked, rubbing her hand.

“You took your arm out of the sling!” Maddy had just noticed. “Are you sure it’s all right?”

“I was off to see the town witch this morning and he said it’s right as rain,” Essie told her. She stretched her arm out and then winced. “It might still hurt a little, but he said that’s natural as the muscle is still mending. But he said it’s best to use it now.”

“That would be Dr. Pearson,” Mrs. Tulane said, her voice reeking with disapproval. “He’s fresh out of medical college and has very modern ideas.”

“You don’t approve?” Maddy asked, surprised.

Mrs. Tulane sniffed. “We had more live than die with old Dr. Traywel, so I’m sure I don’t know why things had to change. But His Grace insisted and retired the old doctor to Lyme. That was before Their Graces’s last babe was born.” She glanced around the kitchen and leaned in, and Maddy and Essie followed suit. “Between us, Her Grace is getting older, and it’s said they feared for her when the last was born.”

“Oh, dear,” Maddy said. It was hard to imagine the lively and vivacious duchess as old, much less infirm. She looked as if she was made to produce ducal offspring indefinitely.

“I’ve never needed a doctor in my life,” Essie said. “I only went because Mr. Matthews insisted, and Hastings made me. I’ve had worse than this and tended myself.”

“Exactly,” Mrs. Tulane said with a pronounced nod of her head.

“I think change is good,” Maddy said firmly. “Science and medicine are helping make society better.” Mrs. Tulane scowled and Maddy wished she could take it back. She’d made great strides with the housekeeper this morning and didn’t want to go backwards.

“Like Frankenstein, hmm? So, what sort of experiment is under here?” Essie asked, pointing to the basket holding Maddy’s dough.

“Bread,” Maddy said proudly.

“Bread,” Essie repeated. She stared at Maddy for a second or two. “You’re making bread.”

“Yes,” Maddy said. She sounded defensive, and reminded herself this was Essie. It was safe to admit here what she was doing, and what she wanted to do.

“Can I ask why?” She glanced over at the housekeeper. “Is there a reason Mrs. Tulane couldn’t make the bread today?”

“No.” Mrs. Tulane was folding a kitchen towel very precisely. “Miss Hyde wanted to learn to make bread.”

“Again, why?” Essie pinned Maddy with a searching look.

“Because Hastings likes fresh baked bread,” Maddy said, still defensive. Perhaps even more defensive.

“I see.” And from the look she was giving Maddy, Essie did see. At least it wasn’t pity. More like accusation. “And you wanted to make him fresh bread.”

“Yes, well, you know, he works very hard as sheriff,” Maddy said. “And he said it’s one of his favorite things.” She glanced over at Mrs. Tulane, who had her stiff back facing them. “I know it won’t be as good as Mrs. Tulane’s, of course, but I thought it might be something that would come in handy when I...when I go, you know.”

She didn’t look at Essie as she said it. She’d be leaving Essie behind, as well. Everyone she’d gotten to know and love here at the parsonage. But Essie and Hastings wouldn’t be here anymore, either. Just Stephen, and Mrs. Tulane. And perhaps whatever woman Stephen eventually married, of course. And there was a new doctor, too, so she needn’t worry he wouldn’t be taken care of properly. The duke and duchess would take care of him, too, obviously. And all his other friends. Maddy hadn’t gotten to know all of them, not really, because she was too dangerous to be around.

She glanced down and saw that she was clutching the back of a chair so tightly her knuckles were white. She let it go and busied herself tidying up the counter, which didn’t need it as they’d already cleaned up.

“Baking bread is a very useful skill,” Essie said encouragingly. Maddy glanced over at her in surprise.

“Yes, indeed it is,” Mrs. Tulane agreed. “There’s many a woman who supplements her household income selling her baked goods. Why, tomorrow I’ll teach you how to

make a fine biscuit—Mr. Matthews’s favorite, you know.”

“He does like his biscuits,” Maddy agreed, imagining Stephen every afternoon with his tea and biscuits. “And your cake.”

“We’ve time for all that,” Mrs. Tulane assured her. “You’ll be a right accomplished baker when...that is, soon.” They fell silent for a moment until Mrs. Tulane waved the tea towel at them. “Now, shoo! That bread won’t rise for another half an hour at least. I’ll come find you.”

### CHAPTER 39

“Good afternoon, Freddy.” Stephen shook the duke’s hand after he entered the library at the Park.

“Anne and Brett and the children are over at Blakely Farm,” Freddy said. “I’m sorry you’ve missed them. It’s riding lessons day.”

“Yes, yes, I know,” Stephen said, suddenly nervous. “I’ve come to talk to you. Specifically.”

“Ah.” Freddy said nothing else.

Stephen had never known a man as shuttered as Freddy. He didn’t used to be like that, back when Stephen had first met him. But Freddy had been young then, and he hadn’t taken to the title easily. He’d let his mother manage it and focused all his energies on helping Brett heal from his injuries after the war. But now he was responsible for the estates and the title, as well as Anne and Brett and the children. And the village. And Stephen. And everyone else under the umbrella of his protection. It had matured him into a man who kept his own counsel and did as he saw fit. Everyone liked to tease Freddy about his kingdom, but the truth was he ruled Ashton Park and the surrounding county as if were his kingdom. He controlled the people here as if he were moving chess pieces on a board, but he was the only one privy to the game. And no one complained because Freddy made it all so damn easy on everyone else. Stephen was surprised he hadn’t taken a more active role in Maddy’s situation.



He realized he'd been standing there procrastinating having the conversation he'd come here for. Freddy smiled encouragingly at him and waved him over to a chair.

"How can I be of assistance?" Freddy asked, closing a ledger and putting some papers in the desk drawer.

"This is awkward," Stephen said. "But I couldn't think of anyone else I'd be comfortable having this conversation with."

"Well, that's intriguing," Freddy said. He came around the desk. "This sounds like it requires a seat on the sofas. That's where I have difficult conversations as a general rule."

Stephen laughed and followed Freddy over to sit in front of the windows overlooking the gardens. "Now, what is it you wish to speak to me about?"

Stephen took a deep breath and blew it out of his mouth. He stared at a spot over Freddy's right shoulder. "I need to know how two men...make love. To each other." He chanced a look at Freddy and his expression hadn't changed from the mildly curious one he'd worn to begin with. "I mean, I understand the rudimentary aspects of it, of course. But I want to be sure I'm not missing some important...element."

"Oh, I think you have all the working elements," Freddy said with a smile as he leaned back and crossed his legs. He steepled his fingers and pressed his index fingers to his lips. "And is this in relation to my sheriff, perhaps?"

"Yes," Stephen said, breathing a sigh of relief that the initial salvos in the conversation were over. Once again, Freddy making it so easy.

"Does Hastings understand the...rudimentary aspects?" Freddy asked. His smile this time was teasing.

“Most likely,” Stephen said. “Though, not in practice, I don’t believe. Only in theory. For a change, I’d like to not be the one person in the bed who doesn’t know what to do.”

“How many people are in the bed?” Freddy asked, raising a brow.

“The usual,” Stephen prevaricated.

“In my domain, that is a disputed number. You’ll have to be more specific.”

“Three?” Stephen said.

“Are you asking me or telling me?” Freddy inquired. He smoothed a crease in his trousers.

“Telling you.” Stephen forced a firmness into his response.

“There you go,” Freddy said, showing his delight with a mischievous grin. “It is the usual number, then.”

Stephen laughed as the tension was broken. “Yes, the usual number.”

“So, you are not immune to what ails us all,” Freddy said. “I suspected as much. It’s why I’ve left you all alone at the parsonage.”

“What do you mean?” Stephen asked in shock.

“It was apparent from the moment Hastings was given to you that you wanted him,” Freddy said. “It’s why everyone’s hackles were up about him. ‘Not good enough for Stephen,’” he intoned.

“Brett,” Stephen said, recognizing who Freddy was imitating.

“He’s a mother hen,” Freddy said, appearing to be blind to the hypocrisy of the accusation coming from him. “He just loves you, Stephen, and wants what’s best for you.”

“Which is up to me to decide,” Stephen said.

“And that is what I told Brett. Anne is quite fond of Hastings and is delighted you are hopefully finding satisfaction at last.”

Stephen groaned in horror. “Have I been the subject of such salubrious conversations often, then?”

“Only among friends who want you to be happy.”

“I am happy.”

“You have not been happy.” Freddy surprised him with his observation, and he recognized Stephen’s surprise. “It has been obvious to me for some time that you have been lonely, Stephen. How could you not be? You are not the kind who is meant to be alone.”

“I don’t know anyone who is meant to be alone,” Stephen argued. “Everyone longs for companionship.”

“Not everyone,” Freddy said. “I have met men, and women, who are quite content with their own company and need no other.”

“You are correct, then,” Stephen conceded. “That is not who I am.”

“Have we left you alone long enough?” Freddy asked. “Anne has practically marshaled a rebellion against my wishes in her desire to come and check on you all.”

Stephen laughed. “Yes, we have been left alone long enough, if you mean have I fallen in love with them.”

“Them. Yes. That brings me to Mrs. Higgs.” Freddy quirked an eyebrow at him.

“Miss Hyde,” Stephen told him. “Her name is Madelyn Hyde.”

“Hyde,” Freddy mused. “Do I know that name?”

“She’s from a disgraced offshoot of the Higginbotham-Hydes.”

“Good Lord,” Freddy said, his eyes wide. “What a miscreant bunch that is. If she’s from a disgraced offshoot I can only imagine.”

“It’s worse than you imagine.” Stephen gave him a brief version of Maddy’s history concerning the Higginbotham-Hydes.

Freddy was shaking his head before he was through. “What a thoroughly despicable bunch,” he said with feeling. “I shall have to renew my efforts to ruin them.” He began thrumming his fingers on the arm of the sofa. Stephen knew this meant he was plotting. “Although...” He paused and smiled at Stephen. “Never mind. So how are things going with her precarious situation? Has it been resolved?”

“There are others who are after her,” Stephen said. “She told us about a man at the Colonial Office of whom she has details of his perfidy through his association with her father. Although she’s only just told us.”

“Yes, well, that wasn’t your top priority,” Freddy drawled. “It’s only life or death and

state secrets, apparently. Nothing compared to affairs of the heart.”

“You see,” Stephen said with satisfaction, “I knew you’d understand.”

“It would seem you need to understand the rudimentary aspects of more than one coupling,” Freddy told him matter-of-factly. “Pay attention. Do you need to take notes?”

For the next hour Freddy proceeded to fill a large gap in Stephen’s education.

### CHAPTER 40

Hastings couldn't believe Maddy had baked bread for him. He'd never expected anything like that from her.

He knew she had feelings for him, but not like her feelings for Stephen, even after their night together. She cared for him, but it wasn't love. She loved Stephen. He didn't mind. He'd loved plenty of people before and not been loved back. At least Maddy hadn't abandoned or tried to kill him. And being part of what Maddy and Stephen had was almost as good as if they loved him, too.

They were all admiring Maddy's bread, which was a little dry but no one said so, when a young boy appeared with a message for Stephen.

"From Tuck?" Stephen asked with a frown. "That's odd."

"Another fellow said to come quick," the boy told him.

"Who?"

The boy shrugged. "Don't know. He gave me a penny to deliver the message."

He started to run off, but Hastings grabbed him by the arm. "Who are you? Tom Hutchinson's boy? It's Peter, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir, sheriff," the boy said with a big grin. "Can't believe you remember my name!"

“Are you sure the message wasn’t for me?” Hastings asked, frowning. He looked over at Stephen. “I don’t want you to get caught up in the thick of that.”

“No, sir.” The boy shook his head. “He said to send the parson round right quick. Reckon old Tuck is about to meet his maker. Or the other fellow, eh, parson?” The boy burst out laughing at his own joke.

“Petey Reynolds, that is no way to talk about a man who may be dying.” Stephen put his napkin down on the table and stood up. He looked around with a frown. “He is dying, correct?”

Maddy shrugged. “I’ve never met the man. Only heard about him. But I suppose you’ve got to go see, either way, don’t you?”

Just then the fire bell in the town started ringing. “Fire,” Hastings said, shoving his chair back. “I’ve got to go.”

“I should go with you,” Stephen said.

“You can’t,” Maddy told him, a hand on his arm. “What if Mr. Tuck dies and you’re not there?” She stood up. “I’ll go with you, Stephen. Essie, can you go with Hastings?”

“You don’t have to, Es,” Hastings told her.

“That’s all right. I was already planning on going,” Essie said, shoving another bite of bread in her mouth.

“I’ll be fine,” Stephen told Maddy, patting her hand. “There’s no need to trouble yourself.”

“Won’t you let me come?” she asked beseechingly, and Stephen smiled.

“Of course. I’d appreciate the company.”

“Of all the times for Tuck to turn up his toes,” Hastings muttered. He came around the table, and after hesitating a moment with a look at Essie, he gave Maddy a quick, hard kiss. “Keep an eye on him, will you?” he asked her. “And yourself, too. At least you’ll be together.”

He marched over to Stephen and gave him a kiss just like the one he’d given Maddy. He grinned as he looked between them. “I could get used to goodbyes like this.” When he realized he’d never get the chance to become accustomed to it, his happiness clouded over. So far, he’d refused to even think about their imminent, much more permanent goodbye.

“So could I,” Stephen said, putting his arm around Maddy and squeezing her tight with a kiss on her temple. “We’ll be back as soon as we can. Hopefully this is just another one of Tuck’s attempts to gain sympathy.”

“The man is a scoundrel,” Hastings agreed, grabbing another piece of bread off the table to bring with him. “Don’t let him talk you into anything.” He headed for the door, reaching for his hat on the way. “Come on, Essie. Sheriffing to do.” There was something niggling at the back of his mind, but he shrugged it off and headed for the village.

They followed the smoke to the village square. It had still been visible in the twilight. When they got there quite a few people filled the square, which seemed to be in some chaos. A line had formed, and buckets of water were being passed down so men could throw the water on Mrs. Thompson’s apartments, between the mercantile and the hat shop.



“What happened?” Hastings demanded as he dismounted. Several voices tried to answer him at once.

“You. Bascomb. Tell me,” he said to the head groom at the village stable.

“Someone started it,” Bascomb said. “There was a pile of brush under the stairs. Probably one of those Hutchinsons. They’re forever up to mischief.”

“Not like this,” the shopkeeper Mr. Howard said. “The boys can get up to trouble, but they’ve never vandalized someone’s home or set fires before. Mrs. Thompson was inside! They’d never risk hurting someone in the village.” Several people standing around angrily agreed with him.

“All right, all right,” Hastings said. “I’m not going to arrest the lads. Yet. First, we’ve got to put this fire out.”

It didn’t take long. The fire was more smoke than flame. The wood had been damp and green, no good for starting a fire. By the time it was out, a coach from the Park had arrived carrying several footmen and Brett Haversham.

“Have you any idea who might have wanted to cause the widow harm?” Haversham asked him as they looked at the pile of blackened brush.

“None,” Hastings said. “She’s harmless, and everyone seems to like her.”

Essie was looking at the pile next to them. “So, you’ve got to have a certain kind of wood to start a fire?” she asked curiously. “I didn’t know that. I just thought wood, fire. In the city we throw a little coal in there and you’ve got a blaze.”

“Yes, that’s how we do it out here in the country, too,” Haversham said, amusement in his voice. “Although not when vandalizing property, I suppose.”

“Yes, it’s clear whoever did this doesn’t know how to start a proper fire,” Hastings said impatiently. “We’ve established that.”

“I can’t imagine who wouldn’t know that here,” Haversham said. “Most people learn that at an early age for harvesting and clearing and so on. Perhaps they deliberately did it poorly to cause a disruption and not inflict serious damage.”

“The damage appears serious enough,” Hastings said angrily. “The house will have to be torn down and rebuilt, at least in part.”

“Sheriff,” someone called to him. He turned and saw one of the villagers waving him over. As he got near, he saw that she was standing next to Mrs. Thompson, who was sitting on a chair someone had brought around, and the young Dr. Pearson was beside her.

“Sheriff,” Mrs. Thompson said. She coughed roughly as the doctor rubbed her back.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Thompson,” Hastings told her. “I’ll find who set the blaze. Have you somewhere to stay?”

“She’ll be staying with us for the night,” Dr. Pearson said, indicating his wife, who was standing off to the side, holding his bag. “I’ll need to keep an eye on her lungs. She inhaled a great deal of smoke.”

“Saw someone,” Mrs. Thompson croaked out in her ruined voice. She coughed again. “No one I knew.”

“You didn’t know them?” Hastings asked. “Are you sure?” Mrs. Thompson was the oldest person in the village. She knew everyone.

She shook her head. “I yelled at him out the window and he ran off.”

“A stranger?” Haversham said sharply from where he’d come up beside Hastings.

Hastings and Essie exchanged a look.

“Grab your footmen,” Hastings said to Haversham. “We need to get back to the parsonage. Mrs. Tulane is there alone.”

“Where are Stephen and Miss Hyde?” Haversham asked.

“They went out to Tuck’s,” Hastings told him, shoving his way through the crowd. “He sent for them.”

“Why?” The Grady stepped out into Hastings’s path. “What’s wrong with Tuck?”

“I was hoping you could tell me,” Hastings said. He had a very bad feeling about this. “They sent for Stephen and told him to come right away. We assumed he was at death’s door.”

“Damn him,” the Grady said, whipping his hat off and slapping his thigh with it. “And me, right over the hill. He’ll die from stubbornness, is what. I just saw the fool yesterday. He was fine. Now he’s probably cut a hand off or some idiot thing.”

Hastings began to run for his horse. “Haversham! Go to the parsonage with your men. Essie, we’re for Tuck’s farm.” This was what had been bothering him. How could he have been so stupid to leave her unprotected?

“I’m coming with you,” Grady hollered.

Hastings didn’t care who came. He was going right now. And if they had hurt Stephen or Maddy in any way, heads would roll. Hastings would kill them all.

### CHAPTER 41

Maddy was deliriously happy. She knew that was silly. Simply riding out to visit a sick parishioner with Stephen shouldn't make her giddy. But it was the sort of thing his wife would do, and Maddy let herself pretend that's what she was. A very respectable parson's wife, doing good things for the parish. She stole a glance at Stephen from the corner of her eye. A very naughty, well-endowed, extremely handsome parson. She giggled. Stephen glanced over at her and smiled.

"What has you so amused?" he asked. He turned his attention back to the horse pulling his small carriage. They were seated quite close together, and Maddy had taken advantage of it to press herself to his side and slide her arm through his.

"I was just thinking what a naughty parson you are," she said, laughing again. "You look so very respectable, but I can't stop remembering you last night."

Stephen blushed as he turned to look at her and then quickly looked forward again. "I hope I didn't do anything to upset you last night," he said.

"Oh, no! That's not why I was thinking about it," she assured him, hugging his arm to her. "I enjoyed it. I want to do it again. Very much."

"As do I," Stephen said. He pulled on the reins and slowed the carriage until it came to a stop. Then he turned to her. Her insides were churning. Was he going to send her away now? She let go of his arm and scooted away from him, schooling her features so she didn't reveal too much and folding her hands tightly in her lap.

“Don’t do that,” Stephen said.

“Do what?” she asked.

“Put on that face,” he told her. “The one you use to hide everything.”

“I don’t do that,” she lied.

“Of course you do.” Stephen sighed. “Maddy, I love you.”

“If you...” Her voice trailed off. She’d thought he was going to tell her it was time for her to leave, before things got even more complicated. “You love me?” she asked, her voice squeaking embarrassingly.

“I want to marry you,” he said firmly. “This wasn’t how I intended to propose, but I can’t wait for you to figure it out yourself. If I do, you’ll be halfway to Australia before you realize it.”

“I don’t want to go to Australia,” she said.

“Good. I don’t either, so I’d hate to have to follow you there just to tell you I love you and to marry you.” Stephen was looking at her expectantly. Whenever he turned his full attention on her it felt like staring directly at the sun. She became blind to anything else around her.

“Well?” he asked impatiently after a moment’s silence.

“Well, what?” she asked.

“Are you going to marry me?” His voice sounded a little strained.

“You know I can’t, but it’s lovely of you to ask me,” she said. She threw her arms around him. “Just knowing that you’d marry me means the world to me, darling.”

“Until you agree to marry me,” Stephen said, gently pushing her away, “none of that then.”

“What?” she asked, sure she’d misunderstood.

“You know exactly how extraordinary physical intimacy is between us,” he said, clucking at the horses to move again. “If you want more of that, then you have to marry me.”

“Isn’t that something I should be saying?” she asked wryly.

“Well, I’m saying it,” he told her. “And I’ll be telling Hastings the same thing.”

“Hastings can’t marry you,” she told him. “That’s silly.”

“Would you rather marry Hastings?” he asked. He didn’t sound upset about it, and she supposed he wouldn’t. He was in love with Hastings, too, after all.

“Hastings wouldn’t marry me,” she told him, quite sure she was right. “He’s going back to London to be a spy or whatever it is he does for Sir Barnabas.”

“No, he is not,” Stephen said firmly. “I have set things in motion to make sure he does not.”

“Oh, no,” she breathed out in shock. “What have you done? He won’t thank you for it, you know. He’s as stubborn as they come. He wants to go back to London.”

“No, he doesn’t. That’s the thing. Weren’t you listening last night?” Stephen sighed

and stopped the horses again. “He said he’d been fooling himself that he could stay here. That he’d begun to feel like he’d found a place here.”

“Until I came,” Maddy said sadly. “I ruined it for you both, didn’t I?”

“No.” Stephen took her hands in his. “We were dancing around it until you showed up. And then suddenly we weren’t. I can’t say for certain if anything would have happened between us if you hadn’t shown up, Maddy. You stirred feelings in both of us, feelings that were tangled up with what we felt for each other. It’s all very complicated, but also very simple.”

“I’m simple,” she said. “Explain it to me.”

“That night—good Lord, was it only two days ago?—when you caught us in the parlor, Hastings told me he was trying to decide if he should kiss me before you and I had our assignation, or after. He wasn’t trying to stop it. Just like he didn’t try to stop our kiss yesterday afternoon.” He paused and looked away for a moment before meeting her eyes again. “Maddy, you were right. We could have met anywhere, or nowhere. But we met here. And call it divine providence or fate or whatever you want, I believe there is a reason we three were brought together. And that reason is that we are meant to love one another.”

“I do love you,” she whispered. “And I love Hastings. And I want to be able to love you both as long as I can, while I’m here. But you know I can’t stay. You know I can’t be your wife. I’m not good enough for that, Stephen. Can’t we just love one another now, and forget the future for a little while longer?”

Stephen pulled her into a crushing hug. “You are good enough,” he whispered in her ear. “You’re better than good enough. I’ve never known anyone who wanted to be good as much as you, Maddy. Your soul is pure and beautiful, and I’m sorry that anyone made you feel less than that. But to me, you are the best woman I have ever

known.”

“There are things,” she started to say, then she realized she was crying, and her voice was cracking. “There are things I’ve done,” she whispered. “Things you don’t know. Worse things than laying with men I had no feelings for. Stephen, I’ve killed people. Do you understand?”

“I don’t care,” Stephen said. He pulled back and kissed her tears away. “I don’t care what you’ve done. Whatever it is, it helped to make you who you are today. You said it yourself, others made you do those things. Other people made you into that person you’re trying so hard not to be. It wasn’t you, Maddy. You would never have done those things on your own.”

“Maybe I would have,” she said. “We can’t know that.” Was that true? Had she only done what she’d done because other people had forced her? Or was it her nature to be a killer? She feared the answer.

“I know that.” He rested his forehead on hers. “I know that. I know who you are. And I love you. I love how strong you are, how determined, and yet how vulnerable. I want to make you see what I see, Maddy. I want you to love yourself as much as I do, and I want to spend a lifetime together showing you how.”

She held on to his words like a drowning man holds onto the rope thrown to him. “What about Hastings?” she asked tearfully. “I can’t forget him. I can’t just leave him.” Even the thought was enough to rip open her heart.

“Leave him?” Stephen pulled back and looked at her in horror. “No. No, he’ll be right here with us.”

“He will?” she asked hopefully. Was she really thinking about this? About accepting his proposal? It was madness, but sweet madness all the same.



“We will make a life together here, the three of us,” Stephen told her, hugging her close again. “I promise. There is no better place for us than here. You can have me and Hastings, and we can have you and each other. No one here will deny us.”

“Then yes,” she whispered. “Yes, I’ll marry you.” A calmness descended on her as soon as she accepted. This was right . They were right together, the three of them.

“Well, well, well,” drawled a familiar voice. “Isn’t this a pretty scene?”

Maddy pulled away from Stephen to see her old gang captain Dickie Bales grinning at her coldly from beside the carriage.

“Watch her, boys,” he said, and Maddy quickly counted four men surrounding them, all with pistols. She didn’t recognize any of them. “She’s a tricky one, she is. She can kill a man at twenty paces if she’s got a blade. And if not, she can do it with her bare hands. I made sure of it, didn’t I, love?”

### CHAPTER 42

Stephen shoved Maddy behind him on the bench. “Who are you? What do you want?” he demanded, but he knew. They had come to kill Maddy, her father’s henchmen. And of course it would be tonight, when for the first time since her arrival neither Hastings nor Essie was around. And Stephen knew he was utterly useless to her. He couldn’t protect her on his own. He had no gun, no weapon of any kind. All he could do was stall them until Hastings arrived. He had to believe that Hastings would figure it out and was even now on his way here.

“Why don’t you tell ’im who I am, Lady Madelyn?” He made a little bow as he said it and then laughed with the other men.

“How many times do I have to tell you, you bloated pig’s arse, that’s not my title. I am not, nor have I ever been, a lady.”

Stephen controlled his surprise at her tone and her words. She sounded absolutely fearless, almost bored, as she antagonized their attacker.

“When I make my move,” she whispered in his ear, “Get down on the floor of the carriage.”

Stephen squeezed her hand tightly, trying to convey what a horrible idea he thought that was. She tried to tug her hand free, but he held fast.

“This is Dickie Bales,” she said loudly. “I told you about him, fat bastard that he is.”

“Well, it seems the old man’s lessons didn’t rub of on ya the way he hoped,” Dickie said. “I told ’im you can’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear, and you can’t make a lady out of that treacherous little cunt.”

“How is dear old Bleecker?” she asked, and then she spit over the side of the carriage.

Dickie Bales laughed. “Dead. I killed ’im.” Stephen could feel Maddy jerk in surprise against him. “Didn’t expect that, did ya?” Bales laughed again. “He didn’t either, stupid prick. But I got a nice payday for it from some interested parties. Only one problem.” He ran a finger up the side of his nose and then pointed at Maddy. “You are part of the deal.” He sauntered over to one of the other men and took a pistol from him. He turned it on them, and Stephen’s heart stopped for a moment.

“I can shoot her through you, parson,” Dickie said calmly. “Or she can get her little arse down from the carriage and take it like a man instead of hiding behind your skirts. Her choice.”

“What’s to keep you from killing me after she’s gone?” Stephen asked. He hated that his voice trembled, but he wasn’t used to facing down brigands with guns. They did not teach that at Divinity School, and the war seemed a very long time ago.

“Nothing,” Dickie said, shaking his head. “But she’ll buy you a little time, won’t she? Maybe your Home Office friend will show up and save you, eh?” He laughed as if it were an uproarious joke, and his compatriots chuckled along.

“Let me down,” Maddy said firmly, pushing at Stephen.

“No, Maddy, listen to me,” Stephen said frantically. “He’s going to shoot you and then he’s going to shoot me. That will accomplish nothing.”

“Stephen,” she whispered. “You must trust me. I’m making the decision to do those

things we talked about. Do you understand?" She closed her eyes and kissed him on the cheek. "I am still that Maddy, but I'm this Maddy, too, and you've got to trust me."

"You're just Maddy," Stephen told her. "That's what I've been trying to tell you."

Stephen didn't want to let her do those things, to risk herself for him. She wasn't the Maddy that she'd been when she was with this Bales fellow, no matter what she thought. And he couldn't let her go back to that. She was so much more now.

"Enough goodbyes," Bales snarled. "Out now, or I shoot through him."

"Why haven't you shot me already?" Maddy asked loudly. "I don't think you can, can you?"

"Always two steps ahead, that's me girl. You're right. They want proof I've killed ya. As you know, it's a lot easier to transport a live one than a dead body."

"Christ, don't remind me," Maddy said with a surprising laugh. "Remember that bleeder we had on Coventry Road?" She and Dickie laughed together like old friends. "I thought we'd never get him to the cemetery. And digging that blasted hole! You made me do the whole thing."

Stephen's gut clenched at what Bales had made her do. He knew she regretted it, regretted everything she'd done for him.

"It wasn't hard, and you know it," Dickie said with a chuckle. "They'd just buried some poor mort there earlier the same day. Dirt hadn't even had time to settle."

Maddy was shaking her head, still chuckling. "That was a brilliant plan. They still don't know what happened to the poor bloke! But this, this is a bad plan." She started

nodding her head. “Yeah, it’s a bad one. You’ve got a witness,” she jabbed her thumb in Stephen’s direction, “and they’re expecting you. Oh, yes, they are,” she said over Bales’s denials. “Why do you think the Home Office has men here?” She shook her head sadly. “Not one of your best, Dickie. You can’t travel fast with me kicking and fighting, and they’ll be hot on your heels even if you do get out of the county. I take it you’ve got a time issue?”

Stephen wasn’t really shocked at how businesslike Maddy was being. She sounded like she had when she’d first arrived at the parsonage. And clearly this was the Maddy Dickie Bales was used to. Stephen couldn’t imagine spending most of your life pretending to be someone you’re not. He knew inside she was reeling from Bales’s appearance, and how terrified she must be for him.

“Take us both,” he said. “She won’t fight you if you’ve got me, alive.”

It was Maddy’s turn to squeeze his hand until it hurt. He didn’t break eye contact with Dickie Bales, who was looking at him as if he were considering it, rubbing his chin.

“He’ll slow you down,” Maddy said. “I’m willing to make a deal. If you let him go before we leave here, and I mean let him get a good bit away, I won’t fuss or fight. I’ll go wherever you need me to.”

“I won’t go,” Stephen said firmly. “I’m not leaving you alone with them.”

At that Dickie Bales let loose a loud guffaw. “She ain’t got nothing to protect anymore, parson. Everyone knows the lady here will drop her drawers for a good deal.”

“It’s not my fault you all think with your pricks,” Maddy said with an unconcerned shrug. “A little slap and tickle has gotten me my fair share of whatever’s on the

table.”

“That’s true, that’s true,” Dickie agreed. “And I benefitted as well, being your captain. I thanks you again for your service.” He laughed with the thugs.

Stephen was stiff with rage at his comments and their situation. He was so furious over their mistreatment of Maddy he’d kill them without regret if he could.

“I tells you what, parson. I like your idea.” Bales turned to two of the men. “Get them down from there. We’ll tie ’em up and then put him back in the carriage with one of you, and she’ll go on a horse.”

### CHAPTER 43

Maddy was thinking furiously. She'd toyed with the idea of getting them to bring Stephen but gave it up when she realized it would be too hard to protect him and herself and get away. Much easier if she were on her own. Now she'd have to reconsider her plans.

She shut out all thoughts of what she was losing here tonight. She'd save Stephen's life; of that she had no doubts. She was more than willing to die to do it. But even if she didn't die, if she survived, there was no way Stephen would still want to marry her. She'd glossed over her past, never telling him the full truth of it. Now he knew. She was a heartless killer.

She'd killed and she'd covered it up. She'd laughed about it with men like this, she'd fucked men like this. How could he possibly forgive that? He'd been willing to accept her vague background story, but when he was confronted with the real thing there was no possibility he could accept her. She didn't expect him to. But none of that mattered. All that mattered was making sure Stephen got out of this alive.

"Let go of her and get down off there," Dickie ordered Stephen. "Keep your gun on her," he told his men.

Stephen let go of her hand and Maddy had to force herself not to hold on in desperation. Very carefully he stood and climbed down. One of Dickie's thugs grabbed his arm and dragged him toward the horses. Maddy stood so she could see where they were going.

“Careful there, missy,” Dickie said, leveling his gun on her. “I know you too well. Leave everything you’re holding there on the seat.” Maddy set her shawl and her reticule down on the seat. “And the hat,” Dickie drawled. She raised an incredulous eyebrow at him but removed the hat. As she slid the large hat pin out Dickie grinned at her. “Now wouldn’t that have been useful?” he asked.

Well, it would have been. But if he thought that was the only weapon she had, he didn’t know her as well as he thought he did.

She set the hat on the seat. “Now what?” she asked. She was hoping one of the men would come over to help her down. The steps were high off the ground. Once she’d slit his throat, she could use him as a shield. Stephen and the other man were too far away to see what was happening, and Dickie was a terrible shot. He was half-blind, and it had gone full dark. It was improbable that he could see well enough to shoot her or Stephen. She just had to incapacitate him and kill the other three before they could kill Stephen. Unfortunately, there was no cover on the country road, the trees few and far between out here by the fields.

“I need assistance to get down,” she told Dickie.

“No, you don’t,” he told her. “I’ve seen you jump from a rooftop.”

“Not in skirts,” she snapped at him.

He shrugged. “Figure it out. No one’s getting near you until we’ve got you tied up.”

“Then how are you going to tie me up?”

Dickie frowned. Honestly, it was becoming clear she had been the brains of the operation.



“Just get down here,” he growled at her.

She sighed and made a show of tucking her skirts up around her waist. Luckily, she was wearing the pink today with all the flounces. None of them appeared to notice when she slipped the thin stiletto out of her garter.

“Maybe we can make a deal,” one of the men said suggestively, and the other two still standing near them laughed.

“I’m not ruling it out,” Maddy said with a saucy grin at them all. Her stomach was churning at the very thought, but she needed them to lower their guard. In her experience men who thought they were going to get a free fuck were ridiculously easy to roll.

She pretended to trip climbing down the steps and hit the ground on her left shoulder and hip, hiding the knife against her arm. It hurt like hell, but nothing was broken. Bruises healed faster than gunshot wounds.

“Skirts have made you clumsy,” Dickie said dispassionately. “I’m beginning to think I worried too much about taking you. Get up.”

She struggled to get up and he waved one of the men over to help her, which was exactly what she’d wanted him to do. God bless Dickie for being so careless and arrogant.

When the man reached down to get her, he slipped his gun into the pocket of his coat. She reached up to take his hand, and as he bent over, she thrust the knife straight into his throat. His eyes went wide and he tried to speak, but no sounds came out, just a slight gagging noise. She tugged the knife out and he fell over onto her.

“Here now,” she hollered as she frantically patted him down, looking for the gun in

his pocket, while trying to make it look as though she was struggling against him. “I didn’t agree to anything yet, you greedy pig.” She could feel his blood spilling out onto her neck and shoulder, and she blanked her mind to it, to what she’d done. Stephen . She had to save Stephen.

“Get off her,” Dickie yelled. “Before she kills you, you bleedin’ sod.”

Too late, Dickie , she thought as she grasped the gun in her hand. She hastily pulled the hammer back and then used both legs to shove the body off her. She rolled to the side just as Dickie’s shot hit the ground beside her. She aimed at the man who wasn’t holding the horse’s halter and blew a hole in his stomach. She was still quite close to the carriage and the horse reared, screaming, knocking the last man off balance. Throwing the empty gun at Dickie, she grabbed her stiletto from the ground, then scrambled to her feet and ran for the last place she’d seen Stephen.

When she got there, Stephen was wrestling with Bale’s thug. Their arms were up in the air as they struggled for the gun the other man held. She was afraid she might hurt Stephen if she tried to stab his attacker while they were spinning around and grappling. Stephen was quite strong, but he didn’t have enough experience with fighting to hold Bale’s man off for long. Frantic, she ran over to the fighting men and leaped onto the back of Stephen’s attacker, but her hold was awkward and unsteady.

She’d obviously taken him by surprise, and he relaxed his hold on Stephen. Without the support of the other man’s arms, Stephen stumbled and lost his balance. His attacker wrenched his hands free and spun around, flinging Maddy off his back before she had a chance to stab him. She hit the ground hard, the wind knocked out of her. She struggled to her knees, trying to catch her breath, worried about Stephen.

She saw Stephen knock the man down, but before he could do more the other man leapt to his feet and spun back around, the gun raised. Jumping up, she ran at them, pushing Stephen out of the way. She threw her knife at the assailant, burying it in his

chest. As he went down, he fired, and when the shot hit her the pain was white hot and immediate. She fell to the ground, gasping for air. She heard Stephen shout, and as he took her in his arms her vision went black.

\* \* \*

Hastings kicked Bronny's side, trying to make him go faster. They'd learned to fly through these fields together in the last few weeks. Hastings had never had a horse of his own, and he'd certainly never had the chance to race across open fields before. Now Bronny gave him everything he asked for, having learned that Hastings was as fearless as he was.

He'd left Grady and Essie far behind. That was fine. It was easier for one man to sneak up on someone and silently kill him than it was for a small battalion. That was one of the first lessons Sir Barnabas had taught him. Barnabas would kill him if anything happened to Maddy. Not that it mattered. Hastings would kill himself.

When he heard the gunshots, it felt like they were going into his own body the pain was so sharp. "Maddy!" he screamed. "Stephen!"

From far behind he heard a voice yell, "Hey hip!" and suddenly it seemed as if the entire countryside was alive with baying dogs. That must have been Grady, calling his sheep dogs. Hastings didn't know what good they'd do, but he'd take all the help he could get.

Finally, he could see Stephen's carriage ahead. It had flipped over on its side, the horse still attached to it and trying to drag it off the road into the field. Another shot rang out and Hastings instinctively ducked, but he didn't slow his horse. He saw a man standing there and it looked like he was trying to reload a gun. Hastings ran straight at him and jumped off the horse onto him.

They fell to the ground, Hastings on top. It knocked the wind out of him, but the man underneath him wasn't moving. Hastings rolled off him and quickly wrapped one arm around his neck, ready to snap it. There was no need. He could tell it was broken already. He tossed the body away. Then he saw the two other dead bodies lying there. He crawled over to the first, but it wasn't Stephen. He could see the second wasn't, either.

He could hear shouting and horses's whinnying from off to his right and leapt to his feet. Before he could race in the direction of angry voices, someone tackled him from behind.

He took a good punch to the head that had his ears ringing but didn't let it slow down his reactions. Hooking his leg over his attacker's he rolled him, changing their positions. He quickly slammed the butt of his palm into his face, and he felt the bones of the other man's nose break accompanied by a sickening squelch. The man cried out, and Hastings kneed him in the groin. As he curled into a ball, Hastings jumped up and kicked him in the head twice. He rolled him face up and punched him as hard as he could, knocking the man unconscious. When it was over he backed away, panting heavily from the fight.

He heard Grady yell, "On him, lads," and suddenly the field was overrun with barking, snarling dogs. He took off running toward the other fight.

When he got there, it was over. He saw Stephen kneeling on the ground holding Maddy's bleeding body. He fell to his knees and let out a keening wail of misery.

### CHAPTER 44

Maddy woke up in Stephen's bed. She smiled and started to stretch, and then realized she was terribly thirsty, and her arm was incredibly sore, and she couldn't move it.

"Ow," she said softly.

"Maddy?" She heard a chair creak and opened her eyes to see Hastings leaning over the bed.

"Why are you dressed already?" she asked. "What time is it?" Her mind was quite fuzzy.

"Stephen!" Hastings yelled. He looked terrible, which wasn't easy for Hastings because he was so handsome.

"Are you ill?" Maddy asked with concern. "Here, lie down." She started to get up, but that damn arm of hers still wasn't working right. It hurt like the devil, though.

"Me?" Hastings asked, sound incredulous. "You got shot!"

That brought Maddy up short. "Did I?" she asked. She finally looked down at her arm. It was in a tight sling, and she could see some blood seeping through the bandage on it. "I'll be damned," she said. "That's a new one."

Hastings took her working hand in his and fell to his knees beside the bed. He kissed

her palm. "Do not ever do that again." He held his mouth on her palm for a moment and then kissed her wrist. "I thought I'd lost you. I thought I was too slow."

"I was too slow," she said. "I'm the one who got shot." That seemed fairly obvious to her, and she wondered if he truly was not feeling well.

She heard Stephen's steps pounding up the stairs, and then several others behind him. There was a lot of chatter and shouting, then Stephen came careening into the room.

"Maddy?" he said breathlessly.

"You don't look well, either," Maddy chastised him. "You both should be in bed with me."

"Saints preserve us," Mrs. Tulane muttered from the doorway.

"Mrs. Tulane," Maddy said, horrified. "I didn't mean it like that. They just, they don't look well. Are they unwell?"

Mrs. Tulane was dabbing at the corner of her eye. "They'll be fine, now, don't you worry," she said in her brusque voice. "I'll just go and make some tea, then." She turned and hurried from the room.

Essie was standing in the doorway, frowning at her, her arms crossed. Now here was someone who seemed perfectly fine. "Essie," she said with relief. "What is going on?"

"You went and got yourself shot playing the hero," Essie told her. "What a damn fool thing to do."

"Heroine," she corrected Essie. "I'm a woman. I'm a heroine." Her eyes were getting

very heavy.

“Yes, you are,” Stephen said, sitting on the side of the bed beside Hastings. He put his hand on her leg. “You saved my life.”

“Well, of course, silly,” she said. Then she yawned. “I couldn’t let them kill you, could I?” Her eyes popped open as memories came flooding back. “Bloody hell,” she said.

“Now she remembers,” Essie said.

“I’m sorry,” Hastings said in a broken voice. “I failed you. I should have seen it, the trap. Instead, I fell right into it. And it nearly got you both killed.”

“I didn’t see it, either, darling,” she told him, tightening her grip on his hand. She felt very weak. “And I practically invented it. I can’t believe I didn’t recognize the divide and conquer.”

“I don’t think you invented that,” Stephen said, shaking his head.

“The way Dickie used it, I did,” she informed him. She looked away. “I guess you know how awful I am now.”

“I don’t know any such thing,” Stephen said softly. “You very nearly died saving my life. I don’t think that’s so very awful.”

“She didn’t nearly die,” a strange voice said. Maddy looked over at the door to see a smiling gentleman. “They’ll have you at death’s door and you’re in no such condition.”

“Maddy, this is Dr. Pearson,” Stephen said.

“It’s just a scratch,” Maddy told him. “Nothing vital was pierced.”

“I was going to say exactly that,” the doctor said with a surprised look.

“I’ve watched men bleed out,” she told him. “I know a little scratch when I’ve got one.”

“I told you both she’d be fine,” Essie said impatiently. “Honestly, Mads, the way they’ve been carrying on.”

Hastings had her hand pressed to his cheek and his eyes were closed. The tear that seeped out ran down onto her hand.

“Hastings, I’m fine,” she whispered. “I promise. I shall be up and irritating you in no time.”

“You better be,” he told her. “I’m not leaving your side until you are.”

Essie threw her hands up in the air dramatically and walked out, making Maddy giggle.

“In that case, go and fetch *The Modern Prometheus*,” she told him, yawning again. “I want to hear the end of it.” Recent experience had taught her that giving Hastings a job to do was the quickest way to distract him.

Hastings fetched the book, but it was Stephen who read to them as they lay entwined on the bed. Hastings would not let go of her, and she reveled in his obvious care and concern for her. She listened to Stephen read of Frankenstein’s final days aboard Walton’s ship, his demise, and the final, wrenching anguish of the creature, dozing on and off.



Hastings lay with his head pillowed on her lap, his breathing even as Stephen shut the book.

“The monster was forced by the cruelty of others to do what he did,” Maddy said quietly.

“Yes, he was,” Stephen agreed.

“But I can’t like Frankenstein,” she mused. “His poor choices were what drove the monster to revenge and madness. Even as he lay dying, he bragged of his own brilliance and worthiness.” She paused. “Do you think the creature killed himself as he said he would? Because of the things he did? Because he wasn’t fit to live?”

“I don’t know,” Stephen said. “What do you think?”

“I think he thought about it.” She considered it for a moment. “But he was human, inside, for all the horror of his appearance. And where there is hope, there is life.”

“He’s still clambering around out there on the ice,” Hastings muttered. “He won’t trust himself back among society, but he doesn’t have the nerve to end it.”

Maddy shivered and Hastings immediately got up and found a warm shawl for her shoulders.

“Don’t go and catch a chill now that you’re on the mend,” he ordered. He lay back down next to her, crossing his ankles as he held her hand.

“Do you think I’m like the creature?” Maddy asked them, voicing the fear she’d been harboring for some time, but was unable to put into words until they’d read Mrs. Shelley’s work.

“What are you talking about?” Hastings asked in voice full of angry disbelief.

“I mean, someone made him into what he was, pieced him together into this horrible creature who did unspeakable things.”

Stephen put the book down and crawled onto the bed on her other side. “Absolutely not,” he told her. “You’re nothing like the creature. You’ve done what you had to do to survive. He did it out of revenge.” He leaned down and kissed her neck. “He would not have shoved me aside and taken a bullet meant for me.”

“If you ever do something so stupid again, I’ll...well, I don’t know what I’ll do, but it won’t be pretty.” Hastings rolled over to glare at her from her lap.

“Again, you really need to work on your threats,” Maddy told him. “They are not in the least bit intimidating.”

Hastings growled and buried his face in her stomach, tickling her.

“None of that,” Stephen said, pushing Hastings off her. “The doctor said she needs to rest.”

“I’m fine, really,” Maddy insisted. “I mean, we are in bed, after all.” She batted her eyelashes at Stephen. “You could both take terrible advantage of me, and I couldn’t do a thing about it with this arm.” She wiggled her arm in the sling and then winced.

“Rest,” Hastings said, standing up beside the bed. “Although you do seem much improved. I’m going to see if Mrs. Tulane has any more of that soup for you.”

### CHAPTER 45

Maddy woke up in Stephen's bed again, and the sun was shining brightly through the window. There was a man standing in front of the window, but she couldn't tell if it was Stephen or Hastings at first.

"What time is it?" she asked, still half asleep.

"I daresay it's well on noon," a strange voice answered as the man turned from the window.

Maddy shot straight up in bed and looked around frantically for a weapon. She grabbed the book and the bowl her soup had been in from the table beside the bed.

"I'm terribly interested in how you plan to defend yourself with a book and a bowl," the man drawled. "They do say a pen is deadlier than a sword, although perhaps not in this context. I have no such trite nonsense for the bowl, however."

Maddy slumped back down on the bed, dropping her makeshift weapons. "Sir Barnabas," she said with relief.

"Yes," he replied. "'Tis I." He wandered over to a chair in the corner and sat down. "What a great fuss there is over you, Miss Hyde."

She could see him more clearly now that he was out of the sun. His dark, saturnine features were in their familiar, perpetual frown. He was handsome in a dark, dangerous, grumpy sort of way. But he was firmly attached to his lady love and their

lover, a lady and gentleman Maddy had met when Sir Barnabas had taken her into protective custody. She'd thought them all very urbane at the time but knowing now that their arrangement seemed to be even more common here in the country, in Ashton on the Green, she thought them almost mundane.

"Is there?" she asked him. She plumped the pillow behind her and sat up, making sure to keep the blanket over her for modesty. Her efforts seemed to amuse Sir Barnabas. "And for your information a bowl is almost as solid as a skull for knocking heads."

"I bow to your expertise," he said. He thumped his walking stick on the floor absentmindedly. "What did I tell you about getting friendly with the help?"

"Don't do it," she answered. "I ignored you."

"Good girl." His answer surprised her. "I take it I have you to thank for three of the bodies I had to dispose of."

She shrugged and picked at the blanket. "The situation called for deadly force."

"Did it?" he murmured, leaning back in the chair. "I don't remember you mentioning you were capable of that kind of deadly force."

"You didn't ask. And I thought you knew everything about everybody? It would seem your spy network failed you." She grinned unrepentantly at him.

"It would seem they did," he said in that calm manner of his. She rather thought he'd discuss pastries and puppies with the same insouciance he discussed murder and intrigue. Underneath it all she was sure he was a seething cauldron of pent-up passion and forbidden desires. He had to be, with two lovers to satisfy.

Rather like Stephen, she supposed. She knew for a fact his calm demeanor hid a seething cauldron of forbidden desires. How delicious it all was.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Sir Barnabas asked suspiciously.

“No reason,” she lied. “How are Mel and Wetherald?”

“Why does everyone ask me that?” He sounded irritated. “As if I were their keeper. They are as well as can be expected, I assume. I do not demand hourly updates.”

“What a romantic you are,” she drawled, imitating him.

“I had no idea you would turn out to be the romantic type,” he observed. “I heard you’re to marry the parson. Good for you.” He didn’t sound particularly happy about it.

“Who told you that?” she asked sharply.

“He did.” Sir Barnabas crossed his legs as he regarded her. “That was unexpected.”

“I try to surprise spymasters on a regular basis.” She drummed her fingers on her thigh. “What did you expect?”

“That is neither here nor there at this juncture,” he said. “What has come to pass has come to pass and cannot be undone.”

“Why would you undo my engagement to Stephen?” she demanded.

He sighed. “You misunderstand me. I meant you cannot undo it if you had a mind to.”

“I do not have a mind to do any such thing.”

“Then we argue in vain,” he said, ending it.

“Did you mean to transport me?” she asked. “To Australia?”

“Why whatever would I do a thing like that for?” he asked in obvious surprise. “I had meant to recruit you, but that is a moot point now. A parson’s wife is ill suited to intrigue.”

“Ha. You have no idea the intrigue that goes on around here.”

“Nor do I wish to.” His response was so dry it made Maddy laugh.

“What about Hastings?” she finally got up the courage to ask.

“What about him?” Sir Barnabas wasn’t looking at her. He was brushing some lint off his trousers.

“Well, you can’t make him go back. To London, I mean.”

“I know where you meant,” he replied. “I did not have to. He offered and so I dispatched him to take care of the gentlemen who hired your ineffective former partner in crime.”

“First, we weren’t partners. He got the majority of the take. Second, what do you mean you’ve dispatched Hastings?”

“He and Essie were reporting what happened, and I told them who had hired Bales. But they already knew. That surprised me. I thought you’d keep that information close as insurance.”

“I was. But then I didn’t need to.”

“Well, he has offered to take care of it, and since he seems to have learned his lesson here, I sent him on his way.”

Maddy got a very cold feeling in the pit of her stomach. “What lesson?”

“I can’t really remember now,” Sir Barnabas said, which was very irritating. “Something about focusing on the mission at hand, or not being so rash. He seemed quite focused this morning, although he did tell me that the entire affair the other evening was all his fault. He said he got distracted.” Sir Barnabas peered at her knowingly. “By you? Or the good parson?”

“Both, and don’t even try to act surprised or shocked.” She bit her nail. “Does Stephen know he’s gone? When is he coming back?”

“I was not going to waste my breath attempting to pretend that which I am not,” Sir Barnabas said. He stood up. “I must apologize.”

Maddy’s eyes widened in shock. “You? For what?”

“I assumed Hastings knew about your engagement. When I mentioned it, it was quickly apparent he did not. I believe that is why he was so eager to get back to London.”

“You stupid sod,” Maddy said sharply. She threw back the covers. “We were going to tell him, but things?—”

“Yes, things happened.” Sir Barnabas stepped out of her way as she got out of the bed and began looking for her clothes. “If you must know, I expected he and Mr. Matthews to make a go of it. You are somewhat of a dark horse here.”

“That’s my specialty,” she told him. “No one expects me to do much.”

“Indeed. I could have used that to my advantage.” He sighed as if feeling very put upon.

“No, you couldn’t,” she informed him flatly as she grabbed the blanket off the bed and attempted to wrap it around herself one-armed. “I’m done letting other people use me to their advantage.”

“Brava,” Sir Barnabas murmured. “It appears a sojourn in the country was the thing for you, too. What does the good parson dispense to cure what ails you all, I wonder?”

“That is none of your concern,” she replied primly. “Where will we find Hastings?”

He shrugged. “Gone to ground, most likely, until he takes care of his assignment.”

Maddy opened the door. “I need Essie.”

“Miss Waters left for London with Hastings,” Sir Barnabas reminded her.

“She left without saying goodbye?” Maddy asked incredulously. She let herself feel hurt by it. She wasn’t going to hide from her emotions anymore. “I can’t believe she’d do that.”

“At this juncture I have very little control over her,” Sir Barnabas said. “She comes and goes as she pleases. I was rather surprised to still find her here at all.”

“She wasn’t supposed to stay with me?” Maddy asked.

“No.” He shook his head. “She was simply to deposit you here in Hastings’s care.”



He picked up his walking stick. “As I said, she does as she pleases. I do believe I will have to use her on a contractual basis, as opposed to a dedicated agent, at least until I can break her of that.”

“No one will ever break Essie,” Maddy warned him. “Now get out. I have to get dressed and fix this mess you’ve made.”

“Oh, I’ve made?” he drawled. “As usual I get the blame and none of the credit. Very well. However, I do not recommend showing your face in London until Hastings and Essie clear it of men who wish to kill you.” He paused as he was walking out and turned back to her. “You may be accustomed to deadly force, my dear, but your parson isn’t. Getting him killed is not a good way to start the marriage.”

“So we’re just expected to sit here and wait until Hastings kills them and then go and get him back?”

Sir Barnabas shrugged. “Unless you can think of a better plan, yes. By the way, there is a drawing room full of people waiting to see you.”

“Who?” she asked, confused as to who would want to see her. “Oh, God. The constabulary?”

Sir Barnabas shook his head. “No. You are not a petty criminal anymore. There was no need to involve the constabulary in the events of the other evening. Too many questions, and too much paperwork. Besides, I know the sheriff here.”

“I was never petty,” she said. “Then who’s here?”

“Maddy?” She walked over and looked over the banister at Stephen, who was standing at the bottom of the stairs. “They said you were up. I can’t find Essie. Is she up there?”

She looked at Sir Barnabas. “He doesn’t know?” she asked quietly.

“No. That is your job.” Sir Barnabas put his hat on as he answered Maddy’s question.

The duchess appeared next to Stephen. “Do you need something, my dear?” she called up. “Can we come up and see you now that that odious man is leaving? The Westridges and the Norths are here as well.”

“This odious man is back to London,” Sir Barnabas said as if on cue. “The duke, one of your admirers in the parlor, by the by, seems to think I’m under some obligation to accede to his wishes in the matter of this affair. I would rather it not become an issue between us.” He bowed at her and headed down the stairs, passing Stephen on his way up.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Matthews,” he said. “I bid you goodbye.”

“Oh, well, yes,” Stephen sputtered as he watched him go. “Goodbye.”

Stephen came to her and gently took her in his arms, being careful of her arm. “Have you seen Hastings?” he asked, looking beyond her into the bedroom. “I can’t find him anywhere, either, since he talked to Sir Barnabas this morning, and no one else has seen him.”

Maddy took his hand and led him into the bedroom. “Come on,” she said. “I’ll explain everything.”

### CHAPTER 46

“T his fellow certainly got us, didn’t he?” Essie asked.

Hastings had been tracking his quarry for three days. It wasn’t that he was hard to find. He was ridiculously easy to find because he was a wealthy aristocrat holding an important position in the British government. What was hard was finding him alone; Hastings needed to wait for an opportunity to kill him when there would be no witnesses. That was the deal he and Sir Barnabas had struck. Sir Barnabas didn’t want this death to come back on him and his office. It had to look like an accident or a random crime. And so, Hastings waited.

He and Essie were currently waiting in a dram shop just across from their offices at the Home Office. They hadn’t been in to the office since their return. The man he was tracking also had an office in the same building, in the Colonial Office. No wonder Maddy had been so worried about being shipped off to Australia or Canada. He should have assured her that Sir Barnabas had more sense than to send her to any colony. Northern Ireland or Wales would have been more likely.

“I’m still kicking myself for not being more suspicious when little Peter said he didn’t know the man who sent the message about Tuck. Tuck’s lucky he just got a knock to the head,” Hastings grouched.

“We’re all kicking ourselves,” Essie said. She glanced out the window and then took a sip of her ale. “We got too comfortable there, that’s the truth of it. Began to believe it was the perfect little village that it seemed. But evil will find you. It always does.”

“That is a very cynical attitude.” Hastings continued to watch the door of the building across the way. The shop was full of men who worked at the Home Office, so their presence didn’t seem out of place. It was close to where they needed to be, but not too close. They could remain inconspicuous here. He turned his attention to Essie for a brief moment. “Where have you been? I haven’t seen you for two days. You look like hell.”

“Had to go see my girl,” she mumbled, staring into her tankard. She took a long swallow. “Turns out she got engaged while I was gone.”

“She what?” Hastings asked, completely shocked. “Mary Peppers got engaged? But you two...”

“Yeah, I thought so, too,” Essie said with a sigh. She sat back and stared out the window. “She said she didn’t know if I was coming back, and she didn’t like having to sit there wondering if I was dead. Couldn’t abide the idea of a life like that. Also, she likes being respectable. Being a nanny for the Manderley’s gave her a taste for it. So, she’s marrying some fat farm agent from Islington, if you can believe it.”

“I don’t believe it. She’ll regret it one day.” Essie just hummed noncommittally. “You can go back to Miss Marlestone now with a clear conscience.”

“She’s not for the likes of me and you know it,” Essie said tonelessly.

“So, we’ve both been tossed over,” Hastings said glumly, slouching against the bench as he watched the building. “Neither of us good enough, I suppose.”

“You didn’t get tossed over,” Essie reminded him. “You ran away before they told you what was going on. That’s different.”

“They’re getting married!” he practically yelled at her. They got stern looks from

several gentlemen seated around them. “And they didn’t tell me. They had the chance. We sat around reading bloody Frankenstein’s story all night the other night. At any time they could have told me.”

“They’d both just been kidnapped, and she’d been shot,” Essie said. “It probably wasn’t uppermost in their minds.”

Hastings rejected her logic. “It would have been uppermost in mine if Maddy had agreed to marry me.” He finished his drink and waved the barmaid over for another.

“Well, as stupid as I think the arrangement will be—and it’s bloody stupid, somebody’s bound to get hurt, mark my words—I can’t imagine either one of them deliberately cutting you out.”

“I was just a placeholder,” he said morosely. “For Stephen, anyway, until Maddy came along.” At least he still had Bronny. The duke hadn’t asked for him back and he wasn’t going to get him if he did. That horse was the only thing he had left that he could call his own.

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” Essie agreed. “He’s that kind of selfish prick, he is. Only thinking with his dick and not caring if somebody gets hurt.”

Hastings swung back around with a frown to glare at her. “You know he isn’t like that.”

“Sure I do,” Essie agreed. “Just making sure you remembered he wasn’t like that.”

“Shut it,” Hastings told her. “It’s not your business.”

“I’m making it my business, against my better judgement, because I like Maddy. And the parson isn’t too bad as far as his sort goes. They’re not here to defend themselves,

so I'm doing it for them." She crossed her arms and glared back at him.

"Yes, and what about that?" he demanded. "They know by now I'm in London, but I don't see them anywhere, do you?" He looked around and spread his arms wide to indicate the lack of a beautiful, backstabbing pretender or sanctimonious parson. He recognized the injustice of the descriptions as soon as he thought them, but he held tight to his righteous anger.

"Took me nigh on three hours to find you," Essie told him. "And I know my business."

"So does Maddy," he said in a curt tone. That was another thing. Why hadn't she told them the extent she'd been involved in the trade? She took out those men like a professional. He couldn't have done better himself.

No wonder Sir Barnabas had taken her in and hidden her from view. Hastings knew damn well he'd had plans for her. He wouldn't have let a find like her slip away. Bastard . He'd wanted to use her just like everyone else in her life had. Well, good for her for catching the parson. She was out of Sir Barnabas's net now.

"Maddy worked the docks," Essie scoffed. "She steered clear of these streets if she could."

Hastings watched some familiar faces approach the shop and enter through the front door. When they appeared beside his table, he ignored them.

"I'm fine, thank you," his former friend Simon Gantry said as if Hastings cared enough to ask. All of this was Simon's fault for dumping him in Stephen's garden. Simon pulled out a chair and sat down beside him. "We just came from the office. He's still in there. Hasn't left in two days. I saw his valet bring clean clothes for him this morning."

“I think he knows his plan failed,” Simon’s partner and lover Robert Manderley said. He sat down in the other empty chair at their table. “He’s hiding in his offices because he knows no one will kill him in there.”

“I’ll kill him in there,” Hastings growled.

“Not without a very difficult and detailed plan,” Simon told him. “None of your rushing in guns firing.”

“I don’t rush in firing my gun anymore,” Hastings told him stiffly. “If I did, you’d be dead.”

“Lord, are we back to that?” Simon complained. He waved the barmaid over and ordered drinks for he and Robert. “How was I supposed to know Stephen would break your heart? He hasn’t got a deceitful bone in his body!”

His words made Hastings remember what a poor liar Stephen was. “Well, he certainly fooled me,” Hastings grumbled.

“I met the good parson when we stopped on our way to find Simon,” Manderley told him. “I agree with him. I think you’ve completely misconstrued the situation and you should give them the chance to explain.” He turned to Essie. “And how are you?” He sighed. “I know Mary Peppers’s engagement took you by surprise. We were surprised, as well. And now we have to find a new nanny.”

Essie shrugged. “I’m sure Very Tarrant will find you someone,” she said, referring to the wife of a former agent. “She’s got her fingers in more pies in this town than even Sir B. She’ll turn over another rock and there your nanny will be.”

“I’m not sure I want a nanny Very Tarrant finds under a rock,” Simon said dryly. “I was actually going to write to Stephen and see if he knew of anyone in Ashton on the

Green who might like the position. A nice country girl is just the ticket.”

Essie frowned at him. “There was nothing wrong with Mary Peppers. You can’t blame her for wanting to better her place. She’s going to be the wife of a prosperous man. She won’t have to worry no more.”

Simon held his hands up in surrender. “You’re right, of course. Mary Peppers was a wonderful nanny. That’s why I’m so put out about losing her.”

“Why don’t you see if Mary Peppers and her farmer are interested in having you join their happy home?” Hastings asked snidely.

“Mary don’t want none of that,” Essie said. “She’s going to be respectable.”

Simon raised a sardonic brow at that. “And we are not, is that what you’re saying?”

“Course you ain’t,” Essie said without rancor. “And you know it.”

“So what’s good for the gander is not good for the goose?” Hastings accused. “You expect me to go back and ask the same thing of Stephen and Maddy, but your Mary Peppers is too good for it? Or you are?”

“It isn’t the same and you know it,” Essie told him impatiently. “I don’t know beans about this farmer, and frankly I don’t want to.” She shuddered. “I’m not interested in any man’s prick. And I’m sure he ain’t interested in someone like me. Not like the parson and Maddy, who were both watching you like you hung the bloody moon. What did I tell you about being candy to them what don’t eat sweets, hmm? And now you’re running because they’ve developed a sweet tooth.”

“Well, they seemed to be quite satisfied with the sweets they have between them,” Hastings said, tired of the allusion. “I always knew I was fooling myself about being



able to stay in Ashton on the Green. That's not a place for the likes of me."

"And what are you?" Simon asked.

"A killer," Hastings said. "Which brings me back to the task at hand."

"Every single person at this table has killed," Manderley said gently. "I'm not going to lie and say that I have in the same way all of you have. But once or twice when I was a constable it was necessary. And I've done it to save Simon's life. That doesn't mean I don't think I deserve happiness with Simon and Christy."

"Simon is about as far from a devout parson as it's possible to be and still remain in England," Hastings said.

"I'd take exception to that except it's quite true," Simon admitted. "I've done things that make even me blush." He shook his head as if he was thinking about some of them. "But I also think I deserve happiness."

"Look, we all deserve happiness," Hastings said, rolling his eyes. "That's not the issue. The issue is that they got engaged, they didn't tell me, and so I left. The end. And I mean that. That's the end of it. Isn't that him?" He pointed out the window in a small gesture, squinting at the man hurrying out of the office building. He was surrounded by four guards, who tucked him into a large coach. One of the men climbed in with him and one took up position on the back of the coach.

"By George," Simon breathed as he looked out the window. "I think we've got him."

### CHAPTER 47

They followed the coach through London on foot. It was traveling slowly down the congested streets, so it was easier than trying to hail a carriage. They went down Charing Cross to Tottenham Court. All the bookshops they passed made Hastings think about *The Modern Prometheus*, and he got mad all over again. More than once since he'd left Ashton on the Green the memory of Maddy comparing herself to Frankenstein's creature had haunted him. He was the creature, not her. Here he was again, killing on command. Killing for revenge. He'd gone right back to his old life, because the truth was, he wasn't fit for a life with them.

The coach finally came to a stop in front of a pub on Tottenham Court Road. The pub was strangely quiet for this time of day, which was perfect. The Honourable Harold Pinter, middle son of the Earl of Wembley, emerged from the coach and looked around furtively. The bodyguard from the back had come around and opened the door for him. He was followed out by the second bodyguard.

Just then another coach pulled up behind Pinter's. He looked surprised. The coach was quite grand and had a black cloth obscuring the coat of arms.

"I don't think that's who he's supposed to be meeting here," Essie whispered.

"No, I don't think so," Hastings agreed. "Whoever it is has terrible timing."

A figure stepped down out of the coach and they all reeled back in shock.

"What the devil is Freddy doing here?" Simon asked.

Hastings had a very bad feeling about this. When a second figure emerged from the coach, he knew he was right. Stephen put his hat on and then turned and offered a hand to whoever was still in there. Hastings knew even before he saw her that it was Maddy.

“Oh, Lord,” Essie said with a sigh. “Here we go.”

Hastings was about to march across the street and gut Pinter before he had a chance to say a word to any of them when Simon and Manderley each grabbed him by an arm.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” Simon said. “No rushing in gun firing, remember?”

“He’s trying to have her killed!” Hastings told him. “None of them have a clue how this works.”

“If it was just him, I’d say Maddy could take him,” Essie mused. “But those guards, I don’t know. Hastings might be right on this one.”

“On this one?” he asked. “I don’t need your help, thanks.”

Essie shrugged and turned and started to walk away. “Suit yourself. Tell Mads I’ll be around to see her soon.” She strolled off and was lost in the crowd.

“I think Barnabas is ready to give up on that one,” Simon said. “She’s far too independent.”

“We are all far too independent for Sir Barnabas,” Manderley said. “Can we let go now?”

Hastings nodded curtly. He couldn’t tell what was being said, but no one had drawn

any weapons, and the bodyguards had taken several steps back. Pinter began gesturing at them. It looked as if he was trying to get them to intervene and they both shook their heads. Freddy spoke to them, and they nodded and faded back into the crowd and were soon gone.

“Freddy still has the ability to surprise me,” Simon said softly. “We could have used him in the service.”

“If I promise not to fire my gun, can I go and see what the hell is going on?” Hastings asked. He looked pointedly at Simon’s hand still on his arm.

“No killing?” Simon asked.

“No killing indiscriminately,” Hastings amended.

“Fair enough.” Simon let him go.

Maddy stepped forward after Freddy sent the guards away. How on earth he’d managed to bribe them before they arrived, she had no idea. She didn’t let it trouble her. He had insisted on helping, and she was very grateful. She wasn’t sure how she and Stephen would have managed it without him. The irony was not lost on Maddy. Here she’d grown up as part of London’s underworld, and a duke had to help her take down her nemesis.

“Pinter,” she said, her voice curt.

“I don’t know you,” he lied. He was looking over his shoulders, not meeting her eyes.

“No, you don’t,” she agreed. The Madelyn Hyde he’d met was not who she was, not then and certainly not now. She shuddered to think she’d let this odious man grope her in order for her father to make a deal with him. She knew now the difference

between someone like him and a real gentleman. "I'm here to offer you a deal." She waited for his attention.

"I have nothing to say to a person like you," he said with a supercilious sniff. "Begone and sell your wares elsewhere."

Stephen bristled with anger at her side. "Watch yourself," he growled. "That is my fiancée you are speaking to."

"If that is indeed the case, then I should call the watch," Pinter said. "I shan't be accosted on the street by criminal scum."

At that the duke took his walking stick and poked Pinter in the stomach hard enough to make him gag and double over.

"Watch your tone," the duke said mildly. "You are speaking to my parson and his intended. And I assure you, should you call the watch I have more influence than you in who gets hauled away."

"I'd heard the Duke of Ashland was a strange sort of fellow, and a ruffian," Pinter said breathlessly, standing straight again. "I see the rumors are true. You may be a duke, but my father has a great deal of influence at court. Be careful or you may find your title in jeopardy."

"If you read your Debrett's you'd know that that is impossible," Freddy told him. "Without an act of Parliament, it can't be done, and no such act will be forthcoming."

"Are you ready to hear my offer?" Maddy asked. She was not intimidated in the least by this toad. Facing him again she realized she'd never been intimidated by him. She'd gone to Ashton on the Green because she wanted out of her life, not because she feared for it. He'd inadvertently given her the keys to her cage, but now he was

jeopardizing everything, and she wouldn't allow that. She couldn't just kill him. Well, she could, but Stephen didn't want that, and she was trying to leave all that behind. And she didn't want Hastings to kill him, either. That would hang over their heads. No, this was the best way.

While he'd been posturing and trying to decide what to do, the duke's footmen had moved in behind him. When he turned and tried to bolt, they grabbed him and turned him back around and set him in front of her. He was all bluster and outrage, but she could see the fear in his eyes.

"I'm not going to kill you," Maddy said. "That's part of the deal."

He had the stones to laugh. "You, kill me? Well, I daresay not."

"Why? Because I'm a woman?" she asked, irritated. "Yes, you just keep on being an idiot. It may not be me, but some woman will get you."

"Focus," Stephen said quietly.

"Right, right," she agreed, nodding. "The deal is, there is a position waiting for you in Canada. You can take it, and leave England, and never return. Or you can die."

"Canada? What are you prattling on about?" he said with a frown. "I work in the Colonial Office. I don't need a position in Canada."

Maddy turned to the duke with a shrug. "Well, I tried. Let's leave him to Hastings." She started to walk away, but Stephen took her arm.

"Maddy," he said with an arched brow. She tapped her foot impatiently.

"Fine," she said. She turned back to Pinter.

“The duke,” she pointed at the duke, “has pulled some strings to get this position for you. He has also told certain individuals about your criminal enterprise skimming money from the Colonial Office and taking bribes for contracts and goods.”

“I have done no such thing!” he blustered, his face turning red.

“Save your outrage,” she told him. “I was there when you brokered the deal with Bleecker, remember?”

“One of those individuals I have had a conversation with is the Earl of Wembley,” the duke said. “Your father, I believe? Yes, well, he agreed this position was a very good opportunity for you. You’ll find your bags packed and already loaded on a ship heading to Nova Scotia.”

Pinter’s face had gone from red to pale. “My father?” he said weakly.

“You can go to Canada, or you can die here,” Stephen said firmly. “Trust me when I tell you we will not be the ones to do the deed, but things have already been set in motion. We are simply trying to intercept before those plans can come to fruition.”

“Personally, I think you should die,” Freddy said in a calm, conversational way. “After all, you attempted to take Miss Hyde’s life, so it is only fair play that you suffer the same fate. But alas, the good parson and his lady have decided to be the better people, as it were, and so I helped broker this deal. Rest assured, I am also willing to rescind the deal at any moment, so I wouldn’t take too long to decide.” He pulled out his pocket watch and checked the time. “I have accepted an invitation for this evening at Carleton House, so the longer you delay the more perilous your situation.”

“Do I get a vote?” Hastings appeared from around Pinter’s carriage, glowering at them. “You are interfering with my job, after all.”

“Hastings!” she cried, and ran over to him. “I knew we’d find you if we followed Pinter.” She hugged him tightly and ignored the fact he didn’t hug her back. He was angry. She understood that. She pulled away and looked up at his lovely face, disregarding his scowl as she gave him a bright smile. “I’ve missed you terribly, and so has Stephen.” Surely he could feel her heart pounding and see the truth of it in her face.

“I’m sure you have,” he said sarcastically. He brushed her hands off his arms and looked at Pinter. “He’s mine.”

“Who, sir, are you?” Pinter asked in a querulous voice. Maddy got the impression he already knew.

“I’m the one whose job it is to kill you,” Hastings told him with a nasty smile. “I got assigned the job, but honestly? It’s going to be my pleasure.”

“Assigned?” Pinter asked in horror. “By whom?”

Hastings shook his head and put his finger to his lips. Pinter’s color had turned ashen.

“I’m a case for him, am I?” he asked. He turned to Freddy. “I’ll take it. I’ll take the deal.” He held out his hand.

The duke looked at it with distaste. “I prefer not to,” he said, turning away. He motioned and the two bodyguards appeared out of the shadows. “Take him to the Imperial,” he told them. “Dock 352.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” one of the men said. He grabbed Pinter’s arm and shoved him toward the carriage. Both bodyguards climbed in with him.

“See here,” Hastings said angrily.



“You still work for me,” the duke told him. “And I am telling you he leaves for Canada.” He and Hastings stared at one another until Hastings swore and turned away.

“Pinter,” the duke said before the door of the coach was closed. “You are never to return. Should you do so, the warrant for your death will immediately be reinstated. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” he said. One of the footmen closed the door in his face.

“Make sure he gets on that ship,” the duke told him. The footman nodded and climbed onto the back of the coach.

“Now,” the duke said gaily, rubbing his hands together, “I shall make my dinner plans, and you three can work this out. Yes?” He waved at his coachman, and he pulled the coach over to where they stood. “I’m taking the coach, naturally. I expect you all at the Park for luncheon on Thursday next to report on what you have decided.”

“I’m not working for you anymore,” Hastings told him. “I’m not the sheriff. I quit. I have a job here. In London.”

“Yes, yes,” the duke said as he climbed into his carriage. “Oh, is that Simon and Manderley?” He waved from the doorway of the coach. “Oh, do let me give you a ride home, gentlemen. We must catch up.”

“Freddy, what have you done?” a blond-haired gentleman asked him.

“What needed to be done, of course,” the duke told him blithely. “Come, come. I must be on my way. Good afternoon,” he said with a little bow of his head to Maddy and Stephen and Hastings as the two men who came from across the street got into

his coach.

“You must be Miss Hyde,” the blond man said through the window. “Simon Gantry. By the way, Stephen,” he said with a grin. “You’re welcome.”

The coach pulled away, leaving the three of them on the walkway in front of a pub.

Hastings started to turn away and in desperation Maddy blurted, “I love you. Don’t leave. We want you to come home.”

Hastings didn’t turn around, just stopped long enough to say, “I don’t believe that. If it were true, I wouldn’t have had to find out about your engagement from Sir Barnabas.” He started walking again.

“That was my fault,” Stephen called out. Hastings stopped again, his back still to them. “I just couldn’t wait on the way to Tuck’s. Maddy was talking about leaving and I had to make her stay. If you don’t want us to get married, Hastings, we won’t.”

At that Hastings turned around. “Don’t do that on my account,” he said. “I’m back in London to stay. It’s a good thing you found each other, then, isn’t it? So just run along back to Ashton on the Green and quit messing up my assignments.”

“Do you want to marry her instead?” Stephen asked. Maddy was surprised. They’d talked it about and decided it made more sense for her to marry Stephen. Since Hastings already lived there, it shouldn’t be too unusual for him to stay, and people would simply get used to it. But Hastings and Maddy, if they married, it would be unusual for a newly married couple to live at the parsonage. And it wouldn’t be possible for Stephen to leave the parsonage and live with them.

Hastings looked right at her and met her gaze. “No,” he said flatly. “I can’t marry her.”

It was like a knife to her heart. Had they destroyed his love by not waiting for him to declare theirs?

“What can we say, what can we do, to prove how sorry we are?” she cried. “Forgive us. You must realize how we feel. Truly, we love you.”

“We do love you, Hastings,” Stephen said solemnly. “We are not complete without you.”

“I think you think you love me,” he said, and he sounded more tired than anything else. “Which is not the same thing.” He shoved his hands in the pockets of his coat. “Take her home, Stephen. She belongs there with you. I told you all along, that life was never meant for me.”

“We both belong there,” Maddy said, giving up any pretense of not crying. “It isn’t home without you there.”

“I’m sure you’ll be fine after the wedding,” Hastings said. He glanced across the street. “Just drop me a note every now and then.”

“We will not marry until you come home,” Stephen declared, and Maddy knew in her heart it was the right thing to do.

Hastings looked at them and then turned and crossed the street, losing himself in the crowd.

### CHAPTER 48

Two months later

Stephen sat back on his heels and dusted his hands off. The garden really didn't need much work for the winter months. Just trimming some of the dead wood and vines away, although most of that would wait until spring. The plants needed a warm layer to protect them in the cold months ahead.

He glanced over at Maddy, who was bundled up in a coat and sitting on a blanket under the oak, reading. Her new puppy, Snuffles, a gift from the Westridge's, was asleep at her side. She couldn't read enough these days. Before long she'd have exhausted his library and then she was going to start on Freddy's. He'd offered her free rein among his books.

"Aren't the trees so interesting like this?" Maddy asked. She looked up at him and smiled, then glanced up at the bare branches above her. "I love how stark they are against the sky. As if the branches were arms reaching for the sun. Hastings will love it here this time of year. Don't you think so? Although fall was my favorite, for the trees, I mean. The leaves were so beautiful. I found a book about trees at the Park the other day. I set it aside for Hastings."

Maddy always spoke of Hastings in terms of when he would be here, not if. Stephen tended to agree with her, but it was taking the damn fool too long to get his head on straight. Maddy's smile had been growing dimmer. Perhaps leaving him in London to figure it out on his own hadn't been the best idea. But Stephen wanted to start as they meant to go on, and so he felt it was important to treat Hastings like a fully grown

man who could make his own decisions, even if they were the wrong ones. But he and Maddy had kept his promise—they remained unmarried, much to Mrs. Tulane's, and the duchess's, disapproval.

He tried not to think about whose bed Hastings was sharing drunk and naked these days.

"I think we should go to London and fetch him." Stephen was startled by his own words. He hadn't meant to voice that out loud.

"I think you're right," Maddy agreed, closing her book. "He's had enough time to wallow in his self-righteous misery." She sighed. "And I've begun to suspect that's what he wants. Do you think anyone has come for him before? I mean, gone out of their way to chase him down and bring him back."

"No, I don't," Stephen said, feeling like an idiot for not figuring that out himself. "I think he's always been the one left behind."

"So do I." Maddy looked back at him with a bright smile. "We should go before winter sets in."

"Perhaps you should marry him," Stephen suggested, not worried in the least what that would mean for him. Regardless of what the very church he worked for believed, Stephen knew that no vows or papers could make he and Maddy any closer. Nor he and Hastings.

"I think Hastings would rather you did," she told him, surprising him again. "I think he likes the idea of belonging to us, not just to me, if that makes any sense. We shall ask him again, of course, but I also think he'd prefer the veneer of independence, as if he could up and take off any time he wished."

“What if he does?” Stephen asked, his stomach clenching in unease.

“Then I daresay he’ll be back.” Maddy seemed unperturbed by the notion. “We give him something no one else has ever given him.”

“What’s that?”

“Unconditional love.” Maddy stood up. “Speaking as someone who never had that before I came here, it is a precious thing and Hastings is not fool enough to throw it away.”

“No,” Stephen agreed. “He’s not that big a fool.”

Hastings felt like a fool. He’d been twiddling his thumbs in London for two months since he’d driven Stephen and Maddy away and, despite knowing he’d done the right thing, they were still all he could think about. He’d very nearly taken a bullet the other day when he took his eyes off the suspect he was chasing because he was distracted by a book he thought Maddy would like in a shop window. And now he was called before Sir Barnabas to take his dressing down. Again. How many times had he had to listen to Sir B rail at him about what a terrible agent he was? He could have been sheriffing in the village, keeping Tuck and Grady away from each other, and pretending Mrs. Thompson was a lady of the evening.

He tried not to think about what else he could be doing in Ashton on the Green.

“So,” Sir Barnabas said as soon as he walked in. “It’s come to this.” He sighed and Hastings sighed with him.

“Why don’t we just skip this part and get to the part where you tell me I’ll be writing reports and supervising some informant for the foreseeable future?” he suggested hopefully.

“Sit.” Sir Barnabas indicated the chair in front of his desk. His lady love Mel had insisted on getting a comfortable chair for his office. He used to have just one tiny, uncomfortable wooden one sitting before his huge desk, making you feel like a prisoner in the dock when you sat before him. God bless Mel, Hastings thought as he sank into the cushioned chair.

“You are very lucky that Essie still had her wits about her the other day.” Sir Barnabas steepled his hands on the desk in front of him and glowered at Hastings over the tips of his fingers.

“I said thank you,” Hastings told him. “That’s what partners are for, aren’t they, to keep you from getting shot?”

Sir Barnabas sighed again. That wasn’t a good sign.

“I had hoped that your time in the country would make you more levelheaded, not less,” he said at last, sitting back in his chair. “Clearly my plan backfired. The Duke of Ashland has requested your return once again.”

“He doesn’t own me,” Hastings snapped. “I’m not a damn serf.” He’d been getting curt notes from the duke every other day demanding his return.

“Apparently the entire village will have no other sheriff.” Hastings drew back in surprise at Sir Barnabas’s statement. “Indeed, I was shocked as well.” He paused and tipped his head to the side as he regarded Hastings. “I know you want to return. Why haven’t you? You are not happy here now. One wonders if you ever were.”

“Happiness is overvalued,” Hastings scoffed.

“No, it is not.” Sir Barnabas shook his head sadly. “I once thought as you do, that happiness was something for fools and the weak-minded. I thought I was perfectly

content to go through life without it. After all, I'd never had it, and I was doing just fine."

"Exactly," Hastings said. "No one needs to be happy."

"I do not think that anymore." Sir Barnabas looked at him grimly. "I cannot fathom my life without Mel and Wetherald now. Should they be taken from me, I would wither like a flower on the vine and fade away. And I'm glad of it. Man was not meant to go through life alone. Companionship, love—they make us stronger, not weaker. Everything I do now, I do for them. I make England, our home, safer for them. They have changed me, and I do not regret it. For everything I do, every sling and arrow I suffer, my happiness with them is my reward. Only a great fool would throw that kind of happiness away. I did not raise you to be a fool."

Hastings was speechless for a moment. He knew Sir Barnabas felt that way about Mel and Wetherald. It was in every look they exchanged, the sound of his voice when he spoke of them. But he had never acknowledged it so openly to Hastings before. And to speak of raising him, as if he were a father to Hastings, this, too, was new.

"You are not my father," he said, not sure how else to reply.

"I am the only father you have ever known," Sir Barnabas said. "I took you in off the streets as a churlish, ignorant boy and I gave you the world. I gave you books, education, my wisdom, a place to call home, a vocation. Everything I would have given a son, had I one."

"I...I don't know what to say," Hastings whispered.

"Say you are not a fool," Sir Barnabas snapped. "I gave you Simon, who is dear to me—which I will deny if you ever tell him that—and he gave you the parson. And when I saw you there, I left you. Because the only gift I had left to give you was love."



I sent Miss Hyde because you are cut from the same cloth. I gave you the chance to choose and then, because the universe is a kind and gentle master, you didn't have to. You have the chance to know love and happiness, the likes of which most men will never know. Do not be a fool. Do not throw it away. Do not disappoint me."

"You saw me there?" Hastings asked in disbelief. "When?"

"That is neither here nor there," Sir Barnabas said airily, waving it away with his hand. "Did you not hear what else I said?"

"I heard it," Hastings told him, standing up. "I can't believe you spied on me. That's what you did, isn't it? You came around to make sure I wasn't bugging it up."

"That is a poor choice of words," Sir Barnabas drawled drily. "I did not come to spy, necessarily. But to see the situation. It has become increasingly apparent to me that you are not cut out for this life."

That blow made Hastings physically stagger. "Are you sacking me? Are you sending me away?"

"I am trying to make you see that you have a choice, and you should choose wisely. If you choose to stay, I will let you, though it will break my heart to do so. But I will not speak of this again or antagonize you with recriminations."

"Are you trying to play the father with me?" Hastings accused. "Trying to make me fear your disappointment?" Oh, but he did. He did fear it. For Sir Barnabas was the best man he had ever known, it was true. He was Hastings's model in all things—in his manner, his determination, his control, and yes, even the way he loved.

"I admit I have no experience in the role and am blundering in the wilderness in my attempts, but yes, I am," Sir Barnabas stated calmly. "I need you to know that when I

tell you to go away and not come back, it's for your own good and because I care for you. When I tell you to go back to Ashton on the Green and love your parson and that treacherous woman who hides behind her genteel facade, it's because I just want you to be happy. Hastings, just be happy. That is all I require of you." He paused. "I am also sorry." He took a deep breath. "I should have known that you were not cut out for this life. But it is the only life I knew then and the only one I knew to give you. Do not be shackled by my ignorance and my mistakes."

Hastings laughed. "An apology. From you. My situation must be dire, indeed."

"Essie has offered to drug you and drag you back to the country." Sir Barnabas leaned back in his chair again, his emotional outburst at an end. Not that his voice ever betrayed the feeling behind his words. Being a spy master was ingrained in him too deeply to reveal himself that way.

"Essie is welcome to try," Hastings said, affronted. "She's just angry I almost got killed."

"We are all angry you almost got killed," Sir Barnabas told him. "Simon and Manderley have offered to tie you up and transport you to the parsonage personally. Perhaps you are unaware that you have been impossible to live with in the past two months."

"Fine!" Hastings threw his hands up in the air. "I love them, all right? Does that make you happy? Because it's making me miserable!" He threw himself down in the chair again. "For God's sake, I'm a killer. I have no experience being a lover, or a husband, or whatever it is they expect of me. And they know it. They got engaged. Without telling me. That hardly seems like the actions of people who are in love with me."

"It sounds like the actions of two people who are in love with each other. That does not preclude the possibility that they are also in love with you. Have you considered

the fact that it makes a great deal more sense for her to marry the parson than you? I have become personally cognizant of the logistics of this kind of relationship, as you know. Unless you wish to cause the parson issues with his church, then he must marry the girl. I see no reason you cannot reside at the parsonage as you did before.”

“You have it all worked out for me, do you?” Hastings asked.

“Of course,” Sir Barnabas replied. “It’s what I do.”

“So, I should throw away my pride and common sense and go back?” Hastings asked. He looked over and Sir Barnabas was already reading over some correspondence, the conversation over as far as he was concerned.

“Hmm?” he said. “Oh, yes. That’s what I did. I speak from experience that pride does not keep you warm at night. And common sense is best left out of personal entanglements.” He smiled at Hastings. “Get out and go away and don’t come back.”

Hastings didn’t need Sir Barnabas to tell him again.

### CHAPTER 49

They had just left the parsonage in one of Freddy's coaches, headed for London, when they spied him. He'd stopped his horse a way down the road and was watching them turn out of the gate.

"Stop!" Maddy yelled at the coachman. "Stop!" She turned to Stephen with a huge grin. "It's him. It's Hastings. He came home!"

Stephen could feel his heart pounding. Was Hastings here for good? Or was this a more formal goodbye than the one they'd exchanged in London? He held Maddy back by her arm as she tried to jump out of the coach.

"Let me out first," he told her, amusement in his voice. "I'll help you down."

"Damn these blasted dresses," she snapped. "I'd have much more freedom in breeches. Like Essie."

"You may champion for women's rights and freedom of dress later," Stephen told her. "Don't break a leg before we even get to speak to him."

Maddy laughed and she sounded so happy that Stephen kept his worries to himself.

Stephen jumped down, and by then the footman had approached with the steps for Maddy. She came down and walked over to Stephen. He was standing there staring at Hastings, who was just sitting there in the road looking at them.

“What’s he doing?” Maddy asked. She grabbed Stephen’s hand. “Come on. He still wants us to go to him and I’m not holding on to my pride.”

No , Stephen thought. Pride was a cold companion. He let Maddy tug him forward. As soon as they started to walk toward him Hastings dismounted. He led the horse over to the side of the road and then started walking in their direction. They met in the middle of the road.

“Hastings,” Stephen said softly as they stopped, barely a foot between them.

“I’m so glad you’ve come home,” Maddy said. Stephen could feel how tense she was in the hand she had tucked into his arm.

Hastings didn’t say anything. He just reached out and enveloped both of them in a hug. The tightness in his chest relaxed and Stephen hugged him back, burying his face in Hastings’s neck, absorbing the heat and the smell of him. Stephen had one arm around Maddy, and she’d let go of his arm to hug Hastings.

“I’m sorry for being so stubborn,” Hastings said after a moment, his voice rough. “Someone told me what a fool I was being, and I finally listened. Well, a lot of somebodies told me that.”

“Sir Barnabas,” Maddy mumbled against his chest.

“Yes,” Hastings admitted. “How did you know?”

“Because he’s the only one you’d listen to,” she answered simply. “I shall annoy him by sending him a thank-you gift. Something garish that he’ll hate instantly.” Hastings laughed.

“He said you were one of the only people he’s ever met who had no fear of him,”

Hastings told her. "I could tell he admired that."

"A man with honor doesn't frighten me," Maddy said, pulling away and forcing Stephen back. "It's the other kind you have to be wary of."

Hastings still had an arm wrapped around Maddy's waist, and he let his hand slide down Stephen's arm so he could grasp his hand.

"Are you home to stay?" Stephen asked against his better judgement. Before they went any further, he needed to know.

"Yes. I'm home." Hastings's answer was simple. It required no embellishment. "Where were you going?"

"To London," Stephen told him. "To get you."

"We waited long enough," Maddy declared. "I grew impatient with you. I even baked some bread to bring you as a bribe." Hastings laughed again. He looked tired and care worn, but the laughter brightened his features.

"I grew impatient with myself," he told them. He started walking toward the parsonage. "I had enough of my self-pity and so decided I'd better come back before the situation turned dire."

Stephen stopped and pulled Hastings and Maddy to a stop. "You have to know we did not mean to hurt you or make plans without you. It was a spur of the moment proposal. I was afraid she was going to leave, and you were going to leave... If you'd been there, I would have proposed to you, too."

"I know." Hastings sighed. "My pride was hurt. And that stupid old fear of being unwanted reared its ugly head, I'm afraid. I'm not easy to love, I know that. I left

before you could toss me out. At the time it seemed like the logical thing to do. As time went by, it just seemed stupid.”

“It was stupid,” Maddy told him. “If there are two people in this world who love you and understand you and want you to stay forever, it’s me and Stephen.”

“I know.” Hastings kissed her. “I also missed my old job,” he told them. “Being a government agent is hard work. I’d rather be sheriffing.”

“And there it is,” Stephen teased. “The real reason you’ve returned.”

Hastings tugged on his hand and pulled him close and leaned down and kissed him, right there in the middle of the lane. Stephen didn’t care who saw them. He reached up and held Hastings’s cheek as they kissed gently. When he pulled away the look in Hastings’s eye belied the gentle nature of the kiss.

“Maddy and I have not been with one another since you left,” he told Hastings after the kiss ended. “I’m nearly insane with pent-up desire.”

That made Hastings tip his head back and laugh heartily. “That is good to know,” he said at last. “Because I, too, have been celibate with nothing but thoughts of you two to keep me warm at night.”

“If one of you doesn’t fuck me silly before the day is through, I’m going to rethink this whole love affair,” Maddy declared. “As the creature said, ‘I have so much love to give.’ Or something similar.”

“We’re back to The Modern Prometheus ?” Hastings asked.

“I’ve read quite a few books since you left,” Maddy told him. “But I don’t know if you’d recognized a quote from one of Mrs. Radcliffe’s novels.”

“That means I wouldn’t know either way if it was right or wrong,” Hastings said. “And I’m willing to believe anything you tell me.”

“Oh, now he’s willing to believe anything I say,” Maddy said with exasperation. “Where was that trust when I first arrived?”

“I think I distrusted my feelings more than I distrusted you,” Hastings told her. “You intrigued me. I found you fascinating and infuriating and far too desirable.”

Stephen had been listening to their conversation with a delighted happiness that he could barely contain. This was it then, the beginning of the rest of his life. He would never be alone again, never long for companionship or love or belonging.

“And what did you think of me, Stephen?” Maddy asked with a smile.

“That I wanted you,” he said. “I wanted you physically, but even more than that, I wanted to love you, because you so desperately needed to be loved.”

“Did I?” she asked softly, her gaze on him so full of love it filled him with a contentment he’d never known.

“And I wanted you not just for me,” Stephen said. “I wanted you for us, for me and Hastings, because I already loved him. And I knew how much love he had inside him, how much love he wanted to give to someone. I knew he would gladly give some of that to you, Maddy.” He looked between the two of them. “You two are so alike. How could you not see that in each other? How could you not respond to that similar desire, to be loved and to love in return?”

“Yes,” Hastings said, his face expressing astonishment, as if he’d just realized something important. “That’s it. That’s what I wanted. Not just to be loved, but to have someone accept my love. I never realized that until just now, how important the



second part is.”

“Darling, you are loved,” Maddy told him, putting a hand over his heart. “So much. Never doubt that. And I am quite willing to accept as much love as you’d like to give me.” The second part was said in a suggestive voice, and Stephen felt his body grow warm as arousal began to course through his veins.

“I’ll never doubt again,” Hastings told them. “Now, come on. I’ve got to get my horse, and then we are going home, and we are not leaving the bedroom for three days.”

“Only three days?” Stephen asked, amusement in his voice.

“I know you jest,” Maddy said, disappointment in her tone. “Mrs. Tulane would have an apoplexy. She’s willing to accept so much, but that might be taking it a bit far.”

“Just leave her to me,” Hastings said arrogantly.

“There are other places besides the bedroom,” Stephen suggested. “Trust me, I’ve thought about this. A lot.”

“Now, I’m intrigued,” Hastings said with a devilish grin.

“Why, you naughty parson,” Maddy said with a wink. “We can compare notes.”

### CHAPTER 50

“A re you sure?” Hastings asked, skeptical that this was going to work.

“Hastings, if you don’t get inside me right now, well, I don’t know what I’m going to do, but it won’t be good,” Maddy said breathlessly. He laughed.

“You really need to work on your threats,” he teased.

“If you don’t get inside her right now, I will lose my temper,” Stephen said through gritted teeth. “I cannot last, and I would like to go together if at all possible.”

“Yes, but are you sure this will work?” Hastings asked again. “Trust me, I want in there. I’m dying to get in there. But I don’t want to hurt you, Mads.”

Hastings was still pinching himself, hardly believing that he was back here, in the parsonage, and that he was loving Stephen and Maddy. He hadn’t expected they would both try to take her like this tonight. He thought they’d work up to it.

“No, there is no working up to it,” Maddy had told him. “I’ve been sitting here, sleeping in my lonely bed, imagining this for two months. Two months , Hastings. I think it is cruel and heartless of you to try to make me wait any more.”

She’d been on top of Stephen, his prick deep inside her at the time, and she’d already come once. Stephen clearly was the saint they accused him of if he hadn’t come yet.

“Freddy told me how to do it,” Stephen said, arching his back as Maddy leaned over

and bit his shoulder. “He said she’d enjoy it.”

“I am enjoying it,” Maddy said. “Oh God, right there, darling.” Hastings had his finger in the sweet rosebud of her arse. She was so tight with Stephen filling her cunt. He rubbed where he could feel Stephen’s cock through her thin wall and Stephen groaned.

“You’re trying to make me come,” Stephen complained. “Stop it. Get in there.”

“Maybe I like teasing you both,” Hastings said. “Maybe I like making you beg for me.”

“Please, please give us what we want,” Maddy panted. “I’m begging you. I want to hold both of you, I want to love both of you.” She whimpered as Stephen thrust into her in a short, sharp movement, as if he couldn’t help himself.

“Yes,” Stephen said, his voice harsh. “Please. We’ve waited so long to love you.”

Their words were a balm to his soul. “Acts of love,” he whispered.

“With this body I thee worship,” Stephen said breathlessly.

“That’s beautiful,” Maddy said. “Oh, Stephen. Yes. That. It feels so wonderful to be touched like this. I’ve never been touched by anyone the way you two touch me, as if I’m precious and loved.”

“Yes, that,” Stephen agreed. Maddy kissed him then, and again Hastings was struck by how much he loved watching them together.

“When you two are like that I feel like I’m right there, in between you, feeling everything you’re feeling, sharing what you’re doing,” he told them, running his palm down Maddy’s back. She’d gained some weight since he left, which had softened her

edges. He liked it. He didn't fear hurting her so much when he reached for her, although she seemed to like it when they were impatient with her and grabbed too much or squeezed too hard.

Stephen broke the kiss with Maddy. His hands were holding her face, and he stroked her cheek, then kissed it. He could be so rough one moment and then so tender the next. His passion ran deep, and he fucked like a man who had gone too long without. He met Hastings's eyes over her shoulder. "You will be between us one day soon. But tonight it's Maddy. Tomorrow it will be me."

"Wait," Hastings said, his mind blanking. "Do you mean you want me to fuck you tomorrow night? Like this?" It was almost too much.

"Oh, dear sweet heaven, yes," said Maddy. She writhed on top of Stephen, who grabbed her hips and held her still.

"Stop," he said sharply. "If you want me to last, stop."

"Did you two really not do this while I was gone?" Hastings asked.

"Well, we didn't do this. But we couldn't resist kissing and touching each other," he admitted.

Maddy laughed. "More than that."

"I want to watch you do it," Hastings said as he rubbed more oil on his cock. "I want to watch you do everything. I really like watching."

"So do I," Maddy purred. She bit Stephen's ear and undulated against him, making Stephen gasp.

"I want to watch," Stephen said, "but I haven't had the chance yet. I would really,

really like to watch you fuck Maddy's bottom right now, please."

"It's the please that did it," Hastings told him as he rose on his knees behind Maddy. He tucked himself against her and rubbed the head of his prick against her back entrance.

"Take a deep breath and then push out when he pushes in," Stephen told her breathlessly. "Hastings, go slowly. I'm going to pull out until you're in."

"You're perfect," Maddy said. "Hastings, please." Her back bowed as she presented herself to him as Stephen pulled out.

Hastings enlarged her entrance with his thumbs and then pushed the tip of his prick inside. He met resistance and almost gave up until Maddy moaned with pleasure. He pushed harder and the head of his prick was swallowed in her tight hole, and he cried out at the sensation. He barely moved within her, short gentle thrusts that worked his prick in deeper each time. They were both covered in oil, his hands slipping on the plump cheeks that he was squeezing. When he was seated all the way inside her he stopped, panting with the exertion of holding back.

"Don't stop," Maddy demanded. "It feels so good." She moved against him, pushing back and moaned.

"Let me back in, Mads," Stephen said, and Hastings loved hearing the nickname on his lips. "I want to feel him inside you. I want to fill you up until you can't take anymore. I want to make you ours." He had his hands buried in her hair, holding it away from her face as he kissed her cheek, her jaw, her neck. "I need it. I need you."

"Yes," she said. "I am yours. Take me."

"No one else will ever be here but us," Hastings said, suddenly feeling possessive. He'd never felt like that about anyone before, but Maddy and Stephen were his. "I'm

here now, and this is ours. You're both mine."

"You are ours," Stephen told him. "And we are yours. Lift her up and then seat her on my cock."

"Christ, just the words are going to send me over," Hastings told him, a shiver working its way up his back. "Hearing you talk like that is sinful." He did as Stephen asked, helping Maddy to get up, the movement changing the angle of his penetration and he and Maddy both moaned. "Hurry," Hastings begged.

"Now you are the one in a hurry," Stephen told him. "I should torture you as you did me, but I don't have patience right now. Later, some other time, but not now. Now I just want to love you both."

As Stephen's cock slid inside, Hastings felt every inch gliding along his length. He squeezed the cheeks of Maddy's arse so hard he knew he was bruising her, but she just moaned that breathy little sound that ended higher than it began, the one that meant she was beyond words with pleasure. After just a few times with her he recognized that sound. He bit his cheek, trying not to come, as Stephen continued to push until he was all the way inside her.

"Now, you pull out while I'm in, and then I'll pull out when you're in," Stephen said in a strangled voice. "We'll take turns, rocking in and out. Go gently so we don't hurt her. And Mads, let us know if anything doesn't feel right, if it doesn't feel good. All right?"

"Mmm hmm," Maddy said. She nodded, but the movement was jerky, uncoordinated. Stephen pulled out and Hastings felt it, as if Stephen was rubbing his cock with his own. It was erotic as hell, and Hastings couldn't hold back a moan. He didn't think he'd ever been so vocal when he was fucking. Just another thing he'd hidden until he met them, he supposed. He wasn't afraid to show them how good everything felt to him. As Stephen pushed back in, Hastings slowly pulled out, leaving the head of his

prick inside Maddy.

“I’m not going to last,” he panted. “It feels too good.”

“The same,” Stephen said breathlessly. “I want to come all over you, inside Maddy.”

Hastings could tell Stephen didn’t know what his words did to him, how they stoked the flames of his passion higher. He was just telling him how he felt.

Maddy had completely surrendered to them. She was letting them hold her up and move within her, not passive, but letting them control her pleasure. Her submission was a heady thing. She reached back and palmed the back of his head, pulling his mouth to her shoulder, and he bit her at the same time he moved his slick hands to her breasts and squeezed the way she liked. She cried out and pushed down on their pricks and then she was coming with a low moan.

Her passage tightened around his prick and he could barely move, but he pushed deep inside her and let her ride her release. She sobbed as it seemed to go on and on and then Stephen shouted, and Hastings could feel the pulse of his release through the thin wall separating them inside Maddy. He couldn’t last then, didn’t want to. He came with a groan of relief, feeling the wet heat of his orgasm surrounding his prick in her tight passage. He jerked against her, burying himself deeper, giving her everything.

When it was over, Stephen pulled out of her first. When Hastings did the same, Maddy groaned, but this time it wasn’t pleasure.

“I can’t do that too often,” she said with a shaky laugh. “But that was amazing.” She fell over onto Stephen’s chest, and he held her tight.

“It was,” Stephen agreed. Hastings could see his eyes were closed and he had a smile on his face.

“That was the best fucking thing I have ever done in my life,” Hastings told them honestly. Stephen laughed, just a tired one, not even opening his eyes. He looked sated and deliriously happy.

“Yes, that,” he agreed, hugging Maddy close.

“Let me clean everyone up,” Hastings said. “Since I’m on top.”

Maddy just hummed, still splayed across Stephen’s chest, her legs straddling him. Hastings got up and grabbed a cloth and the washbasin and brought them over to the bed. He cleaned Maddy off and then Stephen, and then himself. He set them down beside the bed and climbed in with them, curling up beside Stephen.

“So, tomorrow night, hmm?” he asked Stephen, kissing his shoulder.

“Yes,” Stephen said, turning to him and opening sleepy eyes. Hastings kissed him, just a soft meeting of lips. Stephen sucked on his bottom lip gently as he pulled away. “The wedding will be sometime in the next couple of weeks,” he told Hastings.

“That soon?” Hastings asked, surprised.

“Yes. We got the license weeks ago. Freddy actually got the Higgenbotham-Hydes to recognize Maddy, and so we are official and socially acceptable.” He chuckled. “We did not, however, invite them to the wedding. Everyone has just been waiting for your return.” He met Hastings’s eyes with the kind of sincere, loving, genuine look that only Stephen was capable of. “Hastings, will you marry us?” he asked.

“I’m not a minister,” Hastings protested.

“No, silly,” Maddy said sleepily. “He means marry us. We want to marry you. The first ceremony will be church sanctioned, of course, but we’re going to have another one at the Park, so that we can marry you. Freddy said he would preside at that one.”



Hastings didn't know what to say for a moment. "Yes," he finally whispered, overwhelmed at what they were saying. "I never thought to have anything like this for myself," he told him. "I'll marry you. I'd be a fool not to."

The End