







# Hearts at Home

**Author:** *Jude Knight*

**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Three warriors find a forever home in the heart of a loved one in this collection of stories about veterans of the Napoleonic wars.

The cavalry captain

Lord Cuckoo Comes Home

After ten years at war, Dom Finchley wants only to build the home he's never had. A place to call his own. Then he meets Chloe.

Chloe Tavistock is past the age for the marriage market, and unfashionable in her shape, her opinions, and her enthusiasms. She is not going to find a husband in York, whatever her fond brother might think. And then she meets Dom.

Two people who have never fitted in just might be a perfect fit.

(Previously published in the Bluestocking Belles collection *Desperate Daughters*)

The freedom-fighter

The Beast Next Door

Eric Lord Wayford would rather face the surgeons of Naples and Napoleon's armies than the tongues of the ton. He retreats to his estate of Eastwood. Beastwood, as the neighbours called it, for the child he had been—a child whose birthmarks made him an exile.

Charis Fishingham has been escaping to the gardens of Eastwood since she was a child. There, she can escape her mother's expectations, her sisters' chatter, and her own worries about her future.

But now her childhood friend, the Beast of Beastwood, has returned, and their future looks to be full of hope. But someone does not wish Charis to wed the Beast of Beastwood, and will stop at nothing to keep them apart.

(Previously published in the Bluestocking Belles collection *Valentines from Bath*)

The monkey did not want to stay in the basket. Chloe had to hold down the lid while pretending nothing untoward was happening. It was a struggle to maintain a half smile of polite interest to convince those around her that she was listening to the speaker.

She didn't dare look at Doro. Her friend had her gaze focused forward with a determination belied by a certain twinkle in her eye and the occasional tremble of her lips. If they met one another's eyes, they would collapse into giggles as if they were twelve or thirteen again and sharing a schoolroom.

Chloe needed to not think about Rosario the monkey or Doro's amusement. Which meant, of course, that was all she could think about. The lecture might have helped, but the man currently droning on about the iniquities of the Habeas Corpus Act was too boring to actually make any sense.

The lid kicked under her hand. She bent over to rap it with her knuckles, just as the audience started clapping. The sudden roar of sound, of course, made Rosario even more desperate to get out of the basket.

Doro leaned closer and hissed out of the side of her mouth, "I did suggest the reform meeting might not be the best place for a monkey."

"I couldn't leave her behind," Chloe protested. "Martin threatened to wring her neck when he caught her."

Doro's amusement bubbled out in a gurgle. "Rosario did steal Lord Tavistock's cravat pin," she pointed out.

It was true, but not the whole truth. In the two weeks since Chloe rescued Rosario from a mob of villagers, she had stolen several things a day, bringing them all to Chloe with every expectation of approval.

The villagers had told Martin, Chloe's brother, the Viscount Tavistock, that the original owner was in prison awaiting trial for theft. A cravat pin, two pairs of sleeve links, a cross belonging to cook, a pair of Chloe's earrings, one jewelled buckle from a shoe, and a handful of other small objects witnessed to the thief's small hairy accomplice.

"Martin will calm down by the time I am home," Chloe assured Doro, hoping it was true.

The next speaker had risen, and someone behind demanded the ladies be silent. Chloe looked around and winced an apology at the large man glaring from the next row of seats.

Two rows behind him, a fair-haired gentleman caught her gaze and winked one twinkling hazel eye.

The speaker, a little man with a bristling beard and burning eyes, began his oration. Boredom was not going to be an issue this time. A voice that was surely too large for the man's body boomed through the room, calling for them to protest the iniquities under which the workers suffered. "I love the King as much as anyone," he claimed, at full shout, "but his son plays at building pleasure palaces while his government oppresses his people and drives us into the workhouse."

At the man's rant, Rosario threw herself against the lid with renewed determination,

rocking the basket despite Chloe's attempt to keep it still.

Behind them, someone booed. The speaker shouted him down, but a jeer came from another corner. Then the first missile flew, straight past Chloe's head.

Chloe ducked and lost hold of the lid of the basket. Rosario shot out, into the crowd, jabbering her distress. "Rosario!" Chloe shouted.

Doro edged up beside Chloe, avoiding the fight that had broken out in the aisle and threatened to impinge on her seat. "We need to get out of here," she said.

She was right. All around them was chaos. Some people were still hurling projectiles at the stage, though the speaker had disappeared. The chairman of the meeting had given up calling for calm and was wringing his hands while dodging pieces of rotten fruit and vegetables.

Others were wrangling in couples or groups, a few verbally but most with fists, elbows, and feet. Chloe began edging along the row towards the nearest wall. She would just have to hope Rosario found her. Chloe and Doro had to get out of here.

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When Dom Finchley saw the first turnip sail towards the stage, he had the fleeting thought that the thrower should have used it earlier, to cut short the drone of the previous speaker. And then two more turnips flew, followed by an apple. Several men descended on the perpetrator. Someone threw a punch. In less time than it took to take a deep breath, the room was in chaos.

Dom recognized the thrower. An agitator—one of the army of less-than-honourable spies employed by the government. Dom supposed he was himself working, at one remove, for the government, but to observe, not to interfere, and certainly not to

cause a riot where innocent people might be hurt.

His report back to his sponsor would be scathing, and not about the behaviour of the reformists, either.

For the moment though, he was trying to keep out of the way of flying fists while working his way through to where he last saw the two ladies.

He'd noticed them as soon as he took his seat. Their clothes did not look out of place, and their hair—what he could see of it under plain bonnets—was simply dressed. But only those schooled in the art since early girlhood had the carriage of a lady. They sat as if chairs never had backs and their spines consisted of an iron rod each.

At first, he'd thought them a woman and child, and had wondered at the idiocy of bringing a young girl into a potentially dangerous crowd. The girl had something in a basket. A kitten perhaps. Or a puppy.

Then she turned. He saw her chest in profile, and his mouth went dry. No child this. He ripped his gaze from lush curves and upwards to a determined chin, a pert nose, and chocolate brown eyes fringed with dark lashes. The eyes met his with open curiosity. He smiled and winked. Her eyes widened before she turned her back on him. The next speaker began.

A few minutes into the speech, the rumpus started, and Dom started working his way towards the ladies. He had to get them out of here. Both of them. Not just the little elf who so fascinated him.

He stopped in his tracks at the sight of a monkey shooting up out of the crowd, leaping from head to head and clambering up the drapes. Not a kitten or a puppy, then.

A bit of ducking and weaving, a judicious punch when necessary. At times like this, he was grateful that he was slighter in stature than any of his brothers, the other two official sons of the marquess who was married to his mother and the two legitimate sons of his actual progenitor. He could wriggle through gaps in the brawling crowd that would compel a burlier man to stop and fight.

Six years at a public school had taught him how to give a good account of himself if forced to violence. Nearly a decade at war had cemented the lesson. But the priority was to reach the ladies. Ah. There was the elf, on her own, backed into a corner, clinging to her basket.

Ten feet further down the wall was a door. Dom had no idea where it went, but out of the fight, he hoped. He shouldered past the men who were blocking her in, and stopped in front of her. "There's a door this way, Miss."

The elf's curves were even more mouth-watering close up, but Dom couldn't afford to think about them. Someone thumped into his body, and someone else tried to barge past his arm. He made himself a wall to protect the elf, who was standing on the tips of her toes and peering around at the crowd. "I have lost my monkey," she explained. Then, as an afterthought, her brow creased, "and my friend."

"Let me get you out to safety," Dom begged, "And I'll come back and look for your friends. Both of them."

He was moving towards the door as he spoke, herding her along without touching her. She came willingly enough, though she continued to throw those anxious glances.

Then came a shout from the main door to the hall. "Troops!"

The call was taken up by a score of voices, and a hundred people stampeded at once.



Someone caromed into Dom's back, pushing him against the elf. He slid his arms around her to shelter her. The blows and pokes from behind would leave bruises, but not on the lady if he could prevent it.

Even in the stress of holding back the crowd, a small and primitive part of his mind was assessing the lush softness against which he pressed, and enthusiastically suggesting that love was more fun than war.

It was only for a moment, and then he was able to step back, take a breath for control, and reassess their escape path. The door he was aiming for was blocked with men struggling to get through. At that moment, a few feet away, a fabric hanging on the wall shifted, and the monkey's face poked out, followed by the monkey, who launched itself into the elf's arms.

"Quick," Dom said, looking back over his shoulder to the main door, where those who had been trying to get out that way had reversed and were scattering across the floor to other exits. Two steps brought him to the hanging. He twitched it aside and disclosed an open doorway with stairs leading upwards. "Go up. I'll try to find your friend. If the troops catch up with you, tell them you're with Captain Finchley."

She nodded her agreement.

He caught her arm as she passed. "May I know the name of the lady I am honoured to be assisting?"

Her smile transmuted the strong planes of her face into beauty. "Chloe Tavistock, Captain Finchley. And my friend is Dorothea Bigglesworth. A straw bonnet and dark blue pelisse. Guinea-gold hair and blue eyes." Dom nodded his thanks, impressed. She'd maintained her calm and thought clearly enough to describe Miss Bigglesworth, while he was still assuming that any other lady he found must be the missing friend.

He closed the door behind her and dropped the fabric hanging back into place. Now where...? Ah! The brim of a bonnet poked up just beyond the short flight of steps that led to the stage. The hall was emptying, and Dom found it easy to dart across the room, avoiding those who were, by now, more interested in escaping the oncoming troops than in continuing the fracas.

He reached the woman by the stage just as she turned, and knew straight away that it was not Miss Tavistock's friend. This lady had a blue pelisse, but the hair under the straw bonnet was decidedly auburn. She eyed him warily.

"May I see you to safety, Miss?" Dom asked, offering an arm. She looked beyond him, her eyes widening in alarm. Dom turned to see a militia sergeant and two troopers approaching, the sergeant with a pistol and the troopers swords drawn. Idiots. Did he and the lady look dangerous? If nobody was killed today, it would be a miracle.

"Stand down, sergeant," he ordered, his voice crisp. "I am reaching for my identification papers," he added, and suited action to word.

The sergeant approached cautiously, his gun steady, and took the papers with his other hand. His eyes widened as he read the letter that introduced Dom. It was signed by the Duke of Haverford and bore that noble gentleman's seal.

The sergeant nodded and passed the letter back. "I beg your pardon, my lord. Can't be too careful."

Being careful, Dom thought, but didn't say, would preclude carrying loaded guns and naked swords into a volatile crowd of unarmed civilians.

"Can you make sure that this lady is escorted safely to wherever she wishes to go?" he said instead.

The sergeant narrowed his eyes. “She’s not a revolutionary, sir, is she?”

“She is an English gentlewoman, Sergeant, and innocent of any involvement in today’s events.” Or not. But Dom really didn’t care. “As is Miss Tavistock, who came here with me to observe, and her friend Miss Bigglesworth. I need to look for Miss Bigglesworth. Miss Tavistock is worried about her. The lady is wearing a straw bonnet and dark blue pelisse. She has fair hair and blue eyes.”

The lady with the auburn hair was regarding him as if he was some sort of alien. He winked at her and she turned away.

The sergeant lifted his eyebrows in a pleased widening of the eyes and smiled. “Yellow hair? I saw a lady who meets that description, Captain, my lord, sir. A clerical gentleman was escorting her away from here.”

Dom nodded. “I will inform Miss Tavistock.”

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Upstairs in a little gallery, Chloe watched from behind a balustrade as Captain Finchley approached a woman by the stage. She thought she recognized Doro's bonnet and pelisse, but when the woman turned so Chloe could see her face, it was a stranger.

The soldiers came, and three of them accosted Captain Finchley and the woman. Chloe's arms tightened around Rosario until the monkey squeaked. But Captain Finchley gave the leader some papers to read, and then the soldiers drew themselves up straight and saluted.

Chloe apologized to Rosario, patting her down until she realized that the monkey's jacket was lumpy. With a sinking heart, she investigated the monkey's pockets, pulling out a cravat pin, a hair pin, a utilitarian brass shoe buckle, an ornate snuff box, and a shiny acorn shape that looked as if it might have come from a watch fob.

Rosario chattered: her 'I'm a clever monkey' sound. Chloe wanted to cry.

"What do you have there?" Captain Finchley was looking over her shoulder at the little haul. He whistled. "An enterprising fellow, your monkey."

"I cannot seem to break her of the habit," Chloe said. "I have only had her for two weeks, and her former owner trained her to... well, you see."

"That sounds like a story worth the telling," Captain Finchley observed, his eyes twinkling.

A clatter on the stairs warned them, and Captain Finchley, without hesitation, swooped up the little haul and deposited it in his coat pocket while turning to face the door.

A burly militia man, two others on his heels, burst into the little space. “Now who have we here?” growled the first man, looming over poor Captain Finchley while Chloe shrank back against the balustrade, cradling Rosario against her chest.

Captain Finchley, who was at least twelve inches shorter than man who glared at him, didn’t budge an inch. He sighed, for all the world as if he was bored beyond belief, flicked an imaginary speck of dust off his sleeve, and handed the man a document. “My credentials, corporal.” His voice changed to the bark of command. “And you two troopers, sheathe those swords before you pink someone.”

The corporal was reading the document, which appeared to be a letter finished with a large seal. When he spoke, it was with a mix of suspicion, resentment, and reluctant respect. “You would be this Captain Lord Diomedes Finchley, then, would you?”

“I have that honour,” the gentleman answered.

“And this Duke of Haverford sent you?”

Captain Finchley tipped his head to one side and raised his eyebrows. “Now that you have read the letter, corporal, I will have it back, thank you.” He held out his hand. The corporal hesitated then handed over the letter.

“You’ll have to leave now, sir,” he grumbled. “We are clearing the building.” He turned his attention to Chloe. “You’ll come along with me, Miss. You and that wild beast.”

He took a step forward but no further. Captain Finchley had put out an arm to stop

him. “Miss Tavistock is with me, corporal. Get about your business, now.”

They glared at one another, but the corporal’s eyes fell first. He growled a wordless complaint and led the other two militia men away.

“Oh!” Chloe exclaimed. “I have to find my sister!”

Captain Finchley’s eyes widened. “Your sister is here, too?”

Had he forgotten already? “Doro. Miss Bigglesworth.”

“Ah! Miss Bigglesworth. I am told a lady meeting that description was escorted away by a clerical gentleman. I expect she will be relieved when you arrive home safely.”

“Oh, we don’t live together. I live with my brother, and Doro is staying with her stepmother. Our stepmother, I suppose, except Patience married my stepfather after I had already gone to live with my great-uncle.”

“Another interesting story, I perceive. But perhaps we could save it to beguile the walk back to wherever it is your brother resides?” He held out his hand to help her up. “Do you have a leash for your little furry friend?”

“No. She chewed through it. That’s why I had her in the basket, but she has chewed through the ribbon keeping it shut.”

“Perhaps my handkerchief might do service at least until we are safely out of here.”

He threaded the handkerchief through the slot in the basket, then helped Chloe tuck a protesting Rosario inside before inserting a corner of the handkerchief through the slot in the lid and tying a firm knot.

“I’ll just leave the monkey’s little hoard at the bottom of the stairs.” Captain Finchley put the items down one by one, artistically scattering them as if they had been dropped in a hurry. “I daresay someone will think it his lucky day when he comes across them, but at least you and I shall not be arrested for being accessories to a monkey, which would be exceedingly embarrassing, do you not think?”

He offered Chloe his arm. He escorted her straight past the groups of militiamen who were roaming the hall and out into the street.

“I was so afraid when those men threatened you,” said Chloe. “They were so large!”

“Yes, but that made it easier,” Captain Finchley assured her. “I was at the right height to bite their...” his eyes slid sideways to meet hers and he grinned before finishing, “knees.”

Chloe wasn’t entirely certain, but she thought he was being naughty. Still, she chuckled even as she blushed.

“I was never in danger,” he added, sounding serious again, though his eyes still danced. “I am their superior officer. Or, at least, I was. Haverford said he’d put my rank in his letter in case I needed to throw my weight around. The extra gilt on the shoulders makes me a little heavier, you see, and when you’re my size, you need all the help you can get. It’s not really my rank any longer, though. I’ve sold out.”

“What should I call you, then? Lord Finchley?”

“Good heavens, no. I’m a younger son—and not really even that, except by grace and favour. Except I am, but... That’s another story, but hardly one fit for a lady’s ears. I don’t suppose you could call me Dom?”

“I could not. I barely know you, Lord Diomedes.”

“If you must lord me, could it not be Lord Dom? Please? Diomedes sounds like a very stern fellow.” He flattened his mouth into a sour line and furrowed his brow. “Monkey? A monkey is not a pet for a lady. Humph.”

“You sound just like my Uncle Swithin,” Chloe observed.

“One of those is he? A joy leech?”

Chloe had to chuckle. “That is just the word! He was a joy leech!”

“He is dead, then, your Uncle Swithin?”

“A year ago. More. It must be sixteen months, now.” She and Aunt Swithin had been out of their blacks for Christmas.

“I am sure propriety demands that I now express my sympathy for your sorrow,” Lord Dom observed, “but I have known too many joy leeches in my life to do any such thing.”

Chloe couldn’t agree more. “It is a terrible thing to say, and I am sure it makes me a very bad person, but after the first shock, I felt so much lighter! Martin—he is my brother—Martin is not very good at fun, and he worries a lot, but he does at least like me to be happy. Uncle Swithin thought we should all be miserable, for life is a vale of tears, and it would be irreligious of us to enjoy ourselves.”

“I am quite certain Uncle Swithin was wrong,” Lord Dom. “I may not always have been attentive during regimental services, but I am sure I can remember the chaplain exhorting us to rejoice, like good Christians. Perhaps Uncle Swithin didn’t read the Bible?”

“Oh, he did, all the time. He had favourite passages.”



Lord Dom pulled a face and nodded. “Which he read over and over, and used to justify puffing himself up in his own consequence.” He nodded again. “I know the sort.”

Chloe giggled, for Lord Dom was exactly right.

“And was Aunt Swithin another joy leech? Was there an Aunt Swithin?”

“There still is,” Chloe assured him. “She is my chaperone.” She paused doubtfully. “Only she has digestive troubles. She also sleeps all the time, and she forgets things.”

“The best kind of chaperone,” Lord Dom assured her, and added, “I dare say after being married to Uncle Swithin she has had all the joy leeched out of her.”

“I used to think so,” Chloe told him, “but I think she was just hiding it.” She and Aunt Swithin had celebrated last Christmas with all the traditional activities, food, and trimmings, none of which Uncle Swithin had permitted. Martin had made no objection, had commented the house looked nice, and had even purchased a Twelfth Night gift each for her and Aunt Swithin.

“She can be rather startling in her opinions,” Chloe added.

“Opinions are new to her, I imagine, so she is trying as many as she can.” Lord Dom sounded as if he knew all about the Uncle Swithins of the world.

“You are rather wise, Lord Dom,” Chloe said.

Lord Dom’s eyes twinkled, and he winked one eye. “I do apologize. I didn’t mean to be wise.”

They turned into the street where Martin had taken a house. Chloe was still laughing

at Lord Dom's apology when she heard her name shouted.

"Chloe Tavistock!"

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This, Dom suspected, was the stern brother. Several years younger and at least half a foot taller than Dom, he was bearing down on them at speed, his face drawn into such lines of fury that Dom half expected him to be blowing steam out of his nose.

"Oh dear. Martin is not pleased," Chloe commented. She looked concerned but not alarmed, and Dom informed his battle-ready body it could stand down. Clearly, she did not expect physical retribution from her brother. Still, Dom would stay until he was sure that Tavistock would not harm her.

Tavistock didn't seem to see Dom, all his ire focused on his sister. The monkey in its basket reacted to Tavistock's baritone rant, its nervous chitter providing a falsetto counterpoint.

"Chloe! I was just coming to look for you. Lady Dorothea was so worried. How could you go to that infernal meeting when I expressly forbade it? Are you hurt? Did anyone offer you insult? Aunt Swithin is beside herself! I could throttle you. I really could. When I think what could have happened..."

Dom relaxed when Tavistock asked about his sister's well-being before the extravagant threat that was clearly nothing more than relief for his feelings. Chloe apparently thought so, too, for she ignored the risk to her pretty neck, saying. "Doro and I were separated, but Lord Dom found out she had been escorted safely away. Has she sent a message, Martin? I should let her know I am safe. Martin, this is Lord Dom. He rescued me, and insisted on escorting me home. Lord Tavistock, Lord Dom Finchley." She turned to Dom, her brow furrowed, and her upper teeth worrying her

plump lower lip. “Should I have said ‘Lord Diomedes’?”

“Please don’t,” Dom told her, offering Tavistock his hand to shake and bowing slightly. “Pleased to meet you.”

Tavistock looked nothing like his sister. He was tall, slender, and dark-haired with grey eyes, whereas she was short and curvaceous with light brown hair and eyes that were deep pools of chocolate. But something about the expression as he frowned at Dom gave them a family resemblance.

“I am grateful to you, my lord. She should not have been there.” His frown deepened. “Did she go with you?”

“Martin! I went with Doro. I only met Lord Dom when he put himself between me and some men who were fighting, and not paying attention to bystanders. And then he stopped the soldiers from taking me away for questioning.”

The starch went out of Tavistock as he and Dom exchanged a glance full of knowledge about the worse things that might have happened to an unprotected lady in such a crowd. “I am grateful to you,” Tavistock said, sounding sincere this time.

“She was easy to rescue,” Dom assured him. “She kept her head, which is more than many ladies would have done.”

“She’s got bottom,” Tavistock grumbled. “Too much, sometimes. Come on home, Chloe. Doro is waiting to make sure that you are well.”

“I’ll leave you to your brother, Miss Tavistock,” Dom said. “May I have the honour of knowing which house is yours? With Lord Tavistock’s permission, I should like to call tomorrow to see how you and your hairy friend have recovered from your adventure.”

Tavistock raised his eyebrows at the 'hairy friend' crack, then saw that Dom's eyes were focused on the basket. "Infernal monkey," he muttered. "We are at number nine, Lord Diomedes. Thank you, again. Come on, Chloe."

Martin kept the rest of his scold till Doro had exclaimed her relief and left in their carriage, which Martin insisted on having prepared for her. Then Chloe had to listen to a long lecture on irresponsible behaviour, putting herself in danger, disobeying the head of her family whose responsibility it was to protect her, and (for good measure) keeping inappropriate pets.

She found it easy to promise to attend no more reform meetings. The one speaker she'd heard had been disappointing, and while the riot had been an adventure, she did not need Martin to point out that she was lucky Lord Dom had been at hand to protect her. Indeed, his general and vague description of the harms that may have befallen her were nothing to the gruesome horrors she had imagined on her own.

Martin was still seething when they met for dinner. He barely said a word until Aunt Swithin distracted his attention by lamenting she had missed the meeting. "I was so looking forward to it, dear Martin," she told him, blissfully oblivious to his shocked horror, "but I suffered an upset to my digestion, so I told the girls to go ahead without me. Did you have an interesting time, Chloe?"

After one glance at Martin's face, Chloe had to keep her eyes on her plate, though she managed not to laugh. "I only heard the one speaker, Aunt Swithin: Mr. Thomas, whose articles you liked so much when I read them to you. I'm afraid he writes much better than he speaks. After that, the meeting broke up, and Doro and I came home."

Another swift glance at Martin's pained expression almost overcame her gravity.

“Aunt Swithin?” he demanded. “Are you telling me you approve of these revolutionaries? I cannot believe it. What would Uncle say?”

“Not revolutionaries, dear,” Aunt Swithin insisted. “I would never support revolution. Those poor dear children in France! But reform, yes. The government is trying to bully the people instead of listening, and it is not nice, dear. Nobody likes a bully.”

Martin opened his mouth and then closed it again. Chloe waited for him to scold Aunt Swithin as he had her, but instead, he changed the subject. “Chloe is expecting a gentleman caller tomorrow, Aunt Swithin. Lord Diomedes Finchley escorted Chloe home from the meeting, and asked to call again.”

“Finchley,” Aunt Swithin said, and then repeated it. “Finchley. Ah, yes. The Marquess of Pevenwood’s third son.” Aunt Swithin had taken her responsibilities as the female educator of a young viscount to include a devotion to memorizing Debretts. She was also, even under the harsh rule of her husband, addicted to the gossip news sheets, entering into a conspiracy with Cook to read them in the kitchen when Uncle Swithin was out spreading virtue and gloom around the neighbourhood.

She showed the fruits of that research in her next remark. “The one they call Lord Cuckoo, because everyone knows the Duke of Haverford laid him in Pevenwood’s nest. The old Duke of Haverford, who died two years ago, not the young one, who was a dreadful rake but is now devoted to his wife, or so they say. Very admirable, but much less interesting.” She sighed.

“Now where was I? Around fifteen years ago, Pevenwood sued Haverford for criminal conversation, but Haverford’s affair with the boy’s mother was ancient history. The boy was nine or ten, I believe, before Pevenwood found out that the boy was not his own get and took the case. The Duke refused to give evidence, the Marchioness denied everything, the evidence was all gossip or circumstantial, and the case was dismissed.”

She sighed. “I always felt sorry for the little boy. A soldier, is he not? Does he wear a uniform? A man looks so delightful in a uniform. Does Lord Cuckoo have money, though, Chloe? One cannot imagine that Pevenwood left him any, under the circumstances.”

Poor Lord Dom. Chloe could do nothing about his tragic origins, but she could speak up for him to some degree. “Lord Dom—he prefers to be called Lord Dom, not Lord Diomedes,” and definitely not Lord Cuckoo, which sounded like a cruel schoolboy joke. “Lord Dom has left the army. I do not know what he plans for his future, nor do I know how much money he has. It is surely none of my business, Aunt Swithin.”

“Only if you wish to marry him, my dove. Money does not buy happiness, it is true. But one is able to be miserable in some degree of comfort. I always wished that Swithin had more money.”

“Aunt Swithin,” Martin protested. “Uncle Swithin was a very—” his pause for thought was telling. “Upright man,” he concluded.

“He never wore a uniform though,” Aunt Swithin complained. “I do love a man in a uniform.”

Martin’s reply was a gurgling noise, as if he had choked on what he wanted to say. Chloe took pity and changed the subject. “I am visiting Lady Seahaven and the sisters tomorrow morning. Aunt Swithin, will you come with me? I can go with my maid, if you prefer.”

Martin surprised her. “I will escort you, Chloe. I wish to pay my respects to Lady Seahaven, and I should visit our sisters.”

“They will be thrilled, Martin.” Mama had given her second husband, the Earl of Seahaven, two daughters, Emma and Merry. They had remained with the Earl of

Seahaven when Mama died and Uncle Swithin insisted on Chloe being returned to her brother's household.

Chloe had kept in touch in the intervening years, but Martin had only met his half-sisters after Uncle Swithin's death.

Martin twirled his wine glass between his fingers. That was another innovation. They never had wine or any other alcohol while Uncle Swithin was alive. "Lady Dorothea was telling me about their ball, Chloe, and I had an idea," he said. "What do you think of us asking Lady Seahaven to make you one of her protégées?"

"She has been very kind about including me when she and her step-daughters go calling," Chloe observed. Lady Seahaven and the Bigglesworth sisters had started with some personal connections and a few recommendations from relatives, and had brokered them into introductions to most of York Society.

"Precisely," Martin agreed. "They know many more people than we do, and their ball will be much better attended than any entertainment I could put on for you. But I would not wish you to be neglected in such a big crowd of sisters."

Aunt Swithin cackled. "Only three sisters that count, Martin. Lady Seahaven is giving the ball for the Seahaven Diamonds, and quite right, too. Next to them, no one will notice our Chloe, nor any other female."

"Aunt Swithin," Martin protested, "Chloe would make a fine match for any gentleman of discernment."

"Josefina and the twins can only marry one man apiece," Chloe pointed out, though privately she agreed with Aunt Swithin's assessment. Short and dumpy as she was, she suffered by comparison to those Bigglesworth sisters who were her age and older, let alone the three younger girls who would have been reigning beauties even in a



London Season.

The three had been dubbed the Seahaven Diamonds after their first public appearance in York, and the sooner they selected from among their swarming suitors, the better all the other marriageable ladies in York would like it.

“Besides, Aunt Swithin, it isn’t just about the ball. If Lady Seahaven agrees to sponsor me, hostesses who are inviting the Seahavens will include me in their invitations. I will have many more opportunities to meet eligible gentlemen.” And much good it might do me, for I shall still be unfashionably plump, two years past twenty, and far too opinionated for most gentlemen .

Martin nodded. “That is what I thought. I shall ask Lady Seahaven, then, shall I? I will, of course, offer her the money I planned to spend on a party of some kind. Do you think that would be the right thing to do?”

Chloe nodded. “Absolutely.”

After dinner, he showed Chloe some books and trinkets he had brought for the little girls, including for Lady Seahaven’s little Jane, who was only three. “If I am giving gifts to our sisters, I can’t leave the baby out,” he said.

Sometimes, Chloe was quite hopeful that, out from under Uncle Swithin’s control, Martin was becoming almost human.

\* \* \*

When they saw her the next day, Lady Seahaven was delighted to take Chloe under her wing, “Though it seems silly for me to be your sponsor, Miss Tavistock, when you and I are the same age. At the very least, you must call me Patience, as your stepsisters do. When they are not calling me ‘Mama’ to tease me.”

She objected when Martin offered to help finance the ball, “and any other expenses you incur by allowing Chloe to join you.”

“But, Lord Tavistock, your sister is part of the family. I cannot think it proper to charge you a fee.”

“The fact is, Lady Seahaven, that I am at a standstill,” Martin explained. “Chloe and I were tutored at home, as you know, and our guardian was not a warm man. Nor were those few social connections he maintained at the right social level for a viscount’s sister. Aunt Swithin is as much out of her depth as I am, and besides, grows more peculiar by the day.” As Patience could see for herself, since Aunt Swithin had barely said good morning to her hostess before announcing that she would go and find Bess, the eldest Seahaven daughter, because Bess did not have cotton wool between her ears.

Martin leaned forward in his seat, gifting Patience with a winning smile. “If you will treat Chloe as one of your own flock, I am persuaded she will fare much better than my aunt and I could manage without your help. I would not think of putting a monetary value on the advantage to Chloe of your sponsorship. You are doing me an enormous favour, and all I can say is thank you. But I have budgeted for a season for Chloe, and it is only fair that the money I was going to spend doing a poor job should go to helping you do a far better one.”

Chloe was impressed by the speech, and so was Doro, who commented, “That is reasonable, Patience. Lord Tavistock’s money added to ours will allow us to make more of an impression than either of us could manage on our own.”

That settled, Martin was carried off to the schoolroom by an ecstatic pair of schoolgirls. At twelve and ten, and used to a house full of women, Emma and Merry were awed and fascinated by their adult brother.

Chloe was drawn into a wide-ranging discussion of budgets, suppers, invitation lists, and musicians, with Doro and five more step-sisters, Barbara, Susana, Josefina and the twins, Ivy and Iris. Twice, one of the sisters slipped out to fetch tea and cakes. At one point, Martin strolled in to say he had an engagement at the club he'd joined and would walk Chloe and Aunt Swithin home if they were ready to leave. Chloe said, "You go, Martin. Aunt Swithin and I can walk five hundred yards through the quietest part of town in broad daylight."

An hour later, when Patience called a halt so she and those who were accompanying her could change for afternoon calls, Aunt Swithin was nowhere to be found. The impossibly handsome butler said she'd spent some time with Bess but left long before Martin.

Chloe thought about asking Patience for the loan of a servant to walk home with her. But it was, after all, broad daylight, and Patience had retreated to her chamber to get changed, as had the sisters.

Martin was right. Aunt Swithin really was growing more peculiar by the day. Chloe only hoped she had gone home. At least Rosario could be locked in a cage when not directly supervised, but one could hardly do that to one's aunt.

She reached the corner and hesitated. A left turn was the quickest way home, but straight ahead would take her to the bookshop that ran the circulating library she had joined during her first week in York. It was not much out of her way. She could ask if the book she was waiting for had been returned, and then take a shortcut by the narrow way that ran along the back of houses to join up with the street where she lived.

Dom left Thursday Market with a spring in his step and his coat pockets bulging. He'd wandered the stalls and the crafters shops that lined the nearby medieval streets, and found people who could make exactly what he wanted—an unusual courting gift, to be sure, but he thought the lady would like it.

Was he courting? After one meeting? Granted, he had returned from war with the vague notion of finding a bride and starting his family. He had not intended to look about him yet. He was in the north to inspect the estate he had unexpectedly inherited from his mother's uncle, and in York as the last place on a round of reform meetings to fulfil Haverford's errand.

That said, though, choosing a wife here in the north was not a bad notion. A bride with family here was more likely to accept his desire to live in Yorkshire most of the year round. More likely, too, to give their hand to the younger son of a peer who had been repudiated by his supposed father.

Dom didn't have wealth to make him more eligible. The estate was large enough, but needed work to be made profitable again. Haverford had given him a loan to do the necessary work, and he was confident he and his potential family had a bright future. He could offer a wife a comfortable home and some elegancies, but certainly not every luxury.

He'd like to smother Miss Tavistock in luxuries. It sounded as if she hadn't had many under the rule of the dire Uncle Swithin.

This was all too fast, though. He'd only met her yesterday, two days after he'd arrived in York. She was at the top of his bride list, but to be fair she was so far the only one on it.

On the other hand, she interested him more than any other lady he'd ever met. It wasn't just the physical response, though he didn't discount the importance of that. She intrigued, challenged, and amused him. She went to reform meetings. She rescued monkeys from thieves. She laughed at his jokes.

He wanted to know her better, that was certain. Yes. That was the way. Get to know her. Not courting, then. Not quite yet. But definitely a step in that direction.

Absorbing as his thoughts were, his soldier's instincts continued to scan his surroundings. The song he was humming died on his breath as two tall gentlemen rounded a corner towards him, talking so intently they didn't notice him at all.

Though he hadn't seen them in a decade, he recognized them instantly. Totters—Pevenwood now, since his father's death—hadn't changed a bit, except his hair had receded a little from his forehead. Gary had just turned twenty on the night Dom left. He had broadened into adulthood in the last ten years and showed early signs of thickening into middle age.

What on earth were his Pevenwood brothers doing in York?

Dom didn't want to meet them. He turned into the alley he'd found yesterday—a shortcut to the Tavistock residence—and hurried his steps when he saw a group of men clustered around a female who was attempting to back away.

He broke into a run. He would intervene to help any woman, but he'd seen that redingote before. Some primitive part of him had no doubt of the identification. Mine ! it growled, and when one of the insolent tormenters dared to put a hand on Miss

Tavistock's arm, grinning at his companions, Dom had to fight back a red fog of rage.

Fighting eight men might feed the possessive beast, and he was confident they'd all walk away bleeding. But he couldn't guarantee they wouldn't overwhelm him in the end, and then what would happen to Miss Tavistock?

He nudged one of the men out of his way and stepped into the circle, already talking, waving the pin he'd just pulled from his cravat. "I beg your pardon, my lady. I did not think it would take me so long. I found it, though." He wafted the pin with one hand and knocked the offensive hand from Miss Tavistock's arm with the other, making it look purely incidental to tucking her hand inside his elbow.

"When I suggested you stroll ahead, my dear lady, I did not intend you to take the shortcut to your brother's home. Though I suppose we must hurry. Lord Tavistock will be sending out the servants to find you, and he may never let me escort you again if he finds I allowed you to step ahead of me."

Several of the men stepped backward when he called Miss Tavistock 'lady', which was why he had done it. They fell further back when he mentioned Lord Tavistock. Dom could deal with the rest. Grooms, by the look of them. He raised a single brow as he pretended to notice them for the first time.

"Do you know these persons, my lady?" he asked, allowing his voice to drip doubt as thick as treacle.

"No, Lord Finchley, I do not," Chloe replied. "I was just declaring my disinterest in any acquaintance." Clever girl. Omitting his first name to give him a spurious rank had several more of the grooms slinking back into their mews.

Dom allowed the other eyebrow to drift upwards as he fixed the ringleader with a glare. "You made a mistake," he told the man. "Don't compound it."

There's always at least one idiot . The man took a swing at him, just as one of the other grooms exclaimed, "Here, that's Cap'n Cuckoo. Leave 'im be, Ted. That's Do-or-Die Cuckoo, that is!"

The warning came too late for the idiot, whose blow had missed its target when Dom swayed to one side. Dom used the idiot's own fist to tug him away from a collision with Miss Tavistock, which would have been a piece of impertinence too far.

Idiot stumbled a few feet away, propelled by the force of his missed swing, and then roared as he caught himself and turned back toward his tormentor. Oh dear. A bull-brain. The man who had recognized Dom was shouting further warnings at Idiot, who ignored him.

"Would you be kind enough to step to the side of the lane?" Dom murmured to Miss Tavistock, who further showed her intelligence by immediate compliance. She was out of the way just in time. Bull Idiot charged, both fists swinging. Again, Dom swerved out of the way, but this time, he stuck out a booted foot, so Bull Idiot hurtled into the dust of the alley.

He rose again, still roaring. In Dom's peripheral vision, a few of the remaining bystanders clenched their fists and hunched forward. Those on one side halted when Miss Tavistock invoked her brother's title and their own sense of fair play. On the other, the groom who'd called Dom by his old army nickname interposed himself between the would-be assailants and the conflict.

Dom was, for a few moments, too busy to pay any more attention to those who were watching, as he allowed Bull Idiot a glancing blow as the price of getting close enough to finish the fight. A kick to the family jewels, a fist to the chin as Bull Idiot bent in half, the side of the hand to the back of the neck as he went down.

Dom stepped over the groaning man and offered his arm to Miss Tavistock. "Shall

we continue our walk?”

She took her place beside him with admirable composure. “Shall we repair to my brother’s house, my lord? I find myself in need of a cup of tea.”

“An excellent idea,” Dom replied, only half his mind on the nonsensically calm conversation. His ears were doing service for his eyes, listening for movement behind him. Apart from some muttered conversation and a few groans, the alley was calm. His swift sideways glance as they turned the corner confirmed that his erstwhile opponent was still curled in a ball in the middle of the alley, and that the spectator numbers had swollen as more grooms emerged from their separate stable-yards.

They were ignoring Bull Idiot. From the enthusiastic arm waving, Dom guessed they were refighting the battle.

Dom let his own readiness for battle seep from his muscles and nerves. The street was a fashionable one, and busy enough that even Bull Idiot would think twice about accosting a lady on it. Besides, Miss Tavistock’s house was only a hundred paces away.

Miss Tavistock was trotting to keep up with him. What a wretch he was. She must be overset by such a display of violence, and now he was dragging her down the street. He slowed his pace. “I am sorry you had to witness that, Miss Tavistock.”

She surprised him, looking up into his eyes with her own wide and shining. “I am sorry you had to fight that horrid person, Lord Dom, but I am not sorry I witnessed you bringing him low.” She blushed and ducked her head. “Oh dear. Now you will think me dreadful. A proper lady would be swooning.”

“Please don’t,” Dom begged. “A swooning lady would be dreadfully inconvenient.” He slowed still further, pleased to draw out their time together. “I was very impressed



with how you kept calm during the situation.”

She blushed still deeper, the rosy hue spreading from ear to ear and down to disappear beneath her redingote. “It was all my fault. I have taken that shortcut before, my lord, but never on my own. I did not realize...”

Yes, and why is she on her own ? It was not his place to ask, but he did not need to, for the explanation was tumbling out of her, along with her proposed assault on York Society under the umbrella of the Seahaven family, her concern about her Aunt Swithin’s increasing eccentricity, and her pleasure in the two new books that were the cause of her detour from the straight, much safer, way home.

“May I come in?” Dom asked, when their slow dawdle fetched them up on the pavement outside the Tavistock town house. “I know it is early for a call, but since I am here...”

At that point, the front door opened and a man—a butler by the look of him—erupted onto the doorstep. “Miss Tavistock, come quickly. Your monkey...”

He disappeared back inside.

Miss Tavistock muttered, “Oh dear. Someone must have let her out.”

Dom followed her into the house. They stepped in on a tableau. Several women servants gathered around one of their number who sat on the parquet floor of the entry hall, her apron over her head, waving a bloodied hand in the air and wailing. On the stairs that rose from the hall, an elderly lady was cackling with laughter. Two footmen were poking at the chandelier with brooms. No. Not at the chandelier. At the monkey who had taken refuge there.

“That beast has bitten Peggy, Miss Tavistock,” complained a woman dressed all in

black, right down to the apron. A housekeeper, if Dom had ever seen one.

“How did she get out of her cage?” Miss Tavistock wondered.

Peggy wailed louder, and the housekeeper glared at her. “I can’t get any sense out of the girl, Miss.” She drew her dignity around her and returned to her complaint. “But I can’t be having a beast in the house that bites the maids. You must see, Miss Tavistock, that the monkey is not fit to live with civilized people.”

“We shall discuss this later,” Miss Tavistock decided. “For now, please take Peggy to the kitchen and see to her wounds. You may call the doctor if you think it appropriate. I want everyone cleared out of the entrance hall immediately. We shall not get Rosario to calm down enough to descend by poking at her.”

What a soldier’s wife, Miss Tavistock would have made! One wild situation after another, and all met with calm competence. Dom backed her up by removing the brooms from the hands of the footmen and sending them after their fellows.

\* \* \*

It was too much to hope that Aunt Swithin would take her dismissal with the servants. She sank onto a stair near the upper landing, settling her skirts around her. “Well, Chloe? Are you going to introduce your handsome friend?”

“In a minute, Aunt Swithin. Hush, now.” She changed her voice to a sing-song croon. “Rosario. Come down, Rosario. It’s safe now, darling. I’ve sent all the noisy people away.”

Dom edged around her to make his way up the staircase and sit on the step below Aunt Swithin’s. “I’m Dom, and I take it you are Mrs. Swithin. Or should I say Lady Swithin?”

“Heavens no, dear. Swithin never had a title. Except for Vicar, until he told the bishop and the rector that the established church had too little regard for God and too much for the established order of society. If he had remained Vicar Swithin, might I have been called Vixen Swithin?” She cackled, startling Rosario, who leapt two layers higher in the chandelier.

“Hush!” Chloe whispered. “Please,” she added.

Mrs. Swithin mimed clamping her lips shut and turning a lock on them, then winked at Dom. He grinned back and turned to watch Chloe crooning soothing nonsense to the monkey. Rosario, indeed! The villainous monk called Rosario in the gothic novel *The Monk* had in truth been a conniving female by the name of Matilda, who had disguised herself in order to pursue the man with whom she was infatuated into the very monastery.

Dom wondered which member of the little household had named the capuchin. She did not look like a villainess at the moment, to be sure. She had consented to lower herself by one hand from a sconce, setting the chandelier swinging. As he watched, she dropped into Chloe’s arms, wrapped her own around Chloe’s neck, and laid her head on the lady’s breast with a little sigh.

“Butter would not melt in her mouth,” Mrs. Swithin commented, in a loud stage whisper. “Who would have thought that such an innocent scrap of a creature has set the house at sixes and sevens?”

Chloe climbed the stairs towards them, still murmuring to Rosario. Dom stood as she approached, moving to one side to let her pass. Without changing her tone or looking away from the monkey, she said, “Aunt Swithin, would you take Lord Dom to the parlour and order tea? I shall just put Rosario back in my room. I shall be with you shortly, my lord.”

“Come along then, lad,” Mrs. Swithin instructed, after Chloe had continued up the stairs. “Help me up.” She thrust out a gaunt hand, and he helped her to her feet. “When I sat down, I forgot my old bones. Aging is a terrible thing, my boy.” She cackled again. “Better than the alternative. I am not looking forward to meeting Swithin again.”

She directed him to the parlour by way of tucking her hand into his elbow and dragging him in the correct direction. “Have I shocked you, Lord Diomedes?”

Dom suspected she intended to, and refused the conversational sally, saying instead, “Perhaps he won’t be in heaven?”

Mrs. Swithin shook her head at that. “I have no hope of it. He was tediously virtuous. Now, tea. Do not expect much. I daresay the whole household is still in the housekeeper’s room, advising on the treatment of a bite that did not even break the skin, and which the silly girl deserved for opening the cage when she has been told over and over to leave it alone.”

She tugged on the bell as she spoke, then noticed he was still standing. “Sit down. Sit down. Tell me about yourself, Lord Diomedes. Or is it Captain Lord?”

“Just Dom, if you will, Mrs. Swithin. I have sold out of the army.”

She fixed him with a suspicious glare. “You have? How do you plan to support yourself, then? Do you have a position? An inheritance?”

Inquisitive old besom ! On the chance she was concerned for her niece, and not just rudely obvious about satisfying her curiosity, he answered politely, if vaguely, “I am not in danger of starving, thank you for asking.” Thanks to his long-dead mother’s brother. He was taken by surprise when the solicitor’s letter arrived. It said his uncle had died and Dom was his principal heir.

Dom had seen the man once in twenty years. On his eighteenth birthday, when he had approached the Marquess of Pevenwood about his future, the marquess had informed Dom that he'd supported his unfaithful wife's brat for long enough. He would allow Dom to live under his roof until he was twenty-one, but nothing more. No allowance. No university. And certainly, no boost into a career.

Dom did the round of his relatives, hoping that someone would buy him the commission he longed for, or at least loan him the money. His mother's brother refused him, and Dom never heard from him again until the unexpected bequest. Perhaps the man regretted turning his nephew away. Or, possibly, given the condition of the estate, he would have helped at the time, if he'd had the money.

Mrs. Swithin's next question recalled Dom from his memories. "Ready to settle down, are you?"

"One can grow tired of constant travel," Dom replied, "particularly when people insist on shooting at you." As a description of the past decade, it worked, though on the whole, the army had suited Dom, and Dom had suited the army.

Mrs. Swithin's ruthless interrogation covered his history, his prospects, and his intentions. He managed to put her off with vague answers, quips, and anecdotes, but expected her to demand at any moment that he open his mouth so she could examine his teeth.

He was rather dazed by the time Chloe arrived, leading a procession of servants bearing the tea makings and plates of food—a cake, little pastry cases with meat filling, some slices of bread cut into small triangles and spread with a savoury conserve.

Chloe was still carrying the monkey. "I could not leave her," she explained. "She is too upset. I am sorry I deserted you for so long. I went down to see Peggy. She has a

bruise but is mostly upset because she feared I would dismiss her. She opened the cage, though she has been told not to do so. She said she just wanted to pat Rosario, but of course Rosario tried to get out of the cage. Peggy panicked and tried to slam it shut. Then Rosario panicked and..." she trailed off and shrugged helplessly.

"Perhaps these might help?" Dom pulled his packages from the pockets of the coat he'd draped over the arm of the chair, since the servants had been too occupied when he arrived to offer to take it.

One handed, since the other hand was occupied in stroking Rosario, Chloe undid the bow of string on the first package and unwrapped the brown paper to disclose the harness.

The harness maker and smith had collaborated to produce something as pretty as it was practical—rose-coloured leather patterned with punched stars and circles that disclosed the metal forming the foundation of the harness. Rosario would have no chance of chewing through that! But the metal was wrapped in the softest of calf leather to protect the monkey's skin.

The second package was the leash, which could be clipped to a loop in the middle of the back. It was made of a light but strong chain, with the same rose leather forming a hand grasp at the other end of the chain.

Chloe lifted it this way and that, her eyes shining. "Why, it is marvellous, Dom. Lord Dom, I mean. Wherever did you find it?"

"I had it made," he explained. "I wasn't sure of the size, so I had them drill a couple of holes for the buckles. It buckles at the back, since that part had to be leather only, and I didn't want her to be able to get her teeth to it. If it doesn't fit properly, I'm to take it back, and they'll make another hole or two."

Chloe had to try it, of course. She managed to persuade Rosario to don the harness, clipped the chain to the back, and set Rosario on her lap, where the monkey proceeded to pick at the harness, sniff at it, and generally examine it as best she could.

Chloe turned her delighted gaze from her pet to Dom. “Lord Dom, how can I ever thank you. You could not have thought of anything to please me more.”

“Cream, milk or lemon?” Mrs. Swithin asked. “Sugar?”

On campaign, Dom had learned to drink his tea strong and without additives. “Just tea, thank you, Mrs. Swithin. I am glad you are pleased with it, Miss Tavistock. I thought also of a warm coat for Rosario, one without pockets. But I guessed you could probably handle that yourself.

“Without pockets,” Chloe repeated. She beamed at him. “Why did I not think of that?”

“It won’t stop the little fiend,” Mrs. Swithin warned as she handed Dom his cup.

“It will limit her to stealing only what she can carry in her hands,” Chloe retorted.

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Lord Dom stayed a little over his half hour. When he stood to go, he asked if he could call again the next day, but Chloe explained she had promised to make calls with her stepmother and stepsisters.

“I could come at one of the clock, if that suits, and we could perhaps take a stroll along the New Walk? I would be sure to have you back in plenty of time for your afternoon calls.”

He appeared anxious for her to agree, which had to be ridiculous, for what would a successful, personable man like him want with a woman like her? “Yes, I would like that,” she said. She might as well enjoy his interest while it lasted.

He took his leave then, and Aunt Swithin showed every sign of wishing to dissect the visit, so Chloe declared the need to feed the monkey and to mend the hem that had been slightly torn in the scuffle in the alley. She escaped to her bedroom.

Nonetheless, it was only a temporary escape. She had to endure a dinner in which Aunt Swithin regaled Martin with a description of the call, including Aunt Swithin’s opinion of Lord Dom’s intentions and his eligibility.

Chloe did her best to divert the discussion to plans for the ball, and Martin talked about his trip with a man he’d met at the club he’d joined—a Captain James Bentley. Bentley and his cousin, who was a viscount, were debuting a colt in the race meeting that ended the York Season, and Martin had been out to see the horse and the cousins’ training facility. Aunt Swithin kept returning to Lord Dom. She was convinced he was courting Chloe.

As always, Martin retreated to his study after dinner. Chloe followed. “Martin, I hope you will not take Aunt Swithin seriously.”

“Do you like the man?” Martin asked.

Far too much. “He cannot possibly be interested in me, Martin,” Chloe protested. “Not romantically. I mean, look at me!”

Martin did as asked, studying her with a puzzled look. “What do you mean, Chloe? Why should he not be interested in you? Any man would be lucky to win you for a wife.”



“You have to say that because you are my brother. But I am too short, and too...” she waved her hands helplessly in the general vicinity of her bust, feeling the heat rise to her cheeks at the thought of discussing the curves that had so offended Uncle Swithin. “My shape is not ladylike, Martin.” She lowered her voice, though there was no one to hear her but Martin. “Uncle Swithin said I looked like a barmaid, and that no gentleman would ever make me an honourable offer.”

Martin muttered something under his breath that he would not repeat when Chloe said she hadn’t heard it.

“Not something I should have said in front of a lady. Look, Chloe, Uncle Swithin was a bit peculiar. You know that, don’t you? Ignore anything he said about your...” He flushed red. “He was odd about women. He blamed the women, but he was the problem.” He picked up the papers in front of him, rifling them and dropping them edge first on the table to straighten the pile, keeping his eyes from meeting hers. “He liked curvy women, Chloe. Most men do. He had impure thoughts, and they made him feel guilty. Do you understand what I am saying?”

Chloe thought she did. It was a nauseating thought. To distract herself and Martin, she returned to the main point. “Do you seriously think Lord Dom might really be interested in me? To court, I mean?”

“It seems so,” Martin said. “Has he asked to meet you again?”

“To take me walking,” Chloe admitted.

“Do you want to go?” Martin asked. “Or do you want me to warn him off?”

“Warn him off?”

Martin sighed. “I am your brother. If you have a suitor who is objectionable to you, it

is my job to warn him off.”

Chloe blushed. Lord Dom was not objectionable. Not in the slightest. “No. I do not want you to warn him off.”

“Well, then.” Martin shrugged. “Go walking and see what happens.”

The bustle of York had been startling to Chloe, whose entire life had been lived in the country. Since she'd left the Seahaven household eight years ago, her social circle had comprised her aunt and uncle, Martin, and the servants and tenants on Martin's estate, Uncle Swithin having alienated all the neighbours by sermonizing against them.

In the past three years, she had been able to make several brief visits to the Seahaven ladies in their household in the village of Starbrook. But their lives were as constrained by their money woes as hers had been by her uncle's peculiarities.

York's size, its variety, the number of activities available to a gently born lady—all of these were a revelation. She had thought her life one of giddy pleasure before Lady Seahaven took over her social calendar. Now, it had become a whirlwind of calls, walks, rides, and entertainments.

Even the work for their ball and a couple of formal dinners—one at the Seahaven residence and one at her own—was sociable. So many women were involved that it couldn't help but be a time for talking and laughter, and for cementing friendships.

Lord Dom added to the excitement. Every day, he managed to sequester a little of her time. One day a walk. The next day a visit to an art gallery she had mentioned. The day after ices with her half-sisters, who were delirious with joy at the attention their sisters' suitors saw fit to bestow upon them.

Every day, he had a treat for Rosario, who—with a strong leash and a coat with no

pockets—was frequently included in Chloe's outings. Most days, he also had something for her. A flower. A book of poetry. An article about The Habeas Corpus Act.

Lord Dom was courting her. She was almost sure of it. Not that he spent his time in flowery flirtation, and a good thing, too. She much preferred his mix of sensible conversation and cheerful jests. Instead, he indicated his intentions by his diligent presence.

Every day, he asked about Lady Seahaven's plans for her afternoon and evening, and he managed, somehow, to obtain invitations to most of them. If there was to be dancing, he asked for two of her sets. If the entertainment required them to be seated, he was so frequently to be found in the chair beside her that the Seahaven ladies took to saving it for him.

Other gentlemen showed an interest, too. She did not have enough hours in the day for the walks and rides to which she was invited. She only ever sat out a dance when her feet were sore, and then some gentleman usually begged the favour of sitting with her.

They were not just overflow admirers from the Seahaven daughters, and she could acquit them of being after her fortune, since she did not have one, only a modest dowry. Though many of their compliments struck her as insincere or just plain ridiculous, and flirtation made her uncomfortable, she was forced to conclude that at least some of the gentlemen who pursued her did so because they found something about her attractive, especially when two of them proposed marriage.

And Martin proved to be right. The way that men's eyes gravitated to her décolletage and then heated suggested that many men did like curvy women. Lord Dom never stared at her chest. While she did not want him to be so offensive as to examine her figure in public, she could not help but wonder whether he found her curves

attractive.

Of all the men who sought her attention, Lord Dom was the only one who had captured hers, but the Seahaven ball came and went, and he still said nothing to confirm that he wanted her for his bride.

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Dom wasn't sure of his next step. He had met Chloe just before she had burst forth on the York scene, where she was an immediate success. Of course, she was. Quite apart from her luscious figure, she was pretty, intelligent, charming, unassuming, and altogether delightful.

Dom was not the only one to be enchanted. Chloe had at least three or four other serious suitors, all taller, more handsome, and wealthier than Dom, and without a question-mark over their birth. So far, Dom seemed to be the favourite, but he lived in fear of being supplanted by a rival.

The bold courage that had won him his army nickname urged him to beg for her hand, to secure her as his bride before someone else could do so. He had known her for only a short time, but something in him had screamed 'this one' from the very first, and every meeting since had confirmed the instinct.

His rational self urged caution. It had, after all, been only sixteen days. Even if she did seem to prefer him as escort and dance partner, that didn't mean she thought of marriage. Though she had come for the Season, which argued for a willingness to choose a husband. But she had told him herself she was only in York to spend time with her sisters, and because her brother had insisted.

He tossed the options back and forth as he walked to the livery stable to pick up the curricule and pair he had hired for an excursion a couple of days after the ball. Propose

and risk rejection. Carry on as he was and allow someone else to gain the lady's attention. He had to find a middle way.

As always, he was alert to his surroundings; a habit from a decade at war. He ducked his head to hide his face in the shadow of his hat brim as his brother Pevenwood came down the steps of a building on the other side of the street, and stopped on the pavement to address his companion, the man Dom was convinced was Gary.

Dom hadn't seen them since avoiding them the day he had rescued Chloe in the alley. What were they doing in York? What would they say if he crossed the road and introduced himself? Would they deny the acquaintance? Embrace him as a long-lost brother? He snorted his disbelief. Not the latter, he was sure.

The pair of them strolled off together down the street in the opposite direction to Dom's. Let them go. At least they were not participating in the York Season, for if they were, he would have seen them.

A man passed his brothers and walked towards him. Lord Tavistock, Chloe's brother. Dom did want to see Tavistock. He might have some insight into his sister's feelings, though whether he would share that insight with Dom remained to be seen.

Tavistock crossed the street, and Dom moved to intercept him. "Tavistock! Good afternoon! May I walk with you?"

Tavistock returned the greeting. "Good day, Finchley." He moved obligingly to one side of the path to give Dom room to walk beside him. "I'm told you are escorting my sister to some sort of a garden party this afternoon."

"Yes. We are meeting Lady Seahaven's party, so Mrs. Swithin thought she might be excused."

Tavistock sighed. "Aunt Swithin is... I'll tell you, Finchley. I'm more grateful than I can say for Lady Seahaven. Do you have sisters?"

That was an awkward question to answer. "My mother had no daughters," Dom replied, cautiously. How much did Tavistock know about Dom's family history?

The young lord proved that he'd heard the rumours with his next remark. "Of course. I had forgotten the claim that you are Haverford's get. I hope I do not offend by mentioning it?"

Tavistock obviously shared a family tendency to blurt socially questionable truths. Since Dom found it amusing in Mrs. Swithin and endearing in Chloe, he might as well accept it in Tavistock, too.

Better that than the usual nattering behind his back. Dom had walked in on many a conversation that turned mute then started up on another topic, and he was familiar with sly innuendos accompanied by smug glances. But few people referred matter-of-factly to his dubious parentage as if it was no more significant a detail than his eye colour or his taste in cravat knots.

Tavistock continued, oblivious to Dom's reaction. "Haverford acknowledges three half-sisters, does he not? But they would be his responsibility rather than yours. Sisters are a worry, Finchley."

"So says Haverford," Dom agreed. "Being concerned about a sister's wellbeing and her future happiness seems to go with being a brother."

"Precisely. And now all these men want my permission to marry her, and most of them older and better connected than I am. How am I to know what is best for her? I have never understood Chloe."

Dom took the news like a punch in the gut. “All these men?” he managed to choke out.

“Two,” Tavistock amended. “And you, I must suppose, since you are the most persistent of them all. You are courting my sister, are you not, Finchley?”

Dom nodded. “I am,” he admitted. “I came to York to run an errand for Haverford while I was in the area, but I am staying because I met Chl— Miss Tavistock. I have no idea how she feels about me, however.”

Tavistock shrugged. “No point in asking me,” he said. “She refused the other two, and both seemed eligible enough to me. I think she enjoys your company, but she has always been adamant she will not marry. She has not told me she has changed her mind.”

“Then you have no objection to my suit?” Dom persisted. They were nearly at the livery. Though he had not intended to have this conversation yet, it was good to know where he stood with Chloe’s brother.

“I will tell you what I’ve told the other two. I will investigate anyone who is serious about her, and I will tell Chloe what I find out. But Chloe is an adult. She will make the decision. Not me.”

That was fair. Dom spread his hands in a do as you please gesture. “Investigate anything you like about me. I can give you the names of my military commanders, and can instruct my solicitor and agents to provide you with information about my finances.”

Tavistock stopped to face him, regarding Dom with his head tipped thoughtfully to one side. “Once you know whether my sister is interested, we shall discuss the settlements,” he suggested. “Talk to her, Finchley. Tell her you want to court her.



Aunt Swithin and I have both told her that you and others have marriage on your minds, but I don't think she believes it. She hasn't much confidence in her powers of attraction."

Dom nodded. It was good advice. "Thank you," he said. "I will tell her." The corner that led to the livery was a few yards down the street. "I am picking up a curricule for our outing. May I give you a lift?"

Tavistock refused, citing another engagement, and they parted at the corner. It had been a fortuitous encounter. Dom now had his middle option, and how simple it was. Talk to Chloe about his hopes and intentions, and they had half an hour's drive before them in which to begin.

Lord Dom arrived several minutes early. Chloe saw him out of the parlour window as he talked to the urchin who was usually to be found hanging around outside the Tavistock door. The lad went to the horses' heads, and they bent to examine him, and to facilitate his caress of their necks. He was obviously fond of animals, and they returned his regard. Rosario always greeted him with enthusiasm, whenever she saw him.

Lord Dom checked his pocket watch to see how close he was to his time. Chloe was already wearing her gloves and bonnet. She picked up Rosario, making sure that the monkey's leash was firmly attached. "Lord Dom is here, Aunt Swithin. Are you sure you do not wish to come?"

"Run along with you, child. I plan to read the latest Teatime Tattler, and perhaps have a nap. You have a good time with your stepsisters and your young man."

Was Lord Dom her young man? He was about to knock on the door as she opened it. "Miss Tavistock! It is a lovely day for a drive. I see you have brought your hairy chaperone?"

Chloe took his hand and allowed him to aid her balance as she climbed up to the seat. "I hope you don't mind, Lord Dom. I had to leave Rosario at home this morning while I was at Lady Seahaven's writing thank-you letters, since the schoolroom party were not home to entertain her. Aunt Swithin promised to take her out and let her play in the garden, but she forgot, so the poor beast was shut in her cage from the time I left until I got home."

Lord Dom went around to his side of the curricule, took his own seat, and held out his hand for Rosario to shake, distracting the monkey from her focus on the boy with the horses. “You are very welcome, Sister Rosario.” He grinned at Chloe. “She adds a certain air of adventure to our outings, do you not think?”

Chloe blushed at the sly reference to Rosario’s escapades. Earlier in the week, she had climbed a tree in Tower Gardens and refused to come down until Lord Dom had borrowed a ladder from the gardeners’ shed, whereupon she had climbed down the other side of the tree. If Emma and Merry had not cornered her, she would have been up another before Chloe could have reached her.

Two days ago, she had stolen an ice from a passing waiter, tasted it, then thrown it with unerring accuracy at the back of the waiter’s retreating head. Lord Dom had soothed the man’s irritation with a large gratuity.

Then there was the concert, where Rosario conceived a passion for the brooch on the hat of the dowager in the next row, and reached out to snatch it when Chloe became lost in the music. Had it not been for Lord Dom’s quick action—the monkey’s hand was within an inch of the target when he jerked her back by her leash—the ensuing apologies for Rosario’s complaints would have been for a much worse offence.

“I shall keep tight hold of her today,” Chloe promised.

“Or I shall,” Lord Dom agreed. His smile warmed away her embarrassment. “She does not mean to cause mischief, I know. We shall endeavour to keep her out of trouble, you and I.”

He called out to the urchin who stood at the head of the horses. “Thank you, Sam.” He tossed a coin to the lad, who caught it one handed without taking his eyes off the monkey. “You can let them go, now.”

“I could get up behind and look after the ’orses where you and the liddy are going,” Sam offered.

“Not this time, thank you,” Lord Dom replied, and moved his hands in a signal to the horses, saying, “Walk on, boys.”

Soon, they were clopping swiftly through the streets and out through the city gates. The estate where they were meeting Lady Seahaven was thirty minutes away. Lord Dom broke the silence. “I met with your brother today.”

Chloe stiffened. Not Lord Dom, too. Two men had asked Martin for her hand in marriage, without first consulting her wishes. Martin, bless him, told them both to apply to her. One she knew as an interminable bore. She asked him why he wished to marry her, and he replied that she was a good listener. She refused him politely.

The other was charming enough, but even before he went behind her back to try to make an arrangement with Martin, she could not warm to him. His proposal was done in proper form, but with an overtone of smugness that would have argued against accepting even if she had been inclined.

She asked him the same question. He told her she was the loveliest creature he had ever seen. “Lovelier than the Seahaven Diamonds?” she asked. He coloured. “In a different way,” he hastened to add. “Truly, Miss Tavistock, I am convinced you will make me a good wife, and my father says I must marry.”

Chloe was certain he would not make her a good husband. Her refusal appeared to take him by surprise. He tried to convince her that Martin had already agreed and her acceptance was not required. Caught out on that, he assured her that she need not have hopes of Lord Cuckoo, since everyone knew Pevenwood had cast him out when he was eighteen, so he was penniless and hanging out for a rich wife.

He, himself, did not mind that Miss Tavistock was not wealthy, he explained, since he had a large allowance from his father, which his father had promised to increase when he took a wife. She wished him luck and told him that wife would not be her.

And now Lord Dom had taken the same path, speaking to Martin as if she were property with no wishes or opinions of her own. “I did not know you had called,” she told Lord Dom.

Lord Dom shook his head. “I did not call. I saw him in the street while I was on my way here and walked with him for a bit.” He slowed to pass a group of girls who were half on and half off the road as they foraged in the hedgerows, filling their baskets with snippets of green. He chirruped at the horses to set them trotting again. Looking straight ahead, he added, “He assumed I was going to ask for your hand in marriage. Which I wasn’t.”

He wasn’t? How embarrassing. How... how disappointing.

“Not from him,” Lord Dom added. “Not before I’d talked to you first. I am courting you, Miss Tavistock, not your brother.”

That was better. Chloe turned her head to examine his face. His eyes were firmly fixed on the road ahead, but he must have felt the weight of her regard, for he shot her a look and an anxious smile. “Did you know I was courting you? Lord Tavistock said you did not, and that I should tell you.”

“I was not sure,” Chloe admitted. I hoped so . The words occurred, but she kept them in.

Lord Dom grimaced. “I am not very good at it, it seems. I have never done this before. And then I met you.”

He turned his face to her, and must have checked the horses, for they slowed to a walk. “You probably think this is all too fast. I am afraid I am rushing my fences and will take a fall. But I am more afraid that—if I hold back and say nothing—someone else will win your regard in my place.” His laugh was a nervous expulsion of air. “Do you think... Could you tell me if I have a chance, Miss Tavistock? Maybe give me a hint about how to get better at this courting business?”

“I don’t know,” Chloe replied. When his face fell, she hastened to add, “I have never been courted before, Lord Dom. I never thought anyone would wish to marry me, but Martin insisted on this season in York.” She wanted to bounce in her seat and repeat the word ‘Yes’ over and over in fast succession. She resisted, and tested him with the question that had stymied the other two. “Can you perhaps tell me why you wish to marry me?”

“I think I can,” Lord Dom said slowly. He looked along the road ahead as he spoke. “I was attracted before we met, when I saw you across the room at the meeting. That was to be my last engagement in Yorkshire. Then you impressed me with your courage, your sense of humour, and your quick thinking, and I wanted to stay to get to know you better.”

He shot her another of those anxious glances. “But the moment of attraction came first. I don’t know if I can explain it better than to say it felt like recognition. Something in me saw you and said ‘that’s her’.” Another of those short barks of laughter. “It sounds mad, does it not? I am glad I listened, though, for every meeting has confirmed my first impression. You are the woman I can picture spending the rest of my life with.”

He looked so apprehensive that Chloe blurted what she was thinking. “It was the same with me, Dom.”

He dropped the reins to turn to her and take both of her hands. “Chloe! May I call you

Chloe?” The horses, his soft control suddenly absent, tossed their heads and quickened their pace. Dom had to grab for the reins again to exert his will on them.

His soft laugh was exultant. “I lose all my senses when I am with you.”

Chloe, coming to her own senses just in time to grab at Rosario’s harness as the monkey started a flying leap for a passing tree, knew exactly what he meant.

“We turn here,” Dom told her, suiting action to word and setting the horses between two ornate gateposts. “We can talk more on the way home, Chloe. My darling.”

\* \* \*

Pevenwood and Gary were at the garden party. Dom saw them almost as soon as he and Chloe arrived, as they looked around for Lady Seahaven’s party. He steered Chloe down another path. “I do not particularly wish to meet those two people,” he told her.

Chloe visibly restrained herself from peering around him. “Who are they?” she asked, then corrected herself. “Never mind. You do not have to explain yourself to me.”

“Do I not?” Dom smiled down into her lovely eyes. “If I am planning to ask you to share your life with me, I think you do have a right to an explanation.”

He took a deep breath, wondering where to start. Chloe, that wonderful woman, said nothing, giving him the time to compose himself.

He had better start with the cause of the breach between himself and the family he was raised in. “Your brother knows about my family scandal. Has he told you?”

“Aunt Swithin told us both. She reads the scandal columns in the news sheets, and

she remembers your... the marquess's divorce case."

"Attempted divorce case." It had changed his life. Or, rather, the fight between Pevenwood and his wife had changed Dom's life, but the public application for divorce and ensuing trial had let the whole world in on the secret.

"I was ten years old. My brother Totters, the heir, must have been eighteen, for he is six years older than Gary, my next brother. Gary and I were born only eighteen months apart, and were the firmest of friends. We never saw much of the marquess and our mother, or of Totters. But we had each other."

Rosario, who had been sitting on Chloe's shoulder, leapt across to his and embraced his face with one long cold hand.

Dom swallowed the lump in his throat and continued. "The marquess and our mother were seldom in the same place at the same time, and when they were together, they fought. Usually about the marquess's affairs. In one of those fights, Mother told the marquess that I was the son of the Duke of Haverford, and not his son at all." Dom had heard them yelling at one another.

Chloe did not need to hear the detail—that she'd found herself with child after a brief dalliance with Haverford, undertaken in revenge for one of Pevenwood's periodic infatuations. That she'd coaxed Pevenwood back into her bed and then convinced him that the ensuing child was premature.

"Pevenwood and Haverford had never liked one another. I think he could have ignored anyone else. When my mother confronted him with the affair, he threw her out and me with her. And he began divorce proceedings. After they failed, he had to take us back, but by then, he'd turned Gary against me. They called me Cuckoo. Gary started it, and even the servants took it up."



Gary's defection still hurt, all these years later. More, even, than his mother's. "Mother didn't stay. She moved to another of Pevenwood's houses, and I never saw her again. She died three years later." He fell silent, remembering those days.

"Dom," Chloe said, squeezing his arm in a warm gesture of support, "I am so sorry. No one deserves to be treated like that. From the sounds, the marquess and his wife were both guilty of disloyalty to one another and cruelty to you. And your brother, who lost his best friend too, just because he wanted to please his father."

Dom had not thought about the position in which Gary found himself. "I suppose you are right, my darling. Trust you to see it from both sides." He took a deep breath. "Anyway, the people I was avoiding are Totters and Gary. My brothers the Marquess of Pevenwood and Lord Pythagoras Finchley. I haven't seen them or heard from them since I turned eighteen."

Chloe dimpled when she smiled. "Gary is Pythagoras? I take it Totters is Aristotle, then. Who was the enthusiast for Greek philosophers?"

"Pevenwood," Dom admitted. "He insisted on the names, or so I am told, and my mother on the nicknames. "Look. There is Lady Seahaven."

Chloe turned obediently in the direction he indicated as Rosario clearly decided the emotional crisis was over and clambered back to Chloe's shoulder. "You should talk to them, you know. Perhaps you may never again be friends with your brothers, but the marquess is dead and so is the old Duke of Haverford. You brothers are all adults now, and you deserve a chance to see if you can put the old hurts behind you."

"More wisdom," Dom commented. "I will hope our children take after their mother, Chloe."

"You haven't proposed to me, yet," Chloe pointed out.

“We are about to be surrounded by your stepsisters,” Dom said. “This might not be the best time.”

Rosario was edgy today. It wasn't the people who insisted on cooing at her, and offering her fingers to hold and twigs or ribbons or bits of food to grasp. Chloe had taken Rosario to several events where the monkey's admirers had thronged even thicker, and she seemed to bask in the attention.

But today, between preening and showing off, she tried to edge away from Chloe, tugging at her leash as if hoping to find it detached from the person at the other end. Her eyes kept scanning the landscape. She chittered to herself from time to time, a plaintive worried sound.

In the end, when even taking her for a run across the lawn did not rid Rosario of the jitters, Dom suggested a row on the lake.

Several little pleasure boats were tethered to the low dock that edged the expanse of water. Dom led Chloe past the punts, a couple of canoes, and the larger row boats. The one he chose was just big enough for the three of them.

He handed Chloe down into the boat while Rosario clung to her, staring wide-eyed at the water and commenting bitterly in a shrill gabble. "It will be fun," Chloe assured the monkey, who was not convinced, and sent up a loud screech when Dom made the boat rock as he dropped into it.

He fumbled briefly with the oars, then pulled them strongly away from the dock. "Gary and I used to spend most summers on the lake at Bethancourt," he commented. "I had forgotten the trick of it, but it comes back."

“Did you always want to be a soldier?” Chloe asked.

“Yes, for as long as I can remember. Gary and I had complex battles with battalions of soldiers back in nursery days. We planned to join up together and win glory for King and country.” His wistful smile faded, and his face hardened. “After Pevenwood threw me out, I thought I was going to have to take the King’s shilling.”

Chloe gasped. “He threw you out?”

Dom’s shrug belied the hurt that lingered in his hazel eyes. “Perhaps an exaggeration. It was my eighteenth birthday. He said I could continue to live in one of his houses until I reached my majority, but I could choose one he didn’t visit. He said I was no son of his, and that he’d more than fulfilled any obligation he might have had to his wife’s brat by paying for my education until I could stand on my own two feet. I asked if I might have the money to purchase a commission, and he turned me down flat. So, I walked out.”

“The old fiend!” Chloe wished he was here. She would—she would push him in the lake, that is what she would do. “What a nasty old man! Well done you for becoming such a good person despite him!”

“I am not a saint,” Dom warned. “But I will try to be a good man for you, Chloe. I can promise, if nothing else, that I want a true marriage, where both parties are faithful. Where they respect one another, and look after one another’s interests.” The wistful smile returned. “And I would like to be an involved father.”

It sounded appealing. Chloe barely remembered her own father. Her step-father Lord Seahaven was more absent than cruel. He ignored all the females in the nursery, and it was well known that his only interest in children was in siring an heir. As for Uncle Swithin, he readily explained to anyone who would listen that a family was a yoke around the neck of a godly man, and his cross in life was to be burdened with a wife

and his nephew's children.

She returned Dom's smile. "Did you, then? Take the King's shilling and win a commission in the field?"

"I went to all the relations I could think of. As a last throw of the dice, I even went to the Duke of Haverford, and was being refused an audience when the Marquis of Aldridge arrived and invited me to talk to him, instead. He purchased my commission and paid for my kit. He said it was the least he could do for a brother."

"That was good of him. And you have stayed in touch. He is the duke, now, isn't he? His seal was on your letter." Aunt Swithin had often read bits from the gossip columns about the duke when he was the Marquis of Aldridge. He had married two years ago and disappointed many avid readers by becoming a devoted husband.

Whatever his past, Chloe was predisposed to like him for his kindness to Dom.

"That's right. Haverford asked me to go to a few reform meetings while I was up in Yorkshire to see my estate."

He had continued rowing throughout their conversation, and as he made that remark, he gave a strong stroke with the oars that propelled the boat into the cool shade of trees that hung over the water from a small ornamental island, one of several that dotted the lake.

Chloe felt a tug as the leash slipped through her hand and Rosario took a flying leap from her shoulder up into a tree. The monkey was gone in a fraction of a second, leaving behind madly swishing branches and the rustle of leaves.

"I let her go!" Chloe cried. "Oh, Dom, I am so sorry, but we must land and look for her."

Dom made another powerful sweep with the oars. “Of course. I’ll circle the island and see where we can land. Don’t worry, darling. She won’t be able to go far, and we’ll soon have her back safe.”

Finding a place where they could get ashore proved to be harder than Dom expected. The island had no handy little jetty; not even a flat area of dry bank at a suitable height to step safely out of the boat.

Most of it was heavily wooded, with twisty willows that hung over the water’s edge so that they could not get close enough to the bank to clamber onto land, and the few clear patches were on banks higher than Dom’s head. One of those had the remnants of a landing place. Random piles stuck forlornly out of the water, a couple with scraps of beam and bits of decking still clinging. A stair must have led up the near vertical bank, for the top of it hung crazily in midair, a good eight feet above the water.

Dom rowed on, until they had circumnavigated the island.

Chloe was anxiously peering into the trees. “This is where we started, yes?”

“It is,” Dom confirmed. “I’m going back to where the wharf used to be. I can tie the boat to the posts that are in the water and climb the bank.”

She nodded. “I am so sorry to be so much trouble.”

Uncle Swithin strikes again . Dom figured the old man was responsible for Chloe’s habit of apologizing. “You are no trouble, Chloe. Rosario is just a tiny bit of trouble, I’ll concede. On the other hand, she has given me an excuse to spend a bit longer alone with you.”

Her smile was a perfect reward. Though it occurred to him that a kiss would be even

more perfect, even if more perfect than perfect was logically and grammatically impossible, as one of his teachers used to insist. He was thinking nonsense, but her smile turned his brain to mush, so he might as well get used to being nonsensical, for he hoped to make her smile often.

Just ahead, they would turn and reach another face of the island, the one with the high banks. Dom began to ease up on his left stroke and deepen the right, looking over his shoulder to confirm his direction.

“Wait!” Chloe commanded.

He looked back towards her, and past her in the direction she was peering.

“Do you see?” she asked.

Yes. Movement in the willows behind them; a slender shape that ran out along a branch on all four legs, tail held high.

“Rosario!”

The monkey checked and gazed towards them, then dropped into a thicker patch of young willow withies and out of sight. Even as Dom turned the boat, the foliage began a violent shaking and Rosario’s screech rang across the water towards them, angry with an edge of panic.

“Something is wrong,” Chloe diagnosed.

Dom focused on his rowing. “Tell me when I’m around ten yards out,” he said.

Somewhere in the distance, he was aware of a high voice shouting “Pepper,” and idly wondered what was going on.

“Ten yards to go,” Chloe warned.

Dom backed oars, feathering them slightly so that the boat glided into the clump of willows that still shook with Rosario’s struggles.

And they were struggles. When they managed to clear enough foliage out of the way to disclose the monkey, they found that she had caught her harness. Somehow, two branches at an angle to one another had slid up between the monkey and the leather then sprung apart, so she hung in the air, head down. All her twists and turns were making things worse, not better.

She bared her teeth at them as they approached, and screeched again.

“That is no language for a young lady,” Dom told her, sternly.

Chloe cooed soothing nonsense until the monkey calmed enough to allow Chloe to stroke her. That gave Dom the opportunity to examine the offending branches. They were too thick to bend and too green to break. And the knife he had with him was not big enough to cut through.

“I will have to undo the buckles, Chloe,” he said. “Will you hold her still?”

That wasn’t easy, either. At some point since she left them, Rosario had been in water, and the leather was swollen and stiff. She wouldn’t keep still, either, constantly twisting to see what he was doing.

At last, the second tongue slipped free of the second buckle, and Chloe was able to lift the monkey out of the harness. One armhole held the harness to the tree, but a lazy stroke with an oar took the boat the length of the branch, harness and all.

“Back to shore?” Dom asked Chloe, who was occupied taking off the monkey’s wet



jacket, drying her with a handkerchief, and soothing her with a constant stream of words, both endearments and scolds.

“Yes, please. I need to get Rosario warm. I am sorry...”

“No apologies needed, Chloe. When we left home with her, I expected an adventure, and this has been a relatively scatheless one.” Though he was coward enough to hope that the monkey would calm as she grew older, since the constant disruption to social occasions could grow wearisome if repeated. Perhaps he should look around for a companion for the beast, a kind of a personal groom, a monkey keeper. That way, Chloe could keep her pet, and he could keep his wits.

“Your brothers are waiting on the deck,” Chloe told him. “And that’s odd. The urchin who lurks near our house, the one who held the horses, he is there, too.”

Dom glanced over his shoulder. The boy Sam, with whom Dom had struck up an acquaintance while waiting for Chloe, was peering fiercely at Chloe. No. At Rosario.

Dom’s battle instincts stirred.

At that moment, Rosario screeched again, and took a flying leap into the water. Chloe lurched after her, flinging herself against the side of the little boat. Dom leaned the other way to balance the boat, just as Chloe realized she was tipping it and threw herself backwards.

Too far. She went straight over the side, and the boat rocked back the other way. Dom stood up and dived into the water after Chloe.

It would have been a spectacular and brave rescue, if the water had been more than three and a half feet deep. As it was, by the time he reached her, she had found her feet.

“Oh, Dom,” she said, her face moving with strong emotion. “This time, you have to let me apologize!” she insisted.

He grinned. “A somewhat wetter end to our boat excursion than I intended,” he admitted. “Come on. We had better go and find your monkey.”

He held up his hand, as if he was about to lead her into a stately dance, and she raised a dripping arm and placed her hand in his. Gallant lady. From the dock, a few yards away, Pevenwood commented, “Well played, miss.”

Beyond him, Rosario was hugging and being hugged by the boy Sam, the monkey’s chittering and the boy’s murmurs mingling in an ecstatic greeting.

Gary knelt at the edge of the walk, reaching out a hand, and Pevenwood came up beside him to offer another. Lady Seahaven hurried towards them with several of her stepdaughters in her wake.

Dom released Chloe’s hand into Pevenwood’s, and she lifted her other hand to Gary.

“Chloe, allow me to present the Marquess of Pevenwood and Lord Pythagoras Finchley,” Dom said, as he cupped his hands above the water where Chloe could see and then sunk them for her to put her foot into. “Gentlemen, Miss Tavistock, my intended.” A little presumptuous of him, but she did plan to accept when he proposed, did she not?

Pevenwood and Gary pulled and Dom lifted. Chloe, little elf that she was, rose like Venus from the water, and Lady Seahaven was there to wrap the glories displayed by wet cotton in a shawl and hurry her away to the house.

“Lord Dom,” she said, over her shoulder, “will you deal with the monkey and then get yourself up to the house to be dried?”

Dom regarded his brothers with wary interest. Up close, they seemed well. Pevenwood looked much like a younger version of his sire, though the previous Pevenwood had never worn such a benevolent smile. “You are a hard man to track down, Dom. Gary and I thought we might see you when you arrived in London. Then we heard you’d gone away to Yorkshire. We went out to your estate, but they said you were in York.”

“I thought...” Dom swallowed. “The marquess said the whole family wanted me gone, and that I need never bother speaking to any of you again.”

Pevenwood shrugged. “That marquess is dead.”

“Stupid selfish old man,” Gary added. “We are your brothers. He had no right to speak for us.” He flushed. It looked like anger, rather than embarrassment. “He told us that you’d walked out, saying you never wanted to see any of us again. That you’d refused an allowance from him and gone to Haverford’s family.”

“Lies,” Dom told him.

“We know,” said Pevenwood. “We found correspondence after he died. Dom, we know we didn’t stand up for you when you were a boy, but we would like the chance to make amends.”

“Me especially,” Gary said. “We were friends once, and I always regretted being mean to you. Even while I was doing it.”

Dom shivered, and Pevenwood whipped off his elegant coat. “Take off your coat and put this on. We’ll have to get you up to the house before you take cold.”

Unlikely. Dom had been much wetter and much colder more times than he could count while on campaign. “Just a moment,” he said, turning to look for Sam and

Rosario.

The boy was legging it across the lawn, the monkey clutched in his arms. Dom took off in pursuit, and a moment later Gary passed him. He easily outdistanced Dom and soon overtook the boy. “Here he is, Dom. Is he stealing your monkey?”

The boy let loose with a string of imprecations, within which was the claim that the monkey belonged to him, and not to Dom or the lady. “She’s mine,” the boy insisted. “My dad took her, and now he’s gone, so Pepper is mine, again.”

Pevenwood strolled up, still carrying Dom’s coat. “Bring the boy and the monkey up to the house, and we’ll get it sorted while Dom changes into dry clothes.”

\* \* \*

“Sam is the son of the thief who was arrested,” Dom explained to Chloe and her twin step-sisters, who had come along for propriety as they rode back to York in Pevenwood’s carriage. Gary, with Pevenwood for company, was driving the hired curricule back to the stable, and they were going to have dinner with Dom after he had escorted the ladies home and changed into clothes that fitted better than the ones borrowed from their host.

“Sam was working as a groom—he says his mother made him promise not to turn out like his father. When he found out that his father was in prison and the monkey was missing, he left his job to come and find her. He has been watching your house for a chance to steal her back.”

Chloe looked up towards the roof. “I suppose if she is his, he has a right to keep her.”

“As to that,” Dom said, “I had an idea. He needs a job, and we’ve already seen that he is good with animals. And Rosario—Sam calls her Pepper—needs a full-time keeper

to take care of her when you can't. So, I've hired him. He'll be coming home with you, Chloe, if that is acceptable."

Ivy clapped her hands. "Chloe said that you give the best tokens of appreciation, Lord Dom, and that is the finest yet. How clever!"

Chloe looked worried. "Is it proper?" she asked.

Dom smiled at her concern. "There is a way to make it proper, my love. A certain question. Are you ready to hear it from me yet?"

Chloe blushed, and looked up at him from under her lashes. "You mean right now this minute?"

"We could sing loudly, put our fingers in our ears and look out the window," offered Iris.

"Thank you for the kind offer," Dom told her, "but it might lessen the romance." To Chloe he suggested, "Tomorrow morning?"

"Noon," she said, firmly. "Come at noon and ask your question, and I shall give you your answer."

From the curve of her lips and the sparkle of her eye, it would be the one he longed for.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:05 am*

### EPILOGUE

Chloe was being dressed for her wedding. She was to be married in the Minster, by the Archbishop of York in person. It was all very grand, but—as Haverford’s duchess pointed out—she and Dom were all that mattered, not the surroundings or the illustrious marriage celebrant and congregation.

The duchess was helping her prepare this morning. She and the duke had set off for York as soon as they had received Dom’s letter announcing his betrothal, and the couple’s intention to wed in the week after the York races.

They had picked the date and location to make it easy for the Seahaven ladies to attend the wedding, though Martin suggested marrying in the parish church near the Tavistock estate, and Pevenwood offered to host the wedding at his own home, where Dom had spent most of his childhood. Gary put in a bid for London, where Dom would be able to present his wife to the ton, and both Pevenwood and Martin liked that idea.

Dom was only half-joking when he suggested they run off in the night to his own estate and wed there, just the two of them.

Chloe told him it had to be York. She wanted Susana present to see Chloe in the dress Susana had designed and made for her. She wanted Doro to stand up with her. She wanted Patience and all her stepdaughters, especially Emma and Merry, to be there to share her day.

And now they were here, in her bedchamber, as many as could squeeze into the room.

Susana stood by with the gown. It was a confection of peach with an overdress of silver net, embroidered with pearls and trimmed with Brussels lace.

Emma and Merry perched side-by-side on the bed, in their best clothes, watching everything that was happening. Doro and Barbara stood over Chloe, dressing her hair while Patience and the duchess hovered close by to offer suggestions and comments.

When Pevenwood accepted that Chloe and Dom were adamant, he announced that he would hold a grand wedding breakfast for them after the ceremony. Then the Haverfords sailed up the coast from London in the duke's private yacht, landing at Hull. The duke also wanted to host his half-brother's wedding breakfast, and assured Chloe and Dom that his estate outside of York would be a much better venue than Pevenwood's hotel.

Pevenwood pointed out that Haddow Hall was at least an hour from York, whereas his hotel was just around the corner from the little church of Holy Trinity, where the couple planned to be married.

The marquess and the duke descended into a wrangle, all the more intense for being conducted in polite gentlemanly drawls, until Her Grace informed them both that Lord Tavistock would host the wedding breakfast for his own sister, and they could find something else to do to show that they respected and esteemed the half-brother they shared.

Whereupon, Pevenwood and Haverford offered to go together to the Archbishop to acquire the necessary common license, and before anyone else knew what they were about, they had arranged for York Minster and the Archbishop.

Susana and Doro settled the gown over Chloe's head, being careful not to disturb her coronet of flowers or a single curl or pin in her coiffure. Chloe smiled at the memory of Pevenwood's and Haverford's smug faces when they returned with the news. Dom

didn't like having his own arrangements superseded, but admitted to Chloe that he was actually delighted.

"It will be something to tell our children, when we bring them into York to show them the sights." He grinned. "And I must admit that it's nice that my brothers wanted to do this for us."

\* \* \*

Dom waited in a pew at the front of the quire before the main altar in York Minster. He had arrived fifteen minutes before the time appointed for the ceremony, and he was sure at least an hour had passed. "What if something has happened to her," he muttered to Gary, who was standing up with him as his best man.

Gary repeated the assurance he had given three times already. "Nothing has happened." He once again checked his pocket watch. "She actually is late this time," he acknowledged. "By two minutes. You're very anxious to get leg shackled, brother."

"You'll see when it is your turn," Dom told him.

Gary clapped a dramatic hand to his heart and fell back a step. "Cursed! My long-lost brother has cursed me!"

Dom glared, but his lips twitched. Like most bachelors, Gary had no idea that a prediction of marriage was a blessing, not a curse. Dom couldn't wait to make Chloe his and begin his life with her at his side.

A stir around him had him turning in his seat. The Duchess of Haverford was taking her place beside her husband. The Dowager Countess of Seahaven, Lady Susana Bigglesworth and Lady Barbara Bigglesworth were joining the others of their party in



their pew.

“She’s here.” The whisper was from the footman who had been posted in the porch to watch for the bride’s arrival. The Archbishop appeared from somewhere and crossed to stand facing the congregation.

Dom took his place in front of the cleric, with Gary beside him, and watched as Emma and Merry walked towards him, one after the other, their faces solemn. Doro followed. Dom saw none of them. His gaze was drawn to the beloved figure behind, being conducted up the aisle by her brother Martin.

Her lovely eyes met his and clung, and an endless moment later she was before him, placing her hand in his as the Archbishop and Martin exchanged the prescribed words. At least, Dom assumed they followed the format. His senses were filled with his bride.

“You are beautiful,” he murmured to her.

The Archbishop was explaining the purpose of marriage. Dom allowed the sonorous voice to drone on while he basked in the presence of his beloved. He collected himself in time to make the responses required of him, to speak the vows that bound him to her; to thrill to her voice speaking her vows in return.

To think it had been barely six weeks since they met. He had arrived in York to carry out a task for his illustrious half-brother, determined to leave immediately after for his new estate, to see if it could become the place of his own for which he yearned.

So much had happened since then. He met Chloe and fell in love. In winning her, he had also gained a whole family—not just her brother and her aunt, but her Seahaven connections. He had been reconciled with Pevenwood and Gary.

Dom had found his place. Not his estate. Not even his new status as the acknowledged brother of both the Marquess of Pevenwood and the Duke of Haverford, an acknowledgement refused by the fathers of both those gentlemen, and even more precious for the love with which it was tendered.

His place was at Chloe's side. As the Archbishop proclaimed them husband and wife, he smiled down into her loving eyes. After ten years of roaming, Lord Dom had come home.

THE END

\* \* \*

In my books, the dukes of Haverford and their legitimate sons have been scattering children on the other side of the blanket since time immemorial. Dom is one who had the good fortune to be raised in wealth. In others of my books, you can meet the two legitimate sons of the previous duke, less fortunate offspring without his acknowledgement, and his wife, the Duchess of Haverford, who has made it her mission to find and help those connected by blood to her husband and sons.

The Duke of Haverford we meet briefly in this book is Dom's half-brother, formerly the Marquis of Aldridge. He appears in many of my books, most notably *A Baron for Becky* , where his career as a rakehell begins to deviate from the trajectory taken by his wicked father. In *Melting Matilda* , we see him as loving older brother of the heroine, and in *To Tame the Wild Rake* , the fourth in the series *The Return of the Mountain King* , he finally gets to be the hero, winning his forever lady.

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Phoebe was reading aloud from Miss Middleton's guide to etiquette, a much-thumbed book that the younger FISHINGHAM ladies admired. "Gentlemen are not attracted to ladies who show off their learning."

She looked at Charis over the top of the book, lowering her brows and frowning until she remembered that a lady never allowed her feelings to show on her face. "Indeed," she continued, "a lady has no need of extensive book knowledge, but should confine her pursuits to those more suited to her sex."

"See, Cas?" Eugenie added, "That is why Matilda and I have callers when the roads are accessible, and you have none."

Charis considered retorting that the only gentlemen to call on her sisters were uniformly silly. Alternately, she could choke Phoebe with her own book. Undoubtedly Miss Middleton would disapprove of such a response, which would be a tick in the plus column. She sighed. Scandalizing Miss Middleton was not motivation enough to commit sororicide.

Matilda, who was gazing out of the window at the dismal winter weather, interrupted with a huge sigh. "Look," she said. "It has stopped raining at last. If only Mother would consent to take a house in Bath, we might be able to go to all the Assemblies, but I daresay the roads will be impassible for another sennight. Or more."

"Very likely more," Charis agreed. The state of the family finances, the very reason why one or more of the sisters must make a creditable marriage, had this one benefit.

Mother could not afford a house in Bath. As long as they lived more than a half-hour journey away along poorly maintained country roads, Charis could expect the weather to save her from the visits to the Pump rooms, the dinner parties, and the assemblies her sisters so desired. And had it really stopped raining? She joined Matilda at the window to see.

“Oh, how I wish Mother would let me come with you,” Phoebe mourned.

“When I marry,” Eugenie promised, “my husband shall fund your come out. Just think, Phoebe, perhaps you shall be able to make your curtsy in London!”

Charis paid no notice to Eugenie spending the fortune of her as-yet unselected husband. Their small park glistened in the sunlight that had broken through the clouds, turning every wet leaf and blade of grass into a prism.

“If Mother is looking for me,” she told her sisters, “I have gone for a walk.”

The other girls protested, but she had no fear they would insist on coming too. They were not interested in exercise, unless it was dancing or strolling with a handsome man, preferably one in uniform.

Before they could make up their minds to disturb Mother’s afternoon sleep, she hurried into waterproof boots, put the book she was reading into a bag to protect it in case of more rain, donned a coat, and picked up an umbrella.

In minutes, she was letting herself out of the garden door and striding down the path to the gate that let onto the woods.

Her favourite refuge was a fifteen-minute walk away and had been closed to her for weeks. She sped her steps. Today, she would not be denied.

\* \* \*

Eric instructed the housekeeper and her husband, who was man-of-all work for Eastwood Hall, to tell no one he was in residence. He needed time to come to terms with his history here, and all that had happened since, before he could begin to face the inevitable callers. Nothing short of a full-on assault by the marriage makers of the ton, his mother at their head, could have driven him to the manor that had been his childhood prison. The impact of the place was even more powerful than he expected.

He spent the morning wandering the shrouded rooms, lifting a dustcover here and there to confirm nothing had been moved since the day he was taken from this place, leaving behind the only two people who had ever loved him.

Ugo, the mountain shepherd dog he had rescued from an Italian river as a puppy, padded at his heels or took station next to a door watching anxiously as he explored yet another room. Not just the nursery and schoolroom wing where he'd spent most of his childhood, but the reception rooms that had seldom been used and even the bedchambers where the Countess of Wayford and her sons, the young Lord Osric and his brother Ulric had stayed on their rare inspection tours.

Lady Wayford's rooms seemed empty. Had she taken away furniture and fittings when his exile meant she no longer need visit him here? At some intellectual level, he could concede she probably hated Eastwood Hall almost as much as he did. Indeed, he counted on that when he chose it as his refuge from her determination to see him wed to one of her protégées. But since her distaste was founded on the repugnance she felt for him, he would not spare her his sympathy.

At the window to the countess's balcony, Ugo whined to go out. "A bit of a jump down to the garden, boy," Eric told him. "And you won't like the rain." But when he looked over the dog into the garden, the clouds had split to allow the sun to shine through.

Fair enough, then. Ugo would have his walk, and Eric, too, would welcome leaving this mausoleum for a while. “I have a place I’d like to show you, Ugo,” he said. “The place we used to meet. Come on.”

He led the dog downstairs and out across the overgrown front lawn to the woods. Yes. He would go to the folly.

\* \* \*

The bench outside the long-forgotten folly was wet, but Charis had expected that. She took her book from her bag, and spread the bag on the bench to protect her skirts. She never saw anyone here, not since her friend Eric left, ten years or more ago. But someone must know she came, because the area around the bench was always kept weeded, and the folly itself was cleaned from time to time, so it lacked the heavy overload of dust and cobwebs to be expected in such a neglected spot.

She was settling herself to read, when a large shaggy dog bounded out of the woods, his tongue lolling cheerfully from one corner of his grinning mouth. His tail waved enthusiastically, and she braced for whatever he intended, but he stopped a pace or two away and sat, stirring the wet grass and weeds with his tongue, lifting one paw as if hoping she would shake it.

“What a beautiful gentleman you are,” Charis said to him.

The dog tipped his head to one side, his tail speeding up.

“Shake?” Charis said. Is that what he wanted?

Apparently so. He shuffled forward, not raising his hind end completely from the ground. When he was a few inches nearer, he lifted his paw again, this time within reach if she just bent forward.

And so, she did.

The dog grinned still more broadly and half lifted again so his tail could wag at full speed.

“Yes, you are a friendly boy,” Charis agreed. “And someone has taught you beautiful manners.” She looked around, wondering if the dog’s owner was near, but no one was in sight.

The dog collapsed at her feet, leaning his head against her knee, and she obliged by rubbing behind his ear, then down to his chin. He closed his eyes in ecstasy and tipped his head even higher.

“That’s what you like, is it not?” Charis asked him and continued to caress the dog as she opened her book. Her own place, her book, and a friendly dog to pat. She could feel the tension draining as she settled in to enjoy her brief period of freedom.

It was Charis. A decade had not changed her so much that he could be mistaken. She was different, of course. All the difference between ten years and twenty, and what an appealing difference it was.

From the loft above the folly, he could not see her eyes, and her head was very properly covered in a bonnet. But her colouring was right, she'd come down the path from the Fishingham estate next door, and she'd immediately pulled a book from a bag and started reading. Yes. It was Charis.

Eric should have joined Ugo in greeting her. But he was wary of putting their old friendship to the test now both of them were grown. Would she be frightened? Horrified by his scars as she had not been by the unsightly growth that had devastated his childhood? So, when he'd seen her approach, he had slipped around the other side of the folly and climbed up into the loft.

The room had not been made for human occupation, being simply a space between the folly and the roof, with two window openings designed to be viewed from below. Eric had found it long ago, when escaping from Osric and Ulric, who delighted in tormenting him. He was able to swing from one of the surrounding oaks and gain access to a hidden refuge, but he had never needed to take refuge from Charis.

In London, when he had asked about the Fishingham family, most people looked blank. "Widow?" One cheerful young buck asked. "A flock of pretty daughters to fire off, and—if I don't mistake it—not much money?" No, he told Eric, the family didn't come to London. He'd met them in Bath. "Terrible place, but what can you do? My



uncle, you know. Lives there all year round. Very warm man, though, and I was named for him.”

Eric listened as patiently as he could to Moffat’s complaints about elderly relatives who lived in unfashionable places and dangled a possible legacy as a bribe to induce their nephews to dance attendance. When Eric managed to lead the conversation back to the Fishingshams (neighbours of mine, from back when I was a child), he waxed lyrical about the Fishingham twins, the lovely Eugenie and the charming Matilda, who were apparently the belles of Bath. “Twins, you know. One dark, one fair, and both divine. Were I looking for a leg shackle, I might be tempted.”

“And the eldest?” Eric asked. Phoebe would still be in the schoolroom, but Charis was probably married. Apparently not, for Moffat said, “Oh, her. Quiet. Shy. Didn’t take.” Quiet, Eric expected. She had always been reserved with those she did not know. But shy? If so, Charis had changed since he last saw her. But then, it had been ten years since the untimely death of Lord Wayford had led his widow to decide the freakish changeling fate had inflicted on the family must be carved into a suitable replacement heir, should something happen to the new Lord Wayford or the (Dis)Honourable Ulric.

Eric settled to watch Charis reading, and for the first time since arriving in England, felt he had come home.

\* \* \*

"I will not be able to come tomorrow," Charis informed the dog, who had appeared out of the trees each day since the weather cleared enough for her to walk to the folly.

The dog leaned more heavily against her dress, tipping his head even higher, his eyes shut in ecstasy. Charis took the hint and worked her scratching fingers behind his ears. She was rewarded with a sigh.

Charis echoed it. "Mother says the roads have dried out enough for us to travel into Bath. We will leave at noon so we can be seen in the pump rooms, have dinner with one of Mother's friends, and attend an assembly." She sighed again.

"We will do the same every day as long as the weather holds fine, Mother says, going to a private party if there is no assembly. Oh, I do hope it will rain. Is that wicked of me, dog?"

The dog opened his eyes, staring up into the sky. When he stood, swinging his great head to track a flock of noisy starlings that flew overhead, Charis chose to pretend he had understood every word. "I am sure you are right," she agreed. "I do not think it will rain, either."

She heaved another sigh. "Am I an unnatural daughter and sister, dog? Mother says that I am. She thinks I am trying to discourage suitors. I am not, truly. I know it is my duty to marry before the money runs out altogether."

She pitched her voice to a shrill tone, her mother's constant refrain coming easily to her lips. "'If you would just make a push to converse, Cas. Not about your everlasting books, but about things that interest the gentlemen.' But they are so boring! All they want to talk about is their silly japes and their clothes. Can you imagine being married to someone who has never had an interesting thought in his head? And someone who doesn't care to know who I am, and will only court me if I pretend to be as empty-headed as he is. Am I wrong to want to wait for a suitor who likes quiet girls who read?"

She stood and began to gather her things, putting her book back into the bag and replacing and retying the bonnet she had removed to better enjoy the limited heat of the winter sun. "They don't see me, dog. Even when I am right in front of them, they don't see me. They look past me to my sisters. I might just as well be wearing a cloak of invisibility, like in the stories our nanny used to tell. How am I to marry when I am

invisible?”

The dog gave a short bark, which she decided to interpret as support, especially when he took a couple of steps to return to her side, leaning his heavy weight against her hip. “Exactly. Marriage will be for my entire life, dog. I would like to at least respect my husband and have him respect me.”

As had become his habit, the dog escorted her to the row of trees that marked the boundary between Eastwood Hall and Ridley House, Charis’s home, where her sisters had undoubtedly been primping and preparing all afternoon, though the excursion was not until tomorrow.

Sure enough, Charis had no sooner slipped in through the garden door than Eugenie and Matilda pounced on her, each taking an arm, complaining in chorus, each taking a turn, as they harried her up the stairs.

“Hurry, Cas. You have done nothing to get ready, and you know you can look to advantage if you would only try,” said Eugenie, frowning.

Matilda scolded, “You must stop disappearing like this, Cas. Eugenie and I want husbands, even if you do not, and I must say I think you could stay and make a small bit of effort.”

“We have been through your gowns and selected one for the carriage, one for the pump room, and one for the evening,” Eugenie added.

“The ball gown is well enough,” Matilda allowed, “but you have worn all your day dresses before, Cas. Why did you not give them to me to retrim? I offered.”

Charis could tell them that the chance to escape to the folly had wiped all other considerations out of her mind, but it would simply annoy them further.

Eugenie did not wait for an answer. “The carriage won’t matter, but you cannot go to the Pump Room in a dress people will recognize.”

They reached Charis’s room as Matilda picked up the refrain. “If only you would make an effort, Cas.”

Eugenie crossed the room to lift the day gown laid out on the bed, displaying the ivory lace that now draped the neckline and finished the sleeves. “Matilda has fixed it.”

“It will do.” Matilda fingered the lace, lifting it and letting it drop again. Charis recognized it, familiar as she was with every trim and bolt of fabric they had purchased in the autumn in preparation for their assault on the bachelors of Bath.

“That is the flounce from your rose ball gown, Matilda. Surely?—”

Matilda smirked. “My rose dinner gown is now neatly trimmed with knots of magenta and ivory ribbon. Cas, can you remember which shawl you wore with this gown last time? Eugenie and I couldn’t decide whether it was the blue paisley or the green stripe.”

Charis frowned. It should be easy to remember which one she wore to which event. She did not have that many gowns. Matilda and Eugenie, with their busy needles and their flair for design, changed everything she owned between each wearing so the gossips could not sharpen their tongues on the Fishinghams’ inability to furnish each of three daughters with the extensive wardrobes Society considered essential. The basic fabric remained the same, but all else was subject to change without notice.

This blue-green walking costume was one of her favourites, but as to when she had worn it before...

Eugenie sighed. “The Moffat’s garden party. But we were rained out, and spent the whole afternoon inside, so you left your shawl with your bonnet, and I don’t remember which one it was.”

“Then I barely wore it at all. If you and Matilda don’t remember, I am absolutely positive no one else will,” Charis assured her. “Besides, even if someone notices that I’m wearing the shawl I wore then with a gown of the same colour, they will never guess it is the same gown. You have done wonders with it, Matilda.”

Matilda echoed her twin’s sigh. “I suppose it will be safe enough. Perhaps we should start keeping a list, Eugenie.”

The two narrowed their eyes, examining their sister with identical calculating expressions. “Good idea,” Eugenie decided. “She cannot be trusted to remember.”

Matilda shook her head, slowly and mournfully. “I cannot understand it.”

Charis was tempted to point out that she understood them no better than they understood her. How could they could keep all the different social events straight in their heads: who was there, who wore what, who talked to whom, and all the other minutiae that so absorbed her sisters and their mother?

She kept her words behind her teeth, though, avoiding an interminable discussion that would founder in the void between her interests and theirs, with herself very much in the minority since the twins counted Phoebe and Mother on their side.

Had Charis never met Eric, she might have long ago concluded she was defective. She was astounded and relieved to find another person who read as she did, with a boundless curiosity about the world outside the walls, both physical and customary, that kept them confined. Sometimes, she wondered if she had somehow been left in the wrong cradle.

In the unlikely event she ever married, she would make sure her own children could be themselves.

As she gently put down the sheet of paper she would have much preferred to crumple into a ball and throw across the room, Lady Wayford did not allow any of her irritation or concern to show on her features. A display of emotion was not only ill-bred; it caused wrinkles. Unnatural boy. Every line on her face was down to the man her correspondent called 'Mr. Eric.'

Her beloved Osric had been prophetic when he named the annoying creature 'Wreck,' for he certainly went out of his way to wreck her peace. He had caused her endless trouble almost since his birth. Look at the pains she had taken to make sure he was housed according to his possible future station, despite the ugly excrescence that had marred his face and against Wayford's determination to get rid of him.

In fact, she had hidden the little monster from her own husband, and kept his relationship to her a secret even from the servants who tended him and from the little brat himself. He was a relative she was housing at a minor family estate out of compassion, she had allowed them all to believe.

When her darling second son died and Wayford's profligacy caught up with him, she searched Europe for surgeons who could remove the ghastly thing. Then she devoted herself to the affairs of the earldom, despite the fact it was not her problem. To be fair, she did it for dear Osric, who was certainly not interested in managing anything more significant than a glass of brandy or one of his mistresses. Still, Wreck was the one to benefit.

Lady Wayford touched a handkerchief to the corner of each eye, blotting so she did

not disturb the powder that kept her skin looking youthful. To lose poor Ulric so young, and then Osric. Was ever a mother more betrayed by her young?

When she sent a messenger to Italy to inform Wreck that he was her son, was now an earl, and must return to England, she had been proud of her own foresight. For the earldom's sake, naturally.

Did Wreck return from Italy grateful for her intervention in his life? He did not. Instead, he ignored her guidance, refused to choose from the damsels she had carefully chosen as suitable brides for a man in his position, and finally fled to the one place she was reluctant to follow. To do what? To meet this Miss Fishingham?

Just as well she had staffed the place with a couple loyal to her. She picked up the housekeeper's letter again and frowned briefly before she could compose her expression. Fishingham. She did not know the name, but the housekeeper called the girl a lady, and spoke of the estate next door.

Bath was a relatively short drive from Eastwood Hall. Would the girl attend the assemblies there? Her friend Lady Constance would know. Constance had just returned from the place, complaining about how unfashionable it had become. Trust her friend to know the names and pedigrees of every person who attended the least event that Constance graced with her presence.

If the maiden was suitable, she would let Wreck have her. Lady Wayford nodded decisively. She was not an unreasonable woman. Miss Fishingham would need to be a maiden, of course, which her unchaperoned visits to Eastwood put into question. Well-born. That went without saying. Biddable, and grateful to Lady Wayford for her sponsorship. Able to do credit to the family in her looks, dress, carriage, and manners. Unlikely to wrestle with her Mother-in-law for control of the family finances.



Lady Wayford knew precisely the sort of woman Wreck should marry, and every one of the rejected brides fitted her specifications. She greatly feared Miss FISHINGHAM would not, but it was only fair to find out before taking action to separate the pair.

“Martha?” She called for her servant. “Martha, a walking dress, if you will. And let Charles know that I wish him to carry a note to the Menton townhouse.” She would visit Lady Constance immediately and begin her investigations.

The fine weather continued most of the week, much to the delight of Charis's sisters. Each day, after breaking their fast, they selected the gowns they and Charis would wear, made whatever quick repairs and adjustments they had time for, washed and dressed, did one another's hair, and set off for the first of the afternoon's entertainments: calls, musical afternoons, visits to the Pump Rooms, walks in the park. Dinner at the home of one of Mother's acquaintances was followed by singing or card playing or dancing or whatever else the hostess had put together to impress Bath's small society. Except on Assembly nights, when most guests went on to the Assembly Rooms, where the Fishingham twins continued to draw a crowd of remarkably vapid young men.

A bright moon meant safe travel after dark, and Mother was determined to take full advantage of the combination of fine weather and moonlight, so they seldom found their beds before three of the morning, rising no later than ten to repeat the whole process again.

Even on the one day that rain made travel unwise, Charis's sisters decreed that the five women in the family and their shared maid must spend the whole day sewing, remaking the gowns they had already worn to look as different as possible.

Charis had no time to walk to her refuge at Eastwood Hall; no time to even retreat to her bedroom for a few minutes of blessed silence. She found herself staying awake in the small hours of the morning, staring into the darkness, just to have time to herself. After six days of little sleep and almost constant company, she was nervous as a cat in a kennel, fighting a constant urge to yawn and suffering a nauseous headache.

The afternoon was hard enough. They attended a lecture given by an elderly gentleman who managed to be boring while telling stories of his journeys through South America. Charis struggled to stay awake but at least did not have to talk. At dinner, she was paired with one of the vapid, who proved to be more interested in his food than her, paying her little attention beyond his duty of serving her from the dishes that came their way.

Thank goodness it was an Assembly evening. She would not need to take a turn at an instrument or try to remember the rules of some silly card game or struggle not to win at charades (which she would enjoy, if only her mother and sisters insisted that winning all the time was showing off). As soon as they arrived at the Upper Rooms, she found a corner out of the way from which she could watch the dancing until Mother decreed the time had come to go home.

Not that she disliked dancing, but she did not like conversing with strangers, nor did she enjoy being partnered with someone who was clearly biding his time until he could escort her to the side of the dance floor before abandoning her to join the groups that besieged the more popular maidens. A quick glance around confirmed that the usual overabundance of ladies prevailed, so she should be safe enough from being hunted out by the Master of the Assembly with a reluctant dance partner. Just in case, she fitted herself more closely to the corner.

“... Lady Wayford doing here?” asked someone just a few feet away, and Charis jerked awake at the name. The Wayfords owned Eastwood Hall, and Eric was some kind of a relation.

“I have no idea. I thought she never left London.”

Two turbaned ladies sat with their backs to Charis, facing into the hall. Lady Harriett Ross and Mrs. Peacham, two of Bath’s notables. Charis should announce her presence: eavesdropping was poor manners. But then they mentioned Eastwood Hall,

and Charis could not have stopped listening to save her life.

“She attends the occasional house party, if it is sufficiently prestigious,” said Lady Harriett, the lack of warmth in her usually friendly voice screaming her opinion of the tyrant of Eric’s childhood. “But, as far as I am aware, and little happens without my knowledge, she has not visited Somerset in a decade.

Charis craned her neck to see around the gossipers, but she had never seen Lady Wayford and had no idea which of those present she might be.

“The new earl does not appear to be with her,” Mrs. Peacham commented. “I wonder if he is in Bath?”

The sound Lady Harriett made would have been a snort in a less fashionable lady. “The new earl has fled Lady Wayford’s determination to see him wed.” With all the scorn of a famed matchmaker, she added, “I could have told her that the insipid ninnies she chose would not suit, nor the budding harpies. It’ll take a woman of character to corral that one.”

“You have met the new earl?” Mrs. Peacham leaned closer, her body stiffening like a bird dog sighting its prey. “No one knows anything about him, but I daresay he is cut from the same cloth as the former earl, and he was a rakehell and a scoundrel.”

“Perhaps. He was presented to me at a musicale . His manners were charming, but he left shortly after,” Lady Harriett said. “A pity about the scars.”

Mrs. Peacham was nodding “A sword fight, I heard. Over a woman, no doubt. His father was just the same. All charm on the surface and a heart as black as coal. The earls of Wayford have always been beasts.”

Whatever comment Lady Harriett might have been inclined to make was left unsaid

as the Master of Ceremonies finally discovered Charis in her hiding place. Blushing under Lady Harriett's wise gaze, Charis allowed the man to present the Earl of Chadbourn as a suitable dance partner.

He exuded strength in spite of his slender frame, stood tall, possessed thick brown hair, and dressed all in black down to his stockings, gloves and cravat. The armband told her the lack of colour was not a fashion choice but marked a death. However, when she attempted to express sympathy, his friendly smile faded. He said, "Thank you," mildly enough but nothing else as he escorted her to their place on the dance floor.

It was not as bad as she'd feared. Lord Chadbourn recovered his good humour and proved to be an excellent dancer. He even kept his attention on her with every evidence of courteous enjoyment. After some remarks about the weather and her dress failed to ignite a conversation, he admitted to being more at home on his land than in fashionable company and responded to her timid question with a brief comment on new crop succession planning, which became an enthusiastic dissertation when he discovered she was truly interested.

No. It was not bad at all, except that a succession of less interesting men followed the earl's example. She tried fading back into the shadows, but apparently, dancing with a handsome earl destroyed her cloak of invisibility, because each time a partner returned her to her delighted mother, another waited to claim the next set.

She tried the same technique that had worked so well with Lord Chadbourn, asking questions until she hit on a topic her current partner could wax lyrical about. As the hours dragged and she continued to twirl and promenade—and smile, a fixed polite fiction as painful as the feet that were aching worse than her head—she learned more than she ever wanted to know about the best points of a race horse, how hard it was to tie a perfect cravat, and the pleasures of collecting snuff boxes.

The hour was late. Surely this torture must be over soon? She gave half an ear to the fribble who was escorting her back to Mother while, with the rest of her mind, she rehearsed reasons why Mother might consent to let her sit out a dance or two. "...don't know when I have enjoyed a dance more, Miss Fishingham," the fribble said. "Upon my word, I don't. Never thought I'd meet a lady so interested in..."

So that was the secret? That was what men wanted? A listener who made appropriate noises while they rabbited on and on? Even Lord Chadbourn, though he, at least, was interesting and polite enough to stop and check that she was not bored.

Her mother's voice jerked her out of her thoughts. "And this is my eldest child, Charis. Charis, make your curtsy to Lady Wayford."

Charis curtseyed, taking refuge in the formal manners that had been drilled into her over many painful sessions on deportment. She kept her head bowed when she was once again erect, afraid that the tyrant of Eric's childhood would see the anger and hatred that burned whenever Charis thought of the way her friend had been hidden in the country, maltreated, and then torn away from everything he knew.

"So, this is Miss Fishingham?" Lady Wayford put a finger under her chin to raise her face, and Charis managed not to flinch away. "A pretty child. You have hopes for her, Mrs. Fishingham?"

Mother needed no more encouragement to spill forth a litany of complaints about Charis's shyness, interspersed with entirely fictional accounts of her biddability and feminine accomplishments.

Lady Wayford continued to study Charis, while Charis studied Lady Wayford. The woman was tall and thin, elegantly dressed in rich silk in a peach tone that flattered her complexion, and draped with amethysts and diamonds, including a tiara that crowned her exquisitely-styled iron-grey hair. Her eyes were iron, too. A dark grey

entirely without any spark of human kindness.

“Are you enjoying the evening?” she asked abruptly, cutting through Mother’s babble.

Charis gulped back her feelings. You cannot insult a countess in public. Think of Eugenie and Matilda . “It is very pleasant, my lady,” she managed to choke out.

“Perhaps you prefer the country, child?” Lady Wayford managed to convey her contempt for the country with a slight quirk of one eyebrow. Should Charis disavow her own preferences? She wouldn’t.

Keeping her face frozen in polite stillness, she said, “I do, my lady. But the company in Bath is very fine.”

The answer pleased the countess, if her slight smile was any indication. She asked a few more direct questions. Did Charis enjoy riding? Did she keep pets? Was she a great support to her mother? Had she any suitors?

Charis managed to give insipid answers to them all, and heaved a sigh of relief when the lady brought the conversation to a close.

“She does you credit, Mrs. Fishingham. We shall speak again.”

\* \* \*

As always, Mother used the trip home to compliment or castigate each of her daughters for their performance.

Matilda had danced twice with the same man; one, furthermore, without a fortune to commend him. On the other hand, she did not miss a single turn on the floor and went

into supper with a marquis, so could be forgiven much.

Eugenie had missed several dances, giggling in a corner with the Lacey sisters. “It will not answer,” Mother pronounced, “for their brother is too young and is heir to a dukedom, besides. You are pretty, Eugenie, and of good birth, but a duke is above your touch.” However, though her supper escort was not titled, he had the redeeming feature of an enormous fortune, so Eugenie, too, was forgiven.

Charis’s turn began with the usual complaint about hiding in corners, but Mother’s scold was perfunctory. “For the second part of the night, you did very well, my dear,” she said. “I knew you could if you only tried. You are the most aggravating... But there. I was so pleased to see you dancing with Lord Chadbourn, amusing him, too, for everyone could see the pair of you chatting away as if you were old friends. Whatever could he have been saying that entertained the pair of you so well?”

“He was explaining the new method of crop rotation, Mother,” Charis said.

Mother’s jaw dropped, and her eyes widened. “Truly? How peculiar.” She frowned, but then her face stilled, and she shook her head as if to clear it. “No matter. He looked to be enjoying himself, so of course other young men wanted to follow his example. After the one with Chadbourn, you did not miss a dance until Lady Wayford engaged you in conversation.

“Interrogation,” Matilda muttered to Eugenie, but not quietly enough for Mother to miss the remark.

“You will refer to Lady Wayford with respect, young lady. Her interest in Cas was most gratifying. Word is she seeks a wife for her disreputable son—imagine if she were to choose Cas!”

“Mother!” Charis protested. “Why would I want a disreputable man for a husband?”



“His shocking reputation is the reason for our opportunity, Cas,” Mother explained. “We are neither wealthy nor titled, and normally, I would not look as high for one of you, but those considering the Wayford title and lands must also consider the reputation of this earl and his predecessors. The Earls of Wayford have ever been wild, and if you were to be fortunate enough to marry the earl, you could not expect him to be attentive or faithful.”

“He is scarred, too, Mother,” Eugenie said. “Lady Eleanor and Lady Alice met him in London, and they say he looks very fearsome. He is haughty, they say. Almost as haughty as Lady Wayford.”

“Go on,” Mother encouraged. “I normally abhor gossip, as you all know.” She sighed, heavily. “But I will make an exception for the sake of my dear girls.”

Charis exchanged glances with her sisters. Far from abhorring gossip, Mother was addicted to it and had a biweekly subscription to *The Teatime Tattler*, despite the cost of having it delivered from London.

Eugenie frowned as she reported, “He frowned the whole time, and they tell me that he acquired the scars duelling. Are you sure, Mother?”

Mother gave a dismissive wave. “A title, Cas, and more pin money than you can dream of. I daresay he will leave you to live with his mother and only visit to get an heir on you, so you will hardly need to spend any time with him. Just think! Perhaps he will let you remain at home!”

“Hardly, Mother,” Matilda said. “What would Society say about that?”

“Impertinence,” Mother scolded but confirmed the justice of Matilda’s observation by adding, “a long visit would be perfectly acceptable. My Cas, a countess.”

Charis saw no point in arguing that such a marriage would be hell on earth. Lady Wayford was just being polite, and there was nothing in the encounter to encourage the castle Mother was building from pure air. Another day and evening at Bath were over, and they were nearly home.

Surely, this close to Christmas, the fine weather could not hold much longer?

Eric arrived back at Eastwood Hall in the rain. He had never been more pleased to be wet to the skin, though his teeth chattered as he rubbed down his own horse and then Ugo and helped the elderly manservant to haul hot water for his bath.

He hadn't seen Charis in two weeks. After she made no appearance for three days, he'd sent the housekeeper to find out if something had happened to her. She was well, but travelling daily to Bath for the Season, the housekeeper told him.

Relieved she was not hurt or sick, he visited Bristol where he had several business meetings. His worry about possible suitors for Charis grew day by day, and he greeted the foul weather with delight, immediately cancelling the rest of his meetings in Bristol to return to Eastwood.

Estate business would not wait for long. Had the Wayford estates been without any stewardship at all until he took up the task? Certainly, something was seriously amiss with the accounts, and he and his friend Phillip, his former tutor, were doing their best to get to the bottom of it.

Still, business could wait for now. Eric intended to be at home when the weather kept the Fishinghams from Bath, but improved enough that Charis could manage to once more slip away to her refuge by his folly.

It took three days, days he spent mostly over paperwork, apart from a brief run with Ugo morning and evening. Otherwise, Ugo slept in front of the study fire as Eric worked at the desk by the window that overlooked the path from the Fishingham

estate. Not that he made much headway with the work he was expected to do. When he wasn't gazing at the path, he was imagining his first meeting with Charis. How would she react to his reappearance? Most of the scenarios he rehearsed ended badly; he could not believe she remembered him as fondly as he remembered her.

At last, the rain clouds lifted, and his attention to the path sharpened. After this long wait, he couldn't, wouldn't miss her. There. A flash of blue in the FISHINGHAM woods, and then a small figure in the distance. Definitely a woman, by the skirts, and who would it be but Charis? He watched for a minute or two longer. Yes. She was climbing the stile on the boundary wall. Eric grabbed his coat and scarf, laid ready to hand for this moment, and hurried from the house, barely acknowledging the housekeeper as he brushed past.

In minutes, he was setting a hand to the branch by which he would pull himself up to the tree and then the loft of the folly. Ugo gave a single bark. "That's right," Eric encouraged. "Go and greet our lady." The dog barked again and ran off in the direction of the stile, and Eric finished his climb.

Ugo was soon back, pacing majestically beside Charis, his tongue lolling in a huge doggy grin. He flopped at the foot of the bench as she removed her oiled rain cap and spread it, outside down, where she planned to sit.

Once she was seated, she made no move to take out the book that weighted her bag. Instead, she bent forward to rub Ugo's ears. "This may be my last visit, dog," she said.

Above her head, Eric leaned forward to hear better.

Ugo's tail stopped sweeping the ground as he registered Charis's sad tone. "Not for good," she reassured him. "Just until it is safe again."

Safe from what? Eric frowned. He was there to keep Charis safe from any danger.

Charis gave a huge sigh. "I am to stay close to the house, and well away from Eastwood, Mother says. All of us, but the others don't care to walk, so it just affects me."

But why? Charis had always come here, and no one had ever objected. As if she had heard his thoughts, Charis echoed them.

"They have never cared before. Fifteen years I have been coming here, and they have been happy to have me out of the house. But the earl who owns the estate is coming to stay, a lady in Bath told us. Perhaps he will be nice, dog. Perhaps he won't mind a girl who only wants a quiet place to read."

Another huge sigh. "He won't be nice, though. Even I have heard about the Earl of Wayford. Wild to a fault and selfish to the core. I remember him when he used to visit my Eric and make his life a torment."

'My Eric.' Eric, who had been preparing to call out, sat back at those words. She still thought of him as 'my Eric'?

"I cannot understand mother. She thinks the earl might ruin me, whatever that means. It is a bad thing, I know that. And yet she thinks I should marry him? Why would she want me to marry such a wicked man?"

\* \* \*

So Mrs. Fishingham was matchmaking, was she? And with the wicked Earl of Wayford as her target? Eric grimaced. Lord Wayford had been besieged when he appeared for the Season in London, despite his reputation. Trust Charis not to be drawn to the title and the money. But would she take plain Eric Parteger, hideous

scars and all? How would he ever know if he didn't put it to the test?

Charis was saying goodbye to the dog. He could delay no longer. He leaned out of the window and called her name. "Charis."

She leapt to her feet and looked up, her brows drawn together.

How beautiful she had grown. The men of Bath must all be married or blind. Her wide blue eyes narrowed, and then she smiled and held her hands up as if she would fetch him down through the window. "Eric? Eric, is it really you?"

Ugo gave an amiable bark and wagged his tail, then collapsed onto the grass at Charis's feet. She frowned again, looking from the dog to its master. "He is yours? Oh, but he has been here for weeks. Eric, have you been hiding from me?"

"I did not want to scare you, Charis. I never thought you would know me right away. But wait, I will come down." No flinch. No fixing her eyes and then turning them away. It was as if the disfigured side of his face was no different than the side that bore a single long scar from a knife cut.

"Of course, I knew you," she greeted him when he rounded the folly and approached the bench. "No one has eyes like yours, Eric. And no one calls me Charis except you. Here!" She backed to sit again on the bench, sweeping her gown to one side and patting the place beside her. "Come and sit with me and tell me everything you've done since last we could write. Oh, Eric, when Nanny died, I felt as if I had lost you both, and I can only imagine how you must have felt so far away from home! I am so sorry."

Eric hesitated. Given a choice, he'd have sat on the other side, so she didn't have to look at the mess the surgeons had made. Charis put her head to one side, her smile slipping a little, and he sat quickly before he made her uncertain of her welcome.

“I thought it was worse for you,” he told her, “stuck here and no one knowing or caring how important she was to us both.”

When Eric had been sent to Italy, Nanny had been given a cottage in the village and a pension. “I will write, Nanny,” he had said. “I will write to you, and you can tell Charis what the letters say.” They had already reluctantly agreed that Charis would not be able to receive letters from him directly, not just because he was a boy and a flawed one at that, but because no one in the FISHINGHAM household knew of Charis’s secret excursions and the friendship she and Eric had formed.

“My dear boy,” the old woman told him, fondly. “I never did learn to read, and now it’s too late, for my eyes are not what they used to be.”

Charis gave her a hug. “I shall read them to you,” she promised. So, Eric wrote each letter for the two females who loved him, sending them good news and bad. Outings with Phillip Taverton, the tutor assigned to instruct and care for him, who came to be his closest friend. The repeated operations to remove the strawberry growth that marred the whole left side of his face. The infection that nearly killed him. The new friends he made when he was well again and Phillip took him into Italian Society.

There, the scars became something of a passport to new friendships as he and Phillip vied to make up more and more outrageous stories about their cause. His favourite cast him as a ruthless brawler bested by a bandit in a knife fight in the mountains. In the story, the bandit was so impressed with his courage that Eric stayed with the gang for six weeks, being trained by the bandit.

And then the letters stopped. Six years ago, the village rector wrote, expressing his condolences on the death of Mrs. Parker, and enclosing the most recent of Eric’s missives, unopened. And since then, nothing.

Eric had stayed in Italy even after he reached his majority. He had work to do in the

Italian mountains, making life uncomfortable for the king and queen imposed by Napoleon in his bid to have his family rule the world under his direction. Besides, this English manor had been his prison, not his home, and the only two people who had ever cared about him were lost, for surely Charis had forgotten about him as she moved into Society and acquired the suitors she richly deserved. Handsome men, men who were accepted by their families, men with their own fortunes.

But here she was, sitting beside him, her lovely eyes shining. “Oh Eric, I am so glad you are home,” she exclaimed.

And he was, he realized. Home for him had always been Nanny and Charis. “I never forgot you,” he told her.

She looked down, suddenly shy. “I never forgot you, either.”

Greatly daring, he asked the question that had been burning within him since his stay in London. “Is that why you never bothered with the men of the ton?”

Charis blushed and would not meet his eyes. “They were all silly,” she protested.

“And you are promised to me.”

“A childhood promise,” she murmured, so quietly he had to bend closer to hear her, the urge to put an arm around her and rest his lips on the tender flesh of her cheek so strong that he moved away again immediately, so he did not alarm her.

He had pinned his hopes on that promise for the first part of his decade away, fallen into despair when their last link was cut, and—when Napoleon’s defeat meant he’d run out of excuses not to return to England—suppressed every foolish thought of rekindling the romance that had never had a chance to grow. Those thoughts were out of control now, rampaging across his consciousness, yelling ‘Mine,’ ‘Mine,’ ‘Mine,’



like the Norman barons who were his remote ancestors.

“Am I to court you, then, and win the adult woman’s promise?” he asked, the words escaping before he could hold them back. His heart sank. Now Charis would make polite excuses, or—worse still—pretend to be agreeable but never return. He didn’t blame her. Who would want to look at his flawed face every day of their life?

Sure enough, her smile faltered, but she didn’t look away, and the pain he glimpsed in her eyes was not pity for him, which he knew all too well, but something else. “Get to know me again, at least,” she told him. “I have never had a friend as close as you, Eric, and I have missed you more than I can say. But I am not the child you remember.”

He remembered her caution, a product of her mother’s insensitive attempts to mould her into another person. She was relaxed with him, once she learned to trust him, but he had been gone for a long time. “I have changed too, Charis, but not in my heart. I know we shall be friends again. After all, Ugo already loves you.”

She bent to give the dog another caress, lucky beast. “He is a darling,” she said. “What sort of dog is he? I have never seen one like him.”

“An Italian Mountain Shepherd dog,” Eric explained. “I found him in a river in a snow storm.”

Charis gave the little jiggle in place he remembered from a decade ago when a story was in the offing. It was considerably more disturbing in a lady of twenty than a girl of ten. With a stern internal reprimand to his baser self, he began his story and was rewarded as she relaxed beside him.

As an insurgent against Napoleon in the wild mountains at the foot of Italy, he had been famous for his ability to create and implement plans at a moment’s notice.

Today's plan was the most important of his life. Step one. Win Charis's trust again. Step two. Win her love. Step three. Marry her and live happily ever after.

Charis was barely aware of the path home, turning by rote into the short cut through the woods and slipping quietly along behind the stables so she could come at the house from the opposite direction to the Wayford estate.

Eric was home. He was tall and charming—handsome, too, under the scars left by the Italian surgeon's knife, and the single slash on the other cheek. Underneath it all, though, he seemed the same sweet friend she had missed for ten long years. He even still remembered their childhood vow to wed, which she would not hold him to, of course, once he got to know her again.

Her own family did not care to know her, and none of the people she had met in Bath pursued more than a surface acquaintance. To be fair, they interested her no more than she interested them. But she had long known that her love of books and her way of questioning the world set her apart. She would rather be lonely than have to pretend to be someone she was not.

And perhaps Eric would not lose interest. They had been friends once. They were on their way to being friends again. Once she had recovered her balance after the surprise of seeing him and his shocking interest in courting her, they had talked as if they had never been separated.

She managed to reach her room without being intercepted. When the door opened half an hour later without a knock to announce who was visiting, she was sitting at her desk writing in her diary in the code she had devised to keep her nosy sisters from learning her secrets.

“You’ve been to Beastwood again,” Matilda accused.

Charis winced at the cruel local name. “Don’t call it that!”

“Cas, you will never guess.” That was Eugenie. Matilda didn’t wait for Charis to try. “The earl has been here for weeks but hasn’t been visiting.”

Charis knew that, because Eric had told her, assuring her the earl wouldn’t bother her if she came to meet Eric again tomorrow, back at the folly. Could she do it? She shouldn’t. It would make her mother angry if she found out. On the other hand, Eric would keep her safe; she just knew it.

Eric, she knew, was some kind of relative of the earl’s, and the man and his family should be ashamed for punishing Eric for something he could not help. The earl would have been a child at the start of it, she supposed, and at least he had brought his cousin or whatever home after all this time.

As a child, she had quickly stopped noticing the nobbly, purply-red lump on Eric’s cheek. By the time she left him today, she had likewise forgotten his scars. She hoped the earl and the rest of Eric’s family would treat the adult Eric better than they did the child, though the earl’s Christmas plans seemed to suggest otherwise.

The earl was touring all his estates, Eric said, and was expected to join his mother for the seasonal feast. Eric didn’t seem to mind being left behind. “We will have time to get to know one another again,” he promised.

“Cas, you’re not listening!” Matilda stamped one elegant slipper.

Phoebe snorted. “She never listens. She has her head in a book even when she isn’t reading.”

“Cas, this is important,” Eugenie insisted. “Mother is going to invite the earl to dinner next week, and you must at least try to be normal. Mother’s friend Mrs. Greenham says her sister in London says he is definitely looking for a wife. And why not one of us?”

Dear me. But the man was wicked. “Why would you want to marry a man who was wicked?” she asked.

“You mean the fighting?” Eugenie waved one hand. “I wouldn’t mind. He can stop doing it now.”

Fighting? Was that part of being wild? Charis thought about some of the men in the stories she’d read and decided it made sense. Fighting, and drinking, and treating women badly.

“I would not count on that,” she warned her sisters. “Mrs. Eggleston says you should never marry expecting your husband to change, because you’ll be disappointed.”

“Oh, Cas,” Eugenie groaned. “You and your old village women.”

“Mrs. Eggleston was a farmer labourer’s wife, Cas,” Matilda pointed out. “One can’t expect common people to understand. Gentlemen are different.”

“Mother says an earl would be an excellent catch,” Phoebe said and smoothed her skirts. “I am going to ask Mother if I can stay up and have dinner with you when he comes.”

Had Mother run mad? Just this morning, she had demanded that Charis stay close to home while the earl was in the neighbourhood, and now she would let the man marry one of her daughters?

That settled it. Charis was meeting Eric tomorrow.

“Ca-as,” her sisters chorused. “Where have you gone now?”

“We might as well leave her alone,” Matilda suggested.

They trooped out, Eugenie pausing in the door for a parting word. “But Cas, you will be nice to the earl, won’t you?”

Be nice to someone who was wild to a fault? The books Charis read did not exactly explain what ‘wild to a fault’ meant, but she knew a girl could be ruined by such a man—and ruined was a very bad thing; one that would affect not just her, but her three sisters.

They were annoying, noisy, and silly. They constantly interrupted her to drag her into their activities, none of which appealed to her in the least. She loved them, but she wished they would understand that she wasn’t like them. One couldn’t rewrite people in real life to make them easier to live with, or safer for a quiet and harmless trespasser who loved to read.

She sighed again but brightened as she remembered that the earl was going away for Christmas, and that Eric was staying.

\* \* \*

Mother’s invitation to the earl was politely declined, the earl explaining that he was expected in Bath.

Mother nodded, not at all discouraged. “We will meet him there,” she said. “Cas, just think. When you are countess, you can live at Eastwood.”

But the weather and the dark of the moon meant Mother had to delay her conquest of Lord Wayford on Charis's behalf. Charis was delighted. Even the rain could not keep her at home when Eric lived once more at the other end of the path. Her mother's conviction that ladies should rest in the afternoon before the exertions of the evening became Charis's ally. Mother slept, as all the sisters knew, though Mother would deny it, and the sisters were meant to sit together, reading or sewing.

The three younger Fishingham sisters made no comment when Charis announced she would read in her room. She became adept at hurrying quietly down the back stairs and along the back of the stables and the kitchen garden to where Eric and Ugo waited to escort her to the folly.

Eric was as interested in her stories of the past ten years as she was in the far more exciting adventures he'd had. The theft of the Fishings' best rooster paled beside the invasion of the Kingdom of Naples by Napoleon's troops when Eric was 14. The scar left on her elbow from falling over a fence while fleeing an outraged and unexpected bull was nothing to the one Eric had earned when (as he put it) his unmarred cheek came between a bar maid and a bully with a knife. The ridiculous stunts pulled by Eugenie's swains in an effort to outdo one another and impress Eugenie seemed even more childish when measured against Eric's life as a fugitive from the French overlords.

"Brigands, the authorities called me and my friends, but better that than to be known as working for England. They did their best to wipe the brigands out of the mountains, but they didn't have a chance of getting us all, so they went after the easy wins. We made sure not to be easy. If they'd known our real goal, they'd have left no stone unturned."

"Didn't they execute brigands?" Charis asked.

Eric shrugged. "They tortured and then executed the English."

How could the man Eric had grown into be content with a country mouse like Charis? She loved him more with each day that passed, each meeting they had, each story he told. The boy had grown into a strong man, and a good one.

In the first moment of awed wonder that he wanted to court her, she had not questioned the bond between them. Then day after day passed with no evidence he saw her as more than a friend. Her misgivings grew. How could Charis expect to capture and keep the attention of a charming, handsome, experienced man of the world? She was the least pretty of the FISHINGHAM sisters, the odd one, the bluestocking; awkward and anxious in company; impatient with gossip and social lies.

He showed no sign that she bored him, but then his manners were excellent. He showed no sign that she attracted him, either. He never tried even to hold her hand, let alone kiss her. For her part, her whole body hummed with tension when she was near him, reverberating like a tuning fork to another tuning fork set to the same note.

Surely, he must feel something?

\* \* \*

Eric was living a kind of blissful agony. Charis trusted him enough to meet him in private, and he'd honour that trust if it killed him. Some days, tense with need, he felt it might. As soon as the weather cleared enough for travel, he was heading to the midlands, where her uncle and guardian lived. He'd seek Mr. Pethwick's permission to ask Charis to be his wife, and none of this nonsense about long betrothals, either. The sooner he could have Charis at his side all the time, where she belonged, the better. Even the thought spread a grin across his face. No more lonely nights.

Meanwhile, he shouldn't be meeting her like this, but he couldn't bear to have her so close and not spend time with her. He should ride up to FISHINGHAM Manor and



introduce himself to her mother and sisters; see her in chaperoned company away from the temptation to kiss her witless and more. Each day it became harder to honour the vows he'd made to himself, to pay his future wife the respect she deserved by keeping his hands off her.

How would Mrs. Fishingham react? From what Charis said, anyone with a title or wealth would be acceptable. Charis deserved better than that, and so did he. She wanted him for himself, not just the boy he was. She was the only person alive who knew him well from his childhood, but—after all their conversations—he was sure she was coming to love the man he had become. He didn't believe that would change whatever her mother and sisters said, but he saw no need to risk it. Besides, he didn't want to share his time with her in polite conversation with others.

It rained through Christmas and on into the new year, but Charis still managed to come most days, hurrying along the path from the Fishingham kitchen garden, bundled up in her oiled coat and sheltered by an enormous umbrella.

The folly offered them a dry place to talk, away from gossiping servants. The housekeeper-cook and her husband had been selected by Lady Wayford, and he suspected them of reporting to that lady. Even if they didn't, he had no expectation they'd keep Charis's unchaperoned presence under his roof from the village at large.

Besides, even in the folly in the rain, she was almost more temptation than he could bear, testing all the patience and self-control he'd learned as a family reject, then a surgery patient, then a bandit.

The rain's ceasefire came almost as a relief from the churning of his thoughts and the struggle with his lust. His attention so focused on his errand, he forgot that the clearing weather meant the Fishinghams could resume their assault upon Bath.

He was lounging in a chair by the window of his bedchamber, watching the sun rise

into a clear sky while sipping a coffee and planning the logistics of his trip. He'd hire a post chaise at the nearest post inn, change often, and stop for the night in Cheltenham. A riding horse would be faster, but he meant to keep travelling, and Ugo would run his heart out trying to keep up. A post chaise would bring him to Birmingham by the following night, all going well. The next day for his errand and then two or three days back. In six days' time, if he hurried, he would be able to ask Charis to be his wife. He wanted her agreement before he told her his secret, though he wouldn't hold her to her promise if she rejected him when she knew all.

Should he have told her from the beginning? He hadn't wanted to put a barrier between them, and each day he said nothing it became harder. No. This was the best plan.

Ugo rose from his place by the fire and paced to the window, whining and looking expectantly at Eric.

"What is it, boy? A rabbit?" What he saw when he leant forward brought him to his feet. Surely, he was asleep still, for Charis would never visit him in the daytime as she did every night in his dreams.

But when he opened the doors to his small balcony and stepped out, there she was, looking anxiously up at him.

"I needed to see you," she said, without preamble. The hood of her cloak fell back as she tipped her head back, and for a moment, his yearning for her stole his tongue. Then he noticed the pink tip of her nose and her stiff hunched posture as she shivered in the cold of the frosty morning.

"Wait right there," he commanded. He caught the coffee pot up from the hearth on his way to the inner door. He'd find a cup downstairs, or Charis could use his. Did she like coffee? He took his without milk or sugar, brewing it himself over the nearest

fire as he had for years in the mountains.

She was waiting on the terrace, and he opened the doors from the study to let her in. Ugo insinuated himself under her hand and received a fond caress. To distract himself from begging for the same, Eric knelt to start the fire, an easy job since the embers from last night were still alive under the ash.

“Will you have a coffee?” A curiosity cabinet by the fireplace held some Arabic cups—fragile fantasies in glass—that he’d picked up in Gibraltar on his way back to England, and at her nod, he fetched one and poured carefully, so as not to fill the little cup with grounds.

“I can’t get milk or sugar without alerting the servants,” he apologized, “but at least holding it will warm your hands.”

Charis blushed at the mention of the servants, even as she reached out for the cup. “I know I should not be here, but I had to see you before we left.”

Eric's hand stopped, and his eyes sought hers. "Left?"

"For Bath." She wanted to scream and throw things. An unknown benefactor had made a house available for them. No more respite on rainy days. No more Eric.

Eric either didn't care or didn't understand. "Bath. Of course." He pressed the cup into her hands and closed her chilly fingers around it. "Your gloves are damp. Let me take them off and dry them by the fire."

Charis shook her head. "It does not matter. They will get wet again on the way home." But she sat on the sofa he indicated, abandoning Ugo, who padded over to stretch out on the hearth rug with a deep sigh.

Eric knelt at Charis's feet, and she surrendered one hand to his administrations, lifting the cup with the other to smell the coffee.

Coffee was a luxury the Fishingham household could not afford, and Charis had never acquired the taste for it, but smelling the rich odour gave her something to do while Eric peeled off one glove then rubbed her cold fingers between his two warm hands until they began to tingle as the blood returned.

Was embarrassment the source of the burning warmth that flooded her? No one ever touched her so firmly, so intimately. No one ever touched her, except her maid as required to unlace her stays or put up her hair, or perhaps her sisters when excitement caused them to forget decorum. How often she had wished that ladies could exchange

the fond touches she'd observed in lesser families. A hug. A kiss to the cheek. Clasped hands.

Eric lifted her hand to his lips, then placed it in her lap. "Better. Now for the other." His voice was strained, as if he spoke through a stiff throat. Did he dislike touching her?

"Truly, I am fine," she assured him. "You do not need to bother."

"Bother?" He took the little glass from her hand and began removing the other glove. "This is not a bother." He glanced up from the hand he was now massaging, a smile lurking at the corner of his lips. "I have been dreaming of touching you, Charis, and am grateful for an excuse. Give me your coat now."

Something intent and hot in his eyes speared into Charis. She could not account for the way the warmth moved lower, to parts that a lady never mentioned and touched as little as possible, even when washing, but of a sudden, the air seemed to disappear from the room. She inhaled sharply, and let her breath out on a sigh, casting about for something to say to loosen the strange tension in the room. He had dreamed of touching her? How could she think when those words echoed in the chaotic scramble his caress had made of her brain?

She stood to remove her coat and handed it to Eric while her mind settled. Ah yes. Bath. "Mother has been given the loan of a house in Bath. We leave today, Eric, and I do not know how long we shall stay." She had meant her voice to be brisk and matter-of-fact, but the last words came out on a wail, and suddenly, she was enfolded in Eric's arms.

"Dearest Charis." He was rubbing her back with his hands, kissing the top of her head. For a moment, she froze, then—almost without her volition—she wrapped her own arms around him and held on tight, pressing herself against his warmth.

“The others have been over the moon ever since Mother told us. We will miss nothing, they say. Every morning engagement. Staying late at all the assemblies. No more days off because of the rain.” The tragedy that suffused her voice was ridiculous. She was an unnatural female to hate the activities the others so enjoyed, and it would only be until the end of the season.

Eric shifted, moving his lower torso so she was against his hip, but he didn’t put her away from him which gave her the courage to say, “No more visits with you.” To her horror, her voice warbled on the last word, and she burst into tears.

“Ah, Charis.” The rub changed to a soothing pat as she fought to contain herself. ‘Excessive displays of emotion are ill bred,’ Miss Middleton insisted, ‘and displeasing to men,’ though Eric did not sound annoyed as he murmured, “Darling Charis. We will only be separated for a short time, and when I come back, I shall...,” He trailed off.

She drew back, the better to see his face. “Come back? You’re going away, too?”

Eric lifted her chin and kissed the tip of her nose. “For a short time, so that I can...” he stared up into the corner of the room, and she nearly turned to see what had caught his attention before she realized his eyes were unfocused.

Hurt sliced through her, a pain sharper than the misery that had consumed her since Mother’s announcement yesterday evening. Eric couldn’t wait to leave her and was not prepared to tell her why.

“What do you not wish to tell me?” Oh dear. She had not intended to sound like a sulky child. She made to move away, but he would not release his encircling arms. He looked concerned, though, not irritated.

“I haven’t...” the dratted man didn’t finish that sentence either, instead, wiping his

thumb to collect the tears from under her eye. “Don’t cry, Charis. I will come to you in Bath. I am courting you, am I not?”

Charis shook her head. She was by no means sure what he was doing. According to her observations of the servants, the estate workers, the villagers, and the denizens of Bath, courtship involved public tokens of affection and private displays. “You have been everything civil, Eric,” she acknowledged.

Eric raised his brows at her disappointed tone, then his lips twitched as if he fought back a smile. She narrowed her eyes at him. If he thought her affection funny...

He folded her back against his chest so she could no longer see his face. “Darling Charis, I have been a scoundrel and a rogue to use you so. You deserve to have me bringing you flowers, writing you poems, singing love songs under your balcony, sitting in your parlour pretending to listen to your mother and sisters while catching glimpses of you, stealing kisses under every twig of mistletoe and in every hidden corner.”

Charis felt a touch on the top of her head—another kiss—and his arms around her tightened, scattering her senses. She struggled to marshal the words to acknowledge that meeting in secret had been her idea; her way to prevent her mother from destroying whatever was growing between her and Eric by confining Charis to her room until the weather once more opened the roads.

But Eric spoke before she could. “Charis, I will give you all of that, I promise. In Bath, if you are removing there with your family. But first, I’m for Birmingham and your uncle. May I, Charis? May I ask your uncle for the privilege of offering you my heart and my name?”

She pulled away again so she could examine his face. Her uncle was her guardian, though he left the care of his sister’s children entirely to Charis’s mother. “Uncle Ben

never argues with Mother,” she protested. But the more she thought about Eric’s plan, the more she liked it. If Eric had Uncle Ben’s permission, Mother could not refuse Eric’s courtship, though she might nag Charis to refuse an actual proposal.

If, that is, Eric really wished to marry her. “You have never even kissed me.” The words were out before she caught them. But she would not apologize. How dare he hold her at arms’ length, declare his intention to ask for her hand, and tease her with the mention of stolen kisses.

“Are you cross with me for not kissing you, Charis?” Eric’s voice had dropped to a husky purr, and again, his thumb touched her, this time tracing her lips. “I was afraid.”

Without her volition, Charis turned her head to follow his hand as he went to draw it away. “A—afraid?” she stammered.

“You and I have been alone, *dolcezza mia* ; no chaperone to protect your honour—and mine, for I feared that once I started I would be unable to stop. I long for you so. I imagine how soft your lips will be, how you will melt in my arms, how you would look...” he stopped, catching his lower lip in his teeth.

Charis blushed. “Did we need a chaperone, Eric?”

“You doubt it?” He lowered his face towards hers, slowly. Perhaps he was trying not to startle her. Perhaps he wanted to give her time to turn her head or to pull away. Charis waited, lifting her face to make her lips more accessible.

He was right to call himself a scoundrel, for he stopped just a couple of inches away. She waited, then when he made no further move, lifted onto her toes and closed the distance.



Eric greeted her initiative with an approving murmur, his mouth cruising in small kisses along hers. Was that his tongue sliding along the seam of her mouth? She opened her mouth to ask, and it darted inside, sending a bolt of sensation all the way to her female places. Dimly, she was aware of one large hand lifting her derrière , holding her up. Just as well. Without that support, she would have fallen from his lap, although how she had arrived in such a scandalous position she could not have said.

She essayed a foray with her own tongue and was rewarded by Eric's groan as his hand pulled her even closer to his body, and something hard dug into her hip. She wriggled, and he groaned again, pulling away a fraction of an inch to say. " Amore mio ," in a strangled moan.

Charis wanted to moan herself. Her breasts felt hot and heavy, and the lower part of her torso was uncomfortable, as if each kiss pierced through to that forbidden place. She wanted. She gripped Eric's nape and pulled him back to her mouth, and that both eased the ache and made it worse.

When Eric's free hand first brushed and then cupped one of her breasts, she leaned into the new sensation eagerly, her own hands roaming down from Eric neck to the bare skin under his banyan. The hand behind her tugged her closer. " Bellissima ," Eric murmured.

Perhaps Eric could move whatever he had in the pocket of the silk trousers he wore under his banyan. "Something is digging into me," she whispered, shifting uneasily.

It was the wrong thing to say. Eric stilled, and then lifted his head. With both hands on her hips, he shifted back onto the seat beside him, then tucked her head against his shoulder and wrapped his arms around her. "Thank you, dearest Charis," he said.

"For the kiss?"

“Yes, definitely for the kiss. And for reminding me that you are an innocent and I am a gentleman who greatly esteems you and wishes to cherish you for all our days.” He was breathing hard, as if he had run a considerable distance, and Charis, too, felt short of breath.

“I do not understand, Eric. What...?” A thought intruded, something she had overheard when the FISHINGHAM housekeeper came across one of the stable boys kissing the kitchen maid.

“Eric, may I ask you something?” After all, who else could she tell about what had happened here today? Her mother would lock her up forever, and anyone else in her household would immediately tell her mother.

“Of course, cara mia .” He nuzzled the top of her head, but the pleasure of his caress didn’t counter her growing worry. ‘That’s the way to get a baby in your belly,’ the housekeeper had said, and though she would love a dear wee baby, she needed to be married to the infant’s father, first.

“Eric.” She didn’t know how to ask her question, and meanwhile, she was blushing. She could feel the heat in her cheeks burning even down her neck and out to the tips of her ears.

“Charis? We are courting, my dearest. We have done nothing wrong; only expressed our love for one another, and beautifully, too. The memory of your kisses will keep me warm all the way to Birmingham and back to Bath. If you enjoyed them as much as I did, perhaps you will allow me to kiss you again when I return.”

Charis hid her face in Eric’s shoulder.

“Charis? Did I upset you? Was I too rough? Too eager?”

She responded to the concern in his voice. “I liked it,” she confessed. “But Eric, I am worried. Will I have a baby now?” She risked a look at his face.

He kissed the tip of her nose again. “Not from what we did today, my love. Not from a kiss, however passionate and delightful. But kisses such as ours lead to other things, which could indeed make you round with my child. Would you mind? Once we are wed, of course. The doctors don’t think my children are likely to have my affliction.”

“Yes. Yes, I want your babies, Eric.” She hugged him. “And if any of them have a mark, we will love that one just as much as the others.”

Her answer earned her another kiss, this one gentle, almost reverent.

“Tell me about the other things,” Charis asked, when Eric insisted on stopping.

So he would be the death of him. ‘Something is digging into me,’ indeed. The girls he’d known in Italy, even the lovely maidens whose families guarded them zealously from the dishonour threatened by every male between 12 and 70, had known what men carried between their legs and the danger it presented when a man had no honour.

Raised in a family of gentlewomen, Charis was a complete innocent, which was both daunting and endearing. “I will show you,” he promised. “I will show you the other things when we are wed, Charis, and you will like them, I promise.”

“Better than kisses?” Charis asked.

Tenderness engulfed him at the doubt in her voice. “Yes, better than kisses. I swear it by our love and my honour.”

They cuddled and talked some more while her coat and gloves steamed in front of the fire, and Charis finished her coffee. She was more than willing to kiss and be kissed, but Eric kept their embraces gentle and almost chaste. Her innocence was all the armour she needed in his company. She had given him her trust, and he would defend her against all dangers, even himself.

“I must get back before Mother awakes,” she said at last.

“Give me a moment to dress, and I will escort you back.”

Charis shook her head. "It is only a short distance, Eric. I will be safe."

Eric kissed her again. "Let me, Charis. I don't want to part from you yet."

He grabbed the first clothes he could find and hurried back downstairs to find Charis had donned her coat and gloves and was waiting by the door, one hand caressing Ugo's neck.

Hand in hand, they crossed the ragged lawn and entered the trees, Ugo pacing beside Eric's love.

"Was that Italian?" Charis asked. "The words you said when we..."

Eric peered under her hood. She was blushing again. "When we kissed? Yes. Italian has many beautiful names for lovers to call one another."

He had to lean close to hear her soft request. "Will you teach me what they mean?"

He drew her into his arms and kissed her again, his desire for more subsumed by the even greater need to cherish her. "Amore mio," he said, as they resumed walking, her hand tucked into his arm. "That means 'my love'."

"Amore mio," she repeated. Was she practicing her Italian or calling him her love? He kissed her again, and she murmured the Italian phrase against his lips.

"Dolcezza mia." He helped her over the stile that marked the boundary between his estate and hers and then kissed her again. "My sweetheart."

She squeezed his arm affectionately. "A translation per kiss, Eric? I trust you have many such phrases, dolcezza mia."

Eric hurried his steps so he could kiss her again in the shadows behind the stables, out of sight of the early morning bustle. “A thousand, cara mia , maybe more.” If necessary, he would invent some.

“Mia is my,” Charis deduced.

“My dear. My very dearest. I will miss you, and I will come to you in Bath, armed with your uncle’s consent.” Another kiss, and she met this one with the heat he’d begun to nurture in his study, so minutes passed and only the sound of the grooms talking on the other side of the wall gave him the strength to draw back. He rested his forehead on hers for a moment while he caught his breath.

“I love you, Charis,” he said when he could speak again. “Look for me in no more than a week.”

Charis lifted her head to examine the sky. “Weather permitting. Take no risks with cara mia .”

For that, Eric had to kiss her again, a gentle salute to each cheek and to her forehead, for he didn’t trust himself with her lips, already slightly swollen and rosy with his kisses. “Safe travels, Charis. Go now. Alla prosimmo .”

She looked up from her farewells to Ugo and raised her brows in question.

“Until next time,” he explained. “Soon, but it shall seem forever, my love.”

“Soon,” she repeated. She turned her head at a burst of laughter from the stables, then kissed him once more, a brief peck aimed at his cheek that he caught on his lips by the good fortune of turning his head. “Soon, Eric.”

One more pat for Ugo, and she was gone.

The Fishingham girl had finally realized that the Beast of Beastwood had lied to her. Lady Wayford spared the silly chit a moment's sympathy. For the first week of the family's return to Bath, the girl had glowed. No other word for it. She'd been almost pretty, with her colour high and her eyes full of dreams. Certainly, the men had noticed, for they had swamped her with requests to dance, and her mother made her accept them all.

Look at her now, back hiding in corners, wan and pale.

The mother was a stupid and self-centred woman. She clearly hadn't noticed that her eldest daughter was setting herself up to be ruined. Nor did she see the signs that Miss Fishingham imagined herself in love and increasingly, as one week turned to two and then three, that the fool girl had grown pale and withdrawn, her eyes dark bruises in a woeful face that contrasted bitterly with the brittle gaiety she adopted when forced to be social.

Lady Wayford watched Charis Fishingham circling Lord Chadbourn in a long dance, her steps graceful, her lips curved in a polite smile, her eyes bleak.

The poor deluded child. Though even such a waste of air as Mrs. Fishingham had surely warned her daughters not to be private with their suitors. If Miss Fishingham had made her wares available outside of marriage, she was entirely to blame for her current misery.

Lady Wayford had her own disappointments. Having met both Mrs. Fishingham and

Charis, she had been so sure that the child would be a suitable bride for the new earl that she'd arranged to take over the tenancy of a house unexpectedly made vacant when its owners were forced to rusticate.

Not that the Fishingshams knew the name of their benefactor. It didn't do to raise expectations.

A wise decision, as it turned out. Mrs. Fishingham was as venal and as easily manipulated as Lady Wayford could have hoped, but Charis soon showed a disturbing intelligence. That could have been ignored had she not had Opinions. The last thing Lady Wayford wanted in a bride was a rival for her position as head of Wayford's households. She had sacrificed everything for the Wayford legacy, and she deserved the rewards.

She had a firm hand on the purse strings, despite Wreck's stubborn efforts to assist, and she had no intention of giving them up. She would guide the Wayfords into the next generation, and even, perhaps, the one after.

The eldest Miss Fishingham was quiet and well mannered, but stubborn and unwilling to be accept the dictates of those who knew better. Why, she had told no less a person than Lady Harriett Ross that she thought the current system of patronage for election to the House of Commons old fashioned! And in the hearing of others, too!

The other Fishingham girls were more skilled at disguising their disgusting independence, but they would not do, either. Lady Wayford had briefly considered Miranda de Courtenay. That young lady was Lady Wayford's favourite of all the offerings of Bath society, being very like Lady Wayford herself as a young woman. For that reason, she would not do, either.

Perhaps she should consider Prudence Carlisle or Rebecca St George. She would



need to spend more time with them.

The dancers were clearing the floor as the musicians put up their instruments for a short break before the next set. Lady Wayford sniffed. Another break. Surely, they had one a mere two hours ago? Still, this would be the opportunity to speak to some of her acquaintances about possible brides for Wreck.

As Lady Wayford gathered her reticule and her shawl, Chadbourn passed with Miss Fishingham on his arm. Someone should hint him away. A girl who would meet a man in private, whether the wicked boy took advantage or not, was not fit to be a countess.

Charbourn left Miss Fishingham with her mother, but as he crossed the floor, someone accosted him. Wasn't that Taverton? What on earth was he doing here?

“Lord Chadbourn still seems taken with you, Charis, thank goodness.” Mother sounded doubtful, and rightly so. Lord Chadbourn danced once with Charis whenever they were at the same event, ever since she confided that her affections were engaged. He had become something of a friend, which was a surprise, though slightly awkward. The Bath Assemblies didn’t attract many peers of the realm, and some of the other young ladies, used to thinking of Charis as a wallflower, resented her for Charbourn’s attention.

“Lord Chadbourn is coming back,” Matilda said. He was crossing the dancing floor, accompanied by a tall thin man with a narrow face and a mop of dark hair, and in moments, he bowed before Mother.

“Mrs. Fishingham, may I make known to you Mr. Taverton. Mr. Taverton has requested an invitation to meet your daughters, if it pleases you.”

Charis looked at the man more sharply. Taverton? As in Phillip Taverton? Eric’s tutor turned friend? The weight on her heart shifted, not quite letting go its grip, but suddenly shot through with hope.

Mother, after an assessing look that approved Taverton’s expensive tailoring. “My daughters, Mr. Taverton. Miss Fishingham, Miss Eugenie, and Miss Matilda.”

Taverton, having bowed to each of the sisters, turned back to Charis. “May I request a dance, Miss Fishingham? If you have one free?”

“I am not engaged for this dance, Mr. Taverton,” Charis admitted, ignoring Eugenie’s poke. Eugenie and Matilda would have made the man wait while they consulted their fans, on which they had written the names of those who had asked to be their partners. Charis had no patience for such games, even when she wasn’t near bursting with the need to find out what Mr. Taverton knew about Eric.

Mr. Taverton chose places near the front of the lines, and before long, they had danced their turn in and out of the other dancers, up the aisle between the gentlemen and the ladies, around one another, and back to the end, where they could stand out for a brief few minutes until the patterns of the dance needed their attention again.

“You dance like an angel, Miss Fishingham,” Mr. Taverton said.

What did that even mean? Charis shrugged it off. They had no time to debate whether angels danced, and if so, how. “Are you Eric’s Mr. Taverton?” she demanded, and Mr. Taverton’s polite smile broadened into a genuine grin. “I am, Miss Fishingham. Phillip Taverton, at your service.”

“Have you seen him? Is he well?” Her worst nightmare wasn’t that Eric had abandoned her. Somewhere in her every thought, waking and sleeping, was the fear that he lay somewhere injured, sick, or even dead. Travelling to Birmingham in the middle of winter? What was he thinking? What was she thinking, to wave him off without begging him to reconsider?

“Eric sent me. He asked me to apologize for the delay and assure you he is only a day or two behind me.”

The music and other clutter of the ballroom dimmed to a distant susurrations as Charis’s knees turned to custard.

“Miss Fishingham?”

Mr. Taverton's concerned voice gave Charis a focus as she struggled to firm her knees and stay upright. In the next instant, he had wrapped her hand over his arm, supporting her weight with his own strength. "Breathe, Miss Fishingham."

Charis took a deep breath and another. Eric was safe. He had sent a message.

"Miss Fishingham turned her ankle a little and needs to sit down," Mr. Taverton told someone, then, more quietly, "Can you manage a few steps? That's it. Just a step or two more."

Gently coaxing, he took her out into the hall beyond the ballroom and commandeered a bench seat near a window where they were decorously in full view of all the people promenading the hall but could have a private conversation. "I am sorry, Miss Fishingham. I should not have been so precipitate. You were worried about the young rogue."

It wasn't a question, but Charis answered it anyway. "I was. Thank you for bringing the message." She longed to interrogate the man, but she didn't know how far he was in Eric's confidence.

"You are recovering your colour," he observed. "Feeling a little more the thing?"

Charis nodded. "I must apologize, too, Mr. Taverton, for interrupting the dance."

He waved that off with an expansive gesture. "No matter. Miss Fishingham, Eric said to tell you that his mission to Birmingham was delayed because the man he went to see was out of town, but he was ultimately successful. I'm afraid I'm responsible for the further delay. I've been looking into some business for him, and when I met him in London, I gave him some news he thought needed his immediate attention."

"He was in London?" Wasn't London a diversion out of his way back to Bath? She

would not fret about him attending business instead of coming straight to her. She would not.

“Another errand associated with the first. To Doctor’s Commons, unless I miss my guess.” He smiled and winked, but Charis had never heard of Doctor’s Commons and had no idea how an errand there might be part of gaining her uncle’s consent to their marriage. She shook off the impulse to question Mr. Taverton further. It didn’t matter. Eric had gained that consent, was on his way to Bath, and had thought to send Mr. Taverton to reassure her.

“Charis Fishingham, why are you not dancing?” Mother bustled up talking loudly enough that the nearest ladies and gentlemen turned to watch the show.

Mr. Taverton stood politely and bowed. “Ah, Mrs. Fishingham, I am so glad you are here. Miss Fishingham turned her ankle a little and needed to sit down.”

“Charis?” Thankfully, Mother lowered her voice as she sat down on the other side of Charis.

“It feels a little better now, Mother. I am sure I shall be perfectly well if I do not dance again this evening.”

Mother frowned. “But it is too early to go home. Eugenie is dancing with Lord George Chadwick and Matilda with the Honourable Mr. Jonathan Thwaite.”

“I do not need to go home, Mother. I am happy just to sit.” As she had mostly done for the last three seasons, at least until Lord Chadbourn had favoured her with his notice, thereby attracting the attention of the other bachelors. She shot a grateful smile at Mr. Taverton for saving her from the dance floor for the rest of the evening.

Mother pursed her lips and nodded, her mind made up. “Mr. Taverton, you will escort

my daughter back to my side when this dance is over.” She patted Charis’s hand and stood up.

“You should stay off your ankle as long as possible, and I need to keep an eye on the other girls.”

She sailed off, and Mr. Taverton resumed his place on the bench.

“I must apologize...,” Charis began.

“Not at all, Miss Fishingham. It is my pleasure and my privilege to sit out our dance with you. I should apologize that my prevarication has forced you to deceive your mother. But all shall be well when Eric comes.”

Charis was not so certain. Mother had her heart set on the earl, and a mere mister, whatever his connection to a titled family, would not meet with her approval. Still. Eric had the consent of Charis’s guardian, and besides, in just a few months, she would be of age. Mother might fuss, but no one could force Charis to marry where she did not love or not to marry where she did.

Meanwhile, here was the man who had shared Eric’s adventures in Italy, and they had at least another twenty minutes before this dance ended.

“Tell me, Mr. Taverton...” she began, “when did Eric find Ugo? It was in Italy, I know, but will you tell me the story?”

Two days later, Charis was dreaming on the window seat in the little upstairs sitting room the sisters had taken for their own. From this vantage point, she could see the approaches to the front door and the gate to the side of the house, for less lofty visitors.

So far, today had been like any other, with little morning traffic. The household's senior footman had left and returned with the mail (their budget didn't run to a butler). The butcher's boy had delivered meat to the kitchen. Phoebe had taken her hoop to the enclosed garden on the other side of the road, accompanied by the nursery maid, and returned with a story of being watched by a sinister man. Phoebe's adventures tended to the gothic and were entirely imaginary, so this flight of fancy was dismissed.

Despite the lack of activity and the chill off the glass, Charis couldn't tear herself away when the next person to stop at their house might be Eric.

"Cas, did you hear me?" Her sister Matilda spoke from a few inches away, making Charis jump.

"No, I did not. Did you need me for something?"

Matilda rolled her eyes, saying, in sing song tones that underlined her irritation at repeating herself, "Mother wants us all in the parlour. Even Phoebe. She read a letter that arrived in the mail and is a state."

Charis felt around the floor for the slippers she had kicked off. “What about?”

“Matilda does not know,” Eugenie said, linking arms with her twin. “Come along, Charis, and we will find out.”

Mother was striding back and forth as she did when she was cross, but she was also beaming from ear to ear. When her daughters entered the room, she rushed to Charis and enfolded her in a huge, smothering embrace.

“Oh Cas, I was in despair, and then so happy. You have saved us all! Cas, my precious, precious love. Let me look at you!” She turned Charis around by the shoulders until Charis had spun a full circle and then hugged her again. “I have such good news, my dears.” She shrugged. “Bad news, too, but is it not ever so? Sit down, young ladies. Sit down. Cas, you shall sit beside me.”

She sat herself and included them all in her beatific smile.

“Should I call for tea, Mother?” Charis asked.

“Tea? You can think of tea, at a time like this? Are you not excited? Yes, yes. Eugenie, call for tea. The best leaves, for we are celebrating.”

Eugenie and Matilda exchanged glances in a wordless twin communication, and Eugenie went to the door, while Matilda asked. “What are we celebrating, Mother?”

“Oh, my goodness, I have not said. I declare my wits have gone begging. Let me tell you the bad news first, for I do not wish to think of it again. We must leave Bath. The house agent writes that another person has leased the house, and we must leave by the end of this week.”

“But Mother,” Matilda protested, “the Valentine’s Day Ball!”



“I know. Oh dear, I know.” Two fat tears rose in Mother’s eyes at the thought of missing the treat everyone else in the household had looked forward to, but then she cheered.

“That was one of the letters I received today. You will never guess what was in the other.” She stopped talking while the maid wheeled in the tea trolley, then waved the girl off.

“We shall serve ourselves, Milly. Close the door to keep the heat in. There’s a good girl.”

Eugenie was instructed to pour the tea while all four daughters bit their tongues. Asking Mother what had put her in such a good mood was as likely to fetch a scold as an answer.

Charis was about to make the enquiry anyway when Mama spoke. “The Earl of Wayford has spoken for you, Cas. Your Uncle Benjamin has consented to the match, and you shall be a countess. What do you think of that?”

Charis had no words. Uncle Ben had approved Wayford? But Eric’s message said he had succeeded. Her uncle had betrayed them.

“To think.” Mother said, her smile blissful. “My little bookworm is to be the Countess of Wayford.”

“What!” Charis must have heard wrong.

“Yes, indeed. I do not marvel at your surprise, Cas. I was astounded, as was your Uncle Ben, when the earl said he had long admired you and would have no other to be his bride.” She patted Charis on the shoulder. “No other, Cas. Did you hear that?”

Charis pulled her hand from under her mother's. "No, thank you, Mother."

"Now, now. These maidenly airs are lovely but not necessary. He has seen you, and he wants you, and Uncle Ben and I have said yes on your behalf."

Charis sat, rather heavily, on a handy chair. "No. No I cannot marry the earl. And I will not marry him. I am promised to another."

"Just think, we shall be able to... What do you mean, 'I am promised to another'?"

"I do not wish to marry the Earl of Wayford, Mother." Charis took a deep breath and steeled her resolve. "I shall not marry the Earl of Wayford."

"Oh, but—" Matilda began, stopping at an urgent poke from Eugenie.

Mother shrunk a little, hunching over. "Did you want to marry Mr. Moffat, then? He asked last night if he could pay his addresses, but I did not think you liked him above half."

"I will not marry Mr. Moffat, either, Mother."

Mother shook her head slowly and patted Charis's hand again. "I do not believe Chadbourn to be in earnest, Cas. One dance only each evening and never a visit? Take it from me, Cas, you will not bring him to the point. Besides, why hold out for Chadbourn when you already have an offer from an earl."

"Chadbourn is merely a friend, Mother. I have no interest in any of them."

"And I will not permit you to marry that Mr. Taverton, and so I told him. 'Do not bother to call again, Mr. Taverton,' I said, 'for my daughter will not be at home.'" She gave a single fast nod.

“Mr. Taverton called? And you turned him away?”

“I think only of your own good, Cas. Lady Wayford warned me that the man is not to be trusted. The man is a common thief, she said. A highwayman, Cas.”

“Mr. Taverton fought for our King against the French, Mother, pretending to be a bandit. He is a good man and a friend of Eric. How could you, Mother?”

Mother began to cry again, great teardrops running down her cheeks as she ranted.

“How could you, Charis. You owe it to the family to marry well. You know this. You have two offers, both from wealthy men. You must accept one of them. Do you not see that?”

Charis suppressed the guilt her mother excelled in creating. They had a roof over their head and food, servants, a few luxuries. They managed. And soon, they would have one less mouth to feed. “I have three offers, Mother, and I am accepting an offer from the man who holds my heart.”

Mother drew herself up. “A man? Charis Amelia Fishingham! Have you been meeting a man behind my back?”

“I am marrying Eric, Mother.” Hearing her own words made her smile and gave her the courage to continue. “You remember Eric Parteger? The earl’s cousin? He has lived next door to us all his life, except when he was in Italy. Now, he is home, and we are to be wed. If not soon, then later this year when I am of age.”

Again, Matilda said, “But—” and was shushed by Eugenie.

Mother was more bewildered than angry. “The Beast? You are marrying the Beast of Beastwood? How will you survive?”

“He is not a beast, Mother, and I will thank you to forget that horrid name.”

Mother scowled. “Charis Fishingham, you shall not talk to your mother that way, and you shall marry Lord Wayford, not some crippled cousin.”

“I shall marry Eric, Mother.” Charis stood, smoothing down her skirts in an effort to hide her shaking hands. If she heard any more insults from her mother, she would say something unbecoming. “I am in some need of some air. May I be excused, Mother?”

She left the room without waiting for an answer and stood in the hall outside for a moment, waiting for her roiling emotions to settle.

From inside the room, she could hear her mother complaining about ungrateful daughters and bemoaning their coming exile back to Ridley House. Nearer the door, Matilda said to Eugenie, “Why did you not want me to tell her...?”

“Matilda, hush. I will explain later.”

“Miss Middleton says that secrets are unbecoming,” Phoebe pointed out.

Charis was heartily tired of them all: Mother with her plots and plans, Matilda and Eugenie with their secrets. As for that horrid book by Miss Middleton, if Phoebe quoted from it one more time, Charis would season it with salt and pepper and make her eat it.

“Milly,” she said to the hovering maid, “tell John I am going for a walk and want his escort. I will fetch my bonnet and coat and meet him by the gate.

\* \* \*

Bath, at long last. Eric handed over the post-chaise and paid the post-riders. More

coins went to a couple of porters to carry his bags, though the most important of his purchases rested in an inner pocket of his coat.

“Come on, Ugo,” he said to the dog. “Sorting out Lady Wayford is not going to get easier for being left.” When Phillip had told him that her ladyship had been countermanding Eric’s orders and continuing to treat the earldom’s coffers as her personal bank, Eric had been more annoyed with himself than with Lady Wayford. He had seen the signs but hadn’t believed them.

An hour into his first meeting with his solicitors, and his anger had expanded to include the lady herself and all who had made her theft possible, starting with Osric. She had been systematically raiding the estates to enrich herself.

Since he arrived back in England, Eric had been avoiding confrontation. Had he hoped for some sign of affection? If so, some of this was his own fault, since he’d never had any reason to believe she would treat him kindly or even fairly.

She, on the other hand, had every reason to expect him to leave her in command. He had refused to yank the domestic reins from her hands, steered clear of discussing her treatment of him as a child, refused to confront her about setting spies on him, and fled rather than tell her that his choice of bride was none of her business.

He should have stopped her for those things alone, but now he knew she had stolen from him, he could leave her be no longer. Today, they would have their long overdue discussion.

As he climbed the steep street leading to his Bath residence, Ugo barked, the sharp yip that warned of danger. Eric let his eyes follow the dog’s pointing nose as Ugo trembled with the contrary urges to stay at heel as commanded or to bound to the rescue of a woman all bundled up against the cold, whom two burly characters were trying to force into a carriage.

Eric resolved the dog's dilemma with the command to 'get it.' " Prandial , Ugo!" The dog bounded away, Eric running behind him. The woman had a hand on either side of the carriage door way and was shouting for help. If anyone inside the houses heard, they didn't want to interfere.

One of the men lifted something over the woman's head. A cosh? Eric had been wondering if he was stepping into someone else's domestic dispute, but no one had the moral right to hit a woman over the head, whatever the legalities.

He breathed a prayer of thanks for Ugo, who surged into the bounder and knocked him to the ground. The other assailant made one more attempt to push the woman into the carriage, then shoved her away and leapt in himself, shouting to the coachman to, "Get us out of here."

"Ugo?" The woman pushed her bonnet out of the way and looked around.

"Charis?" It was her! He swept her into his arms, hugging her with all the relief of their long separation and the fear he would have felt had he known it was her being abducted. "Charis. Bellissima . Amore Mio . Are you hurt?"

"No, but I fear John Footman is, Eric." She pulled out of his embrace, leaving him bereft, though it was some consolation when she took his hand. She led him to where a man in the Fishingham livery was beginning to sit up, groaning, his hand to his head.

"John? Are you well?" Charis asked.

"Miss Charis? Miss Charis, thank God you are safe. Sir, my thanks. They surprised me, sir, and the next thing I know, lights out."

"Mr. Parteger and his dog arrived in time, John." Eric winced to hear her call him

‘Mr. Parteger,’ but didn’t correct her. He’d have to tell her soon, certainly before he asked her to marry him, but this was not the right time, when she had had such a fright and all her attention was on her footman.

“We must get you home and to a doctor,” she told the man.

“Lady Wayford’s place is closer,” Eric pointed out. “We’ll get John patched up and send someone for the constable.”

“Not Lady Wayford’s, sir,” the footman protested. “That was her carriage, that was.

Charis protested, but Eric had no difficulty in believing that a footman would know the carriages of his betters. He had already known that Lady Wayford was capable of wickedness but to kidnap Charis? Why? To get rid of Eric by driving him to despair? Beyond a doubt, losing Charis would have had that effect.

It made sense, and undoubtedly the man cringing under the threat of Ugo’s bared teeth would confirm the woman’s involvement. Eric let nothing of his disgust show in his voice. “Bravo reglaze , Ugo. Custodiae . Charis, you stay with John and Ugo, and I’ll get some help.”

He banged on a knocker chosen at random and soon had a servant scurrying for the constable, another for a doctor, and a third standing at a respectful distance from Ugo ready to sound the alarm if the thoroughly cowed captive tried to escape.

Once the doctor and constable arrived, he gave them both his card, scribbled his address on the back, and informed them he was escorting Miss FISHINGHAM home. She had been carried off by the householder’s wife and was sipping tea when he came to get her.

A maid was detailed to follow them home and ensure propriety, which meant they

couldn't talk. On Charis's door step, she stopped and sent the girl to stand over on the other side of the road.

"Eric, you must leave me here. I will tell Mother what happened, but this is a bad day for her to meet you. She is already angry because I told her I would marry you and no other."

Eric took both her hands. "I suspect that is what angers Lady Wayford, too, though heaven alone knows what she planned. I will marry you and no other, care Mia . I will return in the morning, and we'll have it out with your mother."

Heedless of the maid, he gave her a quick peck on the cheek, then watched as she entered the house and shut the door behind her.

\* \* \*

At Eric's hotel, Phillip Taverton was waiting. "I've been unable to deliver your messages saying when you will arrive, Eric," he said in lieu of a greeting. "Mrs. FISHINGHAM will not let me see her daughter, and Lady Wayford has refused me."

"No matter, Phil. I've seen Charis, and Lady Wayford has overreached one time too many." Quickly, he caught his friend up on the attempted abduction. "I'm off to have it out with her ladyship as soon as I've washed and changed into dry clothes. Will you keep Ugo with you?"

"Are you sure you don't need me to watch your back? She has a house full of henchmen."

Eric lifted one eyebrow, and his smile was by no means amused. "She has a house full of servants whose wages are paid by me," he pointed out. "Ah. That'll be my bath."



Dusk was turning to full dark when Eric rapped on the door of Lady Wayford's residence with the head of his walking stick. Behind him, Phillip waited with Ugo, Eric having lost the argument about the safety of the Wayford townhouse.

The servant who opened the door tried immediately to shut it again. Eric stopped the door with his foot and shouldered it open. Phillip and Ugo crowded in behind him, and when the man opened his mouth to shout, Eric lifted a finger and shook his head. "Uh uh," he said. "No shouting. Where is Lady Wayford?"

The servant's nervous glance up the stairs told its own story, and Eric took the steps two at a time, Phillip and Ugo following. From the landing at the top, the direction was obvious, since light showed under only one door, probably a front parlour. Below, the servant who'd let them into the house, whether he wished to or not, was hurrying through to the back of the house, probably for reinforcements.

"Ugo and I will make sure you are not disturbed," Phillip offered, taking station beside the parlour door.

Beyond the door, Lady Wayford was kneeling before a fireplace in a luxurious parlour, feeding paper into the fire a sheet or two at a time.

"Destroying the evidence, my lady?" Eric asked.

She started back from the fire, then lifted her chin and sniffed. "You are a barbarian, Wreck. Gentlemen wait to be announced."

"In my own home, madam?" Had he spoken in that cold polite voice to any in his mountain band in Italy, they would have scattered to avoid the Inglese or leapt to obey him.

Lady Wayford sneered. "You have always been a disappointment."

Somewhere inside, the small boy who would have died for this woman's favour hesitated between grovelling and screaming his rage. Eric did neither but crossed the room in a couple of strides and grabbed Lady Wayford's wrist as she went to shove another handful of papers into the flames.

He ignored her protests while he quickly scanned the top page. A letter to a doctor, committing a hysterical female of his household into the doctor's care.

Lady Wayford struggled to free herself. "You are hurting me, Wreck."

Eric dragged her to her feet, away from the other documents she thought to burn. "You will address me by my title, woman, or this letter might yet be put to use."

"Help!" she shouted. "William! Burton!"

"Sit," Eric invited, backing her into a chair away from the fire so she had no choice but to obey. He dropped her wrist as soon as she subsided, and she hunched over, rubbing the red flesh with her other hand.

"You hurt me," she accused.

Lady Wayford had caused the bruising herself, fighting to get free, but the effort to confine his grip to restraint had battered at his self-command. The greatest hurts he had suffered had been at her hands, and the letter he finished reading as he laboured to settle his breathing and his anger would have been the worst blow of all. The letter had today's date. It committed an unnamed female for treatment for madness. It was signed by Lady Wayford as authorized legal representative of the Earl of Wayford. Behind a cold stern face, he howled at what she had intended for Charis.

"You have been stealing from me, madam." He prowled the room, collecting the rest of the papers and putting them away from her reach and on the other side of the room

from the fire. “I have already dismissed the Wayford solicitors and hired a new firm, whose first instruction is to uncover the dimensions of your transgressions as agent to my predecessor and now to me. I told myself that you kept the earldom together against Osric’s depredations, and retiring you to the status of dowager would be punishment enough. But this,” he shook the letter at her, “changes my mind. You would have condemned Miss Fishingham because I love her?”

“Listen to yourself, Wre—” Eric clenched his fist to remind himself to keep his temper. Lady Wayford caught the movement and showed her first signs of uncertainty, just a small withdrawal, a slight widening of the eyes. “—Wayford. Love is for peasants. You were never meant to be earl, but here you are, and you are choosing a countess. That girl will not do.”

“I am inured to your insults, madam.” A lie, for she continued to flay the little boy inside with her disdain. “You will, however, keep your vicious tongue from Miss Fishingham, who will be my countess within a week. As for your fate, I am still considering.”

She lifted her chin. “Everything I have done, I have done for the earldom, and you will throw away all my sacrifices, all my labours, all my losses for the sake of a girl who let you ruin her? Osric would never have betrayed me so.”

Oddly, this tirade settled Eric. The woman was unhinged, and one could no more expect sense from her than expect an amputee to get out of his bed and dance. “Your servants are currently being given a choice between serving me or being dismissed,” he told her. “I will no longer pay wages to those who do not have my interests at heart. I have instructed all my households and estates to ignore your instructions. I have rescinded the authority my brother gave you to sign on behalf of the earldom, which should have lapsed at his death. I have solicitors and business agents searching for funds and assets you might have put in your name using the earldom’s resources.”

Lady Wayford shrank a little at each revelation but flared at the last. “I am your mother! You cannot...”

“You remember that, after twenty-two years? I am your son, yet you locked me away in the country, ignored me, called me names, allowed my brothers to torment me, then...” Eric took a deep breath and let it out. No point in raking over bones long dead. “I have not made up my mind what to do with you, Lady Wayford.”

He went to the door, taking care to keep Lady Wayford under observation. “Phil, does Lady Wayford still have a maid?”

“I think so. Most of the household have claimed loyalty to you. I wouldn’t trust them, though. I think Ugo and I should stay here overnight, and we should hire some men of your own tomorrow morning.”

Tomorrow morning. When he would need to tell Charis about his title and deal with her response. He would win her; he was determined on it. But after she found out what he’d concealed from her, he might have to win her back.

“Get the maid to show you her ladyship’s chambers and search them for any papers. Once you’ve taken anything she might destroy, I’ll lock her in her rooms, and we’ll have a go at the rest of the house.”

He took another deep breath, and Phillip laid a hand on his arm.

“Are you all right, Eric?”

“I am.” As he said the words, Eric realized they were true, and he searched for more words to explain his feelings to this dear and loyal friend. “Tonight, we are cauterizing the past. Tomorrow, I start my future.”

Charis came down to an empty breakfast room. With luck, the sick headache that had taken Mother off to bed before Charis got home last night would leave her sleeping this morning and postpone the scold Charis expected until after Charis had eaten.

She had barely taken a sip of her first cup of tea when Eugenie and Matilda arrived.

“How are you this morning?” Matilda asked. The twins had been wonderful last night, asking no questions, ordering her a hot bath, helping her brush her hair.

“I am well,” she assured them. More than well. Eric had come to Bath. He had saved her from Lady Wayford’s villains. He had kissed her right on her own doorstep. He was coming to see her this morning.

“What happened to you?” Eugenie asked. “Milly says that John fetched a sore head defending you from an assailant, and that Mr. Parteger and his enormous dog rescued you.”

“That is what happened,” Charis said. “Poor John. Two men tried to make me go with them. Thank goodness Eric arrived in time!

“Eric!” Mother almost spat the name. She swept into the room and stood over Charis. “Do not speak to me of this ‘Eric.’ I daresay he arranged this so-called kidnapping just so he could play hero. I have heard of such things.”

“May I fix you a plate of food, Mother,” Eugenie asked.

“I cannot eat at a time like this,” Mother complained. “Charis is about to ruin our family. Come, Charis. You and I need to talk.”

She stalked out, and Charis stood to follow her but stopped as first Eugenie then Matilda gave her a brief hug.

“She will calm down eventually,” Eugenie consoled.

“Sooner rather than later, I predict,” Matilda added and giggled.

The situation might be funny to the twins, but Charis was not amused. Mama was standing by the parlour fireplace, her arms crossed, one foot tapping.

“You are betrothed to the Earl of Wayford,” she declared. “Your Uncle Benjamin has agreed, and so have I.”

“I have not agreed, Mother, and I will not agree.”

Grisham, the butler, appeared in the doorway, his expression saying that callers at this hour of the morning had abandoned all propriety, but that Grisham would nonetheless do his duty.

“The Earl of Wayford, Ma’am,” he announced.

“See?” Mother insisted, hissing the words in a low voice. “He is eager to meet you.” Her tone changed to the forced social cheer Charis hated. “My dear Wayford. How charming to finally meet you.”

Charis refused to look up. This was a nightmare. How could she possibly be betrothed to two men? She who had never had a single suitor?

How could she get out of this? Would Eric consent to an elopement? Or perhaps he had enough money for them to marry by special license? Would he lose his employment if he married the woman that the earl wanted?

Thinking furiously, she hardly noticed when Mother and the earl finished their conversation. Only when two beautifully polished shoes came into her field of vision did she realize that Mother had left the room and she was alone with... She looked up into familiar and beloved green eyes. "Eric? How did you get here?"

"Charis, I need to tell you..."

"Eric, they want me to marry the earl. I have said I won't, but Mother would not listen. Will you help me to convince her?"

Eric scratched the side of his cheek. "Are you certain you don't want to marry the earl," he asked.

Charis was indignant. "How can you think I would? After we..." She blushed to remember. She was not ruined, Eric had assured her, and would not be because they would be married before he would show her the rest.

Eric's tender smile showed his mind had travelled with hers. "It's just that..."

"Can you imagine me as a countess?" Charis asked.

"Easily," Eric assured her. "I have been imagining you as a countess for ages. Charis, can you just let me..."

The door flew open, and Matilda and Eugenie tumbled into the room, Phoebe just catching herself from falling on top of them.

“You— You—” Charis turned back to Eric, who was trying not to laugh. “They were listening at the keyhole, the little baggages. You girls apologize to...” She couldn’t call him Eric to her sisters.

Matilda did not wait, scrambling to her feet then curtseying. “I beg your pardon, Lord Wayford,” she murmured. Eugenie followed, and then Phoebe, each begging Lord Wayford’s pardon and receiving a polite bow and smile from Eric.

The pieces fell into place. Charis could barely wait until she had pushed her sisters out the door and shut it behind them. “You are Lord Wayford.”

“Yes. I was trying to tell you.”

“You are the wicked earl,” she accused.

“No, that was my eldest brother. He died, you see.”

Charis paused in her tirade, her ready sympathy rising. “I am sorry.”

Eric shrugged. “I barely knew him. And the few memories I have of him are unpleasant. He is the one who said I should not be called Eric, but Freak or Wreck, and my mother called me Wreck from that day on. The Beast of Beastwood Hall was another of his names for me.”

Charis winced but could not be diverted even by Eric’s past sufferings from Eric’s current crimes. “Why did you not tell me who you were?”

“I have been trying, Charis darling.”

“I mean before. When you first came home, or at any time these past weeks.” Was he playing some kind of game? But he had asked her to marry him. Yes, and sought



permission from her guardian.

He was shifting from one foot to another, looking embarrassed. “I should have, I know. But I wanted... Charis, from the moment I became earl, ladies have been trying to marry me. None of them knew me, and few of them cared if they even liked me.”

“You thought I was like that?” Charis looked down at her hands to hide the tears that came unbidden.

“No!” Eric squatted before her, lifting her chin and kissing away the tears. “Never, my darling. Rather the opposite. I thought you might be the one woman in England who would reject me because I am an earl. I’m still afraid you might. You won’t will you?”

Charis was struggling to hold onto her indignation at Eric’s deceit, especially with his eyes so intent on hers. He was so close. If she leaned forward just a bit, she could have one of those heart-stopping kisses. But she did not want to be a countess, did she? Did she, if it meant she was Eric’s countess?

She frowned just as the door burst open again, this time propelled by Ugo, one hundred pounds of wet mountain shepherd dog, barking his delight at having found Eric—yes, and Charis as well.

In moments, the sisters had joined them. Mother, too, all of them screeching when Ugo stopped his frantic greetings to his master and Charis long enough to shake himself and spray the whole room with his burden of rain.

At last, Ugo overcame his excitement enough to listen to the wrath in Eric’s voice and slink behind Charis’s sofa, sliding underneath enough to rest a cold wet chin on her foot. “I am sorry, Mrs. Fishingham,” Eric told Mother. “He must have slipped his collar and followed me.”

Mother managed a weak smile. “He is a—a handsome beast, is he not?”

“He is a wicked creature who thinks charm will fish him out of well-deserved trouble,” Charis said firmly, fixing her beloved with a stern frown.

“Now Cas,” Mother started, her eyes wide with alarm.

“If he wants me to be his countess,” Charis continued, “he will need to realize that certain behaviours are not acceptable.”

“You should never marry expecting a man to change,” Eugenie commented with a sly grin.

“Or a woman, either, I suppose,” Matilda suggested.

“I wouldn’t change a thing about Charis. She is perfect just as she is,” Eric assured them.

“She reads a lot, you know,” Phoebe warned.

“I do, too,” Eric said.

Matilda nodded. “And she often doesn’t listen. I’ve known for weeks that Lord Wayford is the boy who used to live next door. You’ll have to repeat yourself.”

Eric smiled at Charis, his eyes crinkling. “I don’t mind repeating myself.”

Eugenie sighed. “The worst thing is she just goes away. You think she is somewhere, and in her head, she has wandered off somewhere else.”

Eric held out one hand toward Charis. “What do you say, my darling? Where do you

wander to when you go somewhere else?”

He knew, of course. He had always been the one she had wandered to. The one whose absence these past years had left her hollow. The one who had returned and filled her with joy. And just like that, her doubts disappeared. She didn't care a farthing more than she had a day ago for being Wayford's countess. But it seemed the title went along with being Eric's wife.

She sighed, forcing her face into mournful lines, but she also took Eric's hand and spoke before the alarm in his eyes could grow. “I suppose my wandering days are over, Lord Wayford. Why should I wander when you are my home?”

### EPILOGUE

Matilda and Eugenie were waiting for Charis in the foyer to the Upper Assembly Rooms and flew to greet her as soon as she and Eric arrived.

“Cas, you look lovely.” Matilda stood on tip toes to kiss Eric’s cheek in a breach of protocol that would have sent Miss. Middleton into a deep swoon. “You look lovely, too, my lord.”

Eric presented his other cheek for Eugenie’s kiss, his eyes sparkling. “As do the pair of you.”

Matilda twirled. “The shawls you gave us are very becoming, Lord Wayford.”

“Never mind that,” Eugenie scolded. “Cas, how are you? We haven’t seen you for two whole days! We feared you would not attend the Valentine’s Day Ball until Lord Wayford sent a message to say you would be meeting us here.”

Charis blushed, well aware of the curious looks from others in the foyer. “I am well.” More than well. Since she and Eric had made their vows two mornings ago at the church known as St Michael’s Without, she had discovered what Eric meant by ‘other things’. So much so, that they had not left the house and scarcely left their bedchamber.

Eric, the rogue, winked, well aware of the reason for her blush. “Dear sisters, you cannot think I would miss the chance to waltz with my wife, especially at a ball dedicated to lovers. We are late enough to make a grand entrance.”

“No doubt,” Mr. Taverton—Phillip—said, coming up to their little group. “I suspect the whole assemblage is waiting to see the Earl of Wayford with his new countess.”

Eugenie turned up her nose. “I hope you did not mean to surprise anyone. Mother has told everyone of her acquaintance.”

Charis had expected that. Eric had insisted on keeping the betrothal secret while he dealt with his own mother. Mother had been near to bursting with the news for the whole three days before the wedding. It took two of those days for Eric and Phillip to arrange matters. In that time, Lady Wayford was able to steal the carefully planned contents of the safe, escape the house, and take a ship from Brighton, bound for the Continent.

“I can hardly prosecute my own mother,” Eric pointed out to Charis and Phillip, “and I’m the last person to lock someone away at a country manor. This way is better for everyone.”

Eric, bless him, had also found a solution to her own mother. She would move to the Wayford townhouse when the lease Eric had renewed ran out on the townhouse Lady Wayford had organized for them. Living in Bath would suit her very well, and the twins and Phoebe, too, though the girls would also spend time with Eric and Charis in London or on one of their five (five!) estates.

“Her ladyship is wool-gathering again,” Matilda observed.

Eric lifted one of her gloved hands to his lips. “My lady has a great deal on her mind.” The wicked look in his eyes suggested a whole new train of thought and prompted another blush.

“May I escort you in, Miss Fishingham, Miss Matilda?” Phillip winged an arm at each of the twins, and they led the way to the ballroom. Eric raised Charis’s hand and

escorted her in their wake. On either side, the bystanders fell back.

She paced forward at Eric's side, ignoring both the admiring whispers and those less pleasant. The word 'beast' made its way to her ears and had her pressing her husband's fingers so as not to turn around and scratch the speaker's eyes out.

As they paused to be announced, Eric returned the pressure, gifting her with a warm smile. People were already taking their places for the waltz, and Eric led her straight onto the floor. In moments, they were dancing, almost flying, Charis felt so light in Eric's arms. Beast, indeed. How dare they?

"Don't let it worry you, wife," Eric said. "I've been called worse than 'beast.' Beasts are honest creatures and kind according to their natures. Look at Ugo!"

That was true. Charis grinned at her husband, the shadow of the insult lifting as if it had never been. "A truer gentleman I have never met," she acknowledged, then paused for a beat and added, "bar one."

Eric swept her in another turn, pulling her closer as he did. "I bless the day I returned to Beastwood Hall, amore Mio ."

"And I bless the day I found my way through the wood," she replied, "to fall in love all over again with the beast next door."

THE END

1

The farrier plied his business from a workshop on the southern outskirts of the little market town of Reabridge. Or his daughter did. The housekeeper at Dr. Wagner's where Jack was staying had been voluble on the subject of dear Miss Hughes, who needed help now that her father was ailing but was too proud to accept it.

The position of the cottage and workshop was not particularly defensible, Jack noted as he led the two horses through the open gate. Too open, with access not only from the road, but from the lane that ran beside the neat cottage where the farrier presumably lived, and across the fields behind the buildings.

But Jack was in peaceful England, not Spain or France or Mauritius or the Indies or any of the other far-flung lands to which King George had sent his soldiers. Of which Jack was only one because he had not yet officially resigned, and if he wasn't Captain Jack Wrath of His Majesty's 20th Lancers, who was he?

One of the horses took advantage of Jack's inattention to pull sharply away to the right, towards a tub planted with peppermint and chamomile. Jack jerked on the lead rein, and received a hurt look from the other beast, Adam Wagner's patient mount. However, the recalcitrant gelding Adam had loaned to Jack fell back into line.

Jack led them past the dusty curricule that stood outside the barn, its shafts empty, then slowed his steps as raised voices in the barn hinted at an altercation. He sped up again when he caught the words.

"I'll have the constable on him. The man is mad. Locked up, that's what he should

be.” A man’s voice in the crisp accent of the aristocracy, the nasal tones shrill with anger.

“Locked up, is it? I’ll be giving you locked up !” That voice was deeper and rougher, with hints of a Welsh lilt overlaying the Cheshire vowels.

Jack hesitated. What was he getting himself into?

“Father! Keep back!” A woman’s voice, sharp with fear.

“Yes, keep him back,” the aristocrat sneered, “or I’ll shoot him like the mad dog he is.”

“He was only coming to my aid, my lord,” the woman protested. “You cannot blame a father for defending his daughter.”

Jack reached the open doors as the aristocrat growled, “I wasn’t hurting you. You and he both need to learn your place, bitch.”

“What is going on here?” Jack demanded, crisping his own pronunciation into the counterfeit of his so-called betters he had perfected since he was first made up to lieutenant.

The scene within had him dropping the reins and moving forward. The workshop was occupied by three people and two horses, the latter a pair of bays that Jack immediately characterized as more showy than sound.

The aristocrat was much as expected: tall, but with too much flesh for his height. Overdressed for the occasion, with lace at his neck and cuffs, and a coat the colour of squashed strawberries over a maroon waistcoat heavily embroidered in gold. Gold tassels on his boots, too, and gems glinting from his cravat, his fobs, and his rings.



The pistol had set Jack moving. A duelling pistol, heavy on the gilt but not less dangerous for its ridiculous adornments. It was wavering between the two other people in the barn, and the hand that held it was shaking. The pompous lord was scared out of his mind.

The woman stood at bay, her hands held out palms backward as if to restrain the man behind her. She was nearly as tall as the lordling who was nearly as tall as Jack himself. She was muscular, too, with powerful shoulders. Her dark hair, curled like a crown on her head, proudly proclaimed she was a woman. He would have known anyway. Even in an old shapeless coat, men's trousers, and a leather apron she was so exquisitely female that Jack's mouth dried. Her gaze met Jack's, her dark eyes full of defiance, fear, and anger.

Her father topped the rest of them by a head. He was a massive man, big and burly, with iron grey hair and dark eyes like his daughter's. Those eyes were currently wide and dazed, as if something had hit him on the head and knocked him silly.

Jack took in all of that at a glance before the nobleman spoke. "That idiot peasant attacked me," he said. "Call the constable. I want him arrested."

"Is that right?" Jack said, giving the fool an easy smile as he walked closer.

"Yes, dammit. And the female, too. Stupid bitch." The man turned his face toward Jack, baring his teeth in a snarl and displaying the scarlet imprint of a palm on his cheek. "She hit me. For no reason."

"I see," Jack replied, placing his hand on the pistol and pushing it so it was pointed away from father and daughter. Towards the fool's innocent horses, but in the confined space that couldn't be helped. He took hold of the man's hand and squeezed, catching the weapon as it fell. He spoke over his shoulder. "He assaulted you, miss, and your father took exception."

It was a statement, but she treated it as a question, her answer a cautious, “He came up behind me as I was shoeing his horse, and grabbed... and took hold of me in an inappropriate manner. When I protested, he tried to... I slapped him.”

“Oh, come on,” said the aristocrat. “She was wagging her buttocks at me! She wanted it. I didn’t hurt her. Just had a bit of a feel. What sort of a decent woman wears trousers? She was asking for it.”

Part of Jack’s focus was on removing the ball and gunpowder from the pistol, not an easy task with only one working arm, but he was not about to take his attention from the frilled fop. He drawled, “I would suggest the slap was a strong hint your advances were not welcome.”

“Are you going to get the constable to lock this madman up? Or not?” the man demanded.

A simple question with an obvious answer. “Not.” Jack handed the now harmless pistol back to its owner. Perhaps the witless waste of air would see reason if it was pointed out to him. Jack had known it to work with others of his ilk. Though he’d been their superior officer at the time.

“Look, man, if you insist on calling the law, you will find yourself before the magistrate, explaining why you made an indecent assault on a respectable tradeswoman of this town while she worked on your horse, then drew a gun on her father when he came to her aid. The Hughes are known and respected in this town. You are—” he made a guess based on the luggage tied on the back of the curricl— “passing through. You will be lucky to get off with a fine.”

The idiot was taken aback for the briefest of moments, before his self-consequence reasserted itself. He struck an attitude. “I, sir, am Lord Augustus Featherston-Crawford.” He stopped, apparently for applause, for he appeared miffed when none

was forthcoming. “I would think that a Featherston-Crawford would be believed over a pair of peasants.”

“Then you would be wrong, Gussie,” Jack told him. “I imagine they called you Gussie at school? Miss Hughes, are Lord Gussie’s horses ready?”

“That one is,” the woman replied, indicating with her hand. “I was doing the left hind on the second when I felt his lordship’s hands...” she trailed off, shuddering, and Jack was barely able to suppress the urge to punch Lord Augustus’s puffy face. But violence would not be useful in this situation, and besides, he was tired of it.

“Bad form, Gussie,” he growled. The pompous swine opened his mouth to object, but was not stupid enough to persist in the face of Jack’s glare.

Mr. Hughes had wandered away from his daughter and was soothing one of the nervous beasts. “This shoe isn’t on properly,” he declared, lifting a hoof as he leaned into the animal. “Evan! Where is that boy. Here, Gwennie, help your Da. Fetch me that hammer that’s on the floor. I’ll skelp that boy’s bum for him, leaving tools like that.”

The farrier’s daughter scooped the hammer from the floor and a handful of horseshoe nails from the pocket of her apron. She managed to sound like a girl when she begged, “May I have a turn, Da? While you watch?”

The farrier nodded, and let his daughter take the hoof.

“Come along, Gussie,” Jack commanded. He led the other horse out to the curricule, and soon had it harnessed, ordering Lord Augustus to put a hand here or a finger there whenever needed. The lordling objected only the once, but subsided after a glare from Jack.

After a few minutes, Miss Hughes led the other horse out and put it in the shafts. Lord Augustus leapt into the curricule and waited impatiently for her to finish. Jack took the opportunity to spread a little fear to lend wings to the horrid man's heels.

He strolled over to the phaeton, and leaned his hip against the fore wheel. "Better stand away," Lord Augustus advised. He had his whip in his hand, and some of his arrogance had crept back in.

"Before I do," Jack told him, "I want to introduce myself and give you some advice." He made his voice as menacing as possible. Twenty-five years in the army starting as a drummer-boy and working his way up through the ranks to captain meant he did menacing well.

The fool ignored Jack's tone. "You! Girl! Step out of the way!" He raised the whip, but Jack vaulted up the wheel and wrenched the whip from his hand before it could be used—whether to flick the team into motion or to lash at Miss Hughes.

Lord Augustus cowered back in his seat as Jack looked over him. "I am the son of the—," he quavered.

"I am Captain Jack Wrath," Jack told him, his voice a low growl. "I have served King George in far flung lands. I am an expert at killing and maiming. I do not object to using those skills against bullies who pick on women and the elderly. I do not know your father, but perhaps I should ask a duke or two to pay him a visit and explain to him that his son is a waste of good air."

Never mind that the only duke Jack had a nodding acquaintance with was Wellington, who was in Paris and unlikely to listen to a lowly ex-captain about a civilian matter in any case. The threat did what was intended. Lord Augustus, already pale, whitened further.

Jack bent closer. “You have your horses. Pay Miss Hughes the money you owe her and leave. Keep going out of town. You are not welcome in Reabridge.”

“Oh, I say!” Lord Augustus complained.

Jack raised the whip. Lord Augustus pulled a fat purse from the inside pocket of his jacket, and tossed a coin to Miss Hughes, who stepped away from the horses’ heads to catch it.

Jack leapt to the ground and threw the whip up to Lord Augustus, who fumbled the catch and had to scrabble for the whip on the floor before it could slither away. The team was already moving, and the curricule’s rear wheel scraped the gate on its way out before Lord Augustus could straighten and grab the reins.

The curricule turned onto the road away from the town. In Jack’s last sight of the lordling, he was swearing at the horses, who had the bits between their teeth and were not minded to pay attention.

“And good riddance,” said Miss Hughes. “I owe you my thanks, Captain Wrath. Or is it ‘Lord’?”

“Jack will do,” Jack told her, letting his accent relax and a little touch of his East Midlands home creep in. “I’m not a lord. And I am not much of a captain.” He used his good hand to point at the useless arm, buckled to his side with the forearm bound across his chest so that it didn’t flop into trouble. He glared at the empty road down which Lord Augustus had disappeared. “I dislike pompous aristocrats, and I cannot abide bullies.”

As he spoke, he turned back towards the barn, jerked up his head, and then leapt into a run. Adam’s bleeding horses had made a feast out of Miss Hughes’ barrel of herbs.

G wenillan Hughes had to chuckle at the expression on Captain Wrath's face as he sped toward his horses. Embarrassment and irritation mixed, and her keen ears heard the salty words he muttered as he tore past.

He didn't need to fret. Peppermint and chamomile were tough, and would grow again—and besides, she had plenty more in her herb garden.

She followed more slowly, ready to help if he could not control the two animals one-handed. One arm was strapped to his body just above the elbow, with the forearm held across his chest in a sling that was also bandaged in place across his chest. However, it didn't appear to slow him down, and she was cautious of offending his pride. Men could be touchy about what they saw as weaknesses.

"I must apologize, Miss Hughes," he said over his shoulder, as he tugged the first horse away from the barrel and led it a few steps away to the hitching rail. "I heard a little of what was happening inside and just let them go. I should have remembered them sooner."

"I'm glad you came to my rescue," she reassured him. "I could have handled him on my own, except that my father tried to intervene, and then he pulled out a pistol..." she shuddered. This was not the first time a stranger in town had thought her trousers made her a harlot, but it was the first time she'd been threatened with a gun. Slapping their face usually worked, and her backup plan was a hammer between their legs. In one case, lacking a hammer, she had chased a man away with her gelding irons.

It was only the strangers. The men of Reabridge did not see her as a woman at all. Apart from one man the year after Evan disappeared, and he had proved to be a disappointment.

He was one of the few men of her class in the town as tall as she was and had been courting her, she thought. His increasingly passionate kisses promised marriage, for they were both respectable people. Suddenly, with no explanation, he stopped visiting, and when she managed to corner him after chapel meeting one Sunday, he did his best to back away, his eyes darting in every direction for an avenue of escape.

“I’m sorry, Gwen, but you can’t have thought I meant anything by it,” he told her. “I’m betrothed to the dressmaker’s daughter.” The dressmaker’s daughter was at least eight inches shorter than Gwen and would never dream of lifting any implement heavier than a needle.

It took Gwen nearly two years to decide she’d had a lucky escape. A man who will cheat on one woman will cheat on another. Still, no-one else had ever shown an interest.

The second horse decided to dispute the need to move, and Mr. Wrath applied his attention to changing its equine mind. He soon had it under control, using a firm calm voice that expected obedience just as much as the strength of his left arm, which must be considerable.

Gwen was used to large men. Her father and her brother Evan were both taller and broader than most. But Jack Wrath was not just their equal in size. He had a presence that made him seem larger still.

Perhaps that came from being in the army. Would Evan have learned the same way of filling a space and demanding attention? Would she ever know? For a moment, the pit of devastation yawned. Evan was gone. They had not heard from him since he left,

six years ago. Had he married the girl he ran off with? Had he joined the army as he longed to? Was he still alive?

Mr. Wrath was standing before her with the horse, and had said something.

“I’m sorry,” she had to admit. “I was wool-gathering.”

He replied without a hint of irritation. “I said these two horses need to be reshod, Miss Hughes. I believe you received a message from Dr. Wagner’s stables. Are you or your father able to manage them now?”

Bother. She had seen no message. Whoever brought it must have given it to Father, and no doubt he forgot all about it as soon as it was delivered.

“We can manage them now,” she acknowledged. “Would you like me to see to this lovely fellow first?”

“In the orphanage, they told us that Handsome is as handsome does ,” said Captain Wrath. “Sister Joy would not at all approve of calling this stubborn and wilful beast ‘handsome’.”

Captain Wrath had grown up in an orphanage? Gwen filed that piece of information away. “Do you work for Dr. Wagner?” she asked, as she led the way back inside the farriery.

“I am a guest at his house,” Captain Wrath replied.

Father had left the workshop, leaving the door to the cottage open behind him. Should she fetch him? He was happiest when he was working, and she encouraged it, not least because it was easier for her, in some ways. He mostly remembered his craft, even if he forgot everything else. Though his skill with his hands was waning, his



ability to control an awkward horse was still second to none. And when he was here, she did not have to worry about what else he might be doing.

On the other hand, at the moment, only their closest neighbours knew of his problems, and they had no idea how confused he was getting. The more people who saw him, the more likely the townsfolk would discover that his wits had gone wandering. Then, it would only be a matter of time before the farrier in the upper town made her father's condition an excuse to shut her down so he could have the custom of the whole of Reabridge.

"Go check on your father," Captain Wrath advised. "I can wait until you have seen to him."

Gwen opened her mouth to say her father was fine, just as there was a roar of rage from inside the house. She took off at a run, and a crash from the kitchen sped her steps.

What a mess! Da must have become frustrated with something on the dresser, for all the contents of one shelf were on the flagstone floor, most of them in pieces, and Da was sitting in the midst of them. Somewhere in the last few minutes, he must have removed both slippers and socks, for he was weeping over a cut foot.

"Ellen," he said as she entered, slowing her steps to avoid alarming him. "Ellen." As was happening more frequently, he took her for her mother. He lost track of the words he wanted to say, another alarming recent development. He pointed to his bleeding foot. "Hurts," he said.

"Oh, Da." Ellen wanted to weep, too. She grabbed an old apron off the pile of unfolded laundry, tore off a strip, and wadded it into a ball as she squatted down to look at the foot. The blood welling from the cut made it hard to tell how deep it was, but she didn't think anything was still stuck in it. She pressed the ball of fabric onto

the cut and he did not flinch. “Hold that tight, Da, and I will sweep this lot out of the way before you get hurt again.”

“I’ll sweep,” said a voice from behind her. It was Captain Wrath, leaning over her shoulder to look at her father’s strong fingers holding the cloth against his foot. “You see to your father. Where is the broom?”

Gwen thought of objecting to his invasion of her privacy, but it was too late and she needed help too much. “In the scullery,” she told him. “Through that door. Now, Da, let me have a look, then we’ll see about moving you to your chair.”

She sang to him as she checked the cut—an old song that Ma had often sung while she worked. Da was calmer when she sang from her mother’s repertoire. Except when he remembered that Ma was no longer with them, and became distressed.

Today, the song worked its magic, and she was able to take a good look under the cloth. The cut was still oozing blood but not as deep as she’d feared. Da must have stepped on a sharp edge of the broken china that Captain Wrath was swiftly and efficiently sweeping away from her father, one-handed. He had cleared the path to Da’s chair. She supposed he guessed the correct one because it had been made to fit her father’s proportions.

“Should I fetch the physician?” her uninvited guest asked, as she finished tying the cloth on firmly. He had picked up a few items that had miraculously survived the fall and set them on the table, had swept the pieces into a heap out of the way, and had found a hand brush and pan so he could clean any shards out of the cracks between the flagstones. How he would manage those one handed, she did not know.

She idly wondered how a gentleman learned to sweep a floor—for all his talk about an orphanage, he was an officer so he must be a gentleman. “I don’t think it is deep, Captain Wrath. Come on, Da. Let me help you up. Once you are sitting in your chair,

I will bandage your foot for you.”

Da shook his head, but he co-operated when she took his hand to pull him to his feet. Captain Wrath didn’t wait to be asked to help, but put his working hand under Da’s other arm, supported him to stand, and gave Da his support as they hobbled across the kitchen.

Captain Wrath chattered the whole time. “Well, Mr. Hughes, that was a bit of an accident, wasn’t it? Never mind. Your fine lass here will bind it up and it will mend, good as new. Here, let me fetch this box for you to put your foot on. A cushion under it to make it more comfortable? I’ll put some of this fabric over the cushion, Miss Hughes, shall I?” He was suiting action to words, and Da seemed mesmerized by the sound of his voice.

Once Gwen tried to take the cloth away from the foot again, though, Da objected, batting her hand away. “No. Don’t touch. It hurts.”

“I need to bandage it, Da.”

“Don’t call me Da,” he objected. “It makes me sound old. A chit like you should have better manners.”

He had forgotten who she was again. She kept her sigh internal. “I need to bandage it, Mr. Hughes.” She made her voice firm and business-like, though she wanted to lie down and howl.

“There will have been many a time you’ve bandaged a cut on a horse’s leg, Mr. Hughes,” Captain Wrath commented. “What would you recommend for a poultice in such a case as your foot? I had a farrier with my troops who swore by turnip.”

That distracted Da. “Epsom salt and bran is good for drawing inflammation,” he

proclaimed. “Warm, of course. For a fresh wound, honey is best, I find. You are a cavalry man? I’m sorry I don’t think I caught your name.”

“Jack, Mr. Hughes. Just call me Jack. Yes, I’ve been twenty-five years a lancer, man and boy.”

Gwen let out the breath she did not know she was holding. At moments like this, when he could draw on the knowledge he learned as a boy at his father’s knee, Da sounded almost like his old self. But the disappearing memories of his recent past made him confused and angry.

Da was expressing regret for the cruel life of a war horse, and Captain Wrath agreed with every word. “Mind you, I’ve owed my life to my horse many a time, Mr. Hughes. One thing about this stupid shoulder is that I won’t have to see another horse killed in battle.” His voice was grim, and his gaze fixed on something that wasn’t in the room.

The dark mood seemed to shake Da out of his enthrallment with this new friend. Gwen was spreading honey on the cut, and he tried once again to push her hands away.

“Let me tell you about my Tabby,” Captain Wrath said, suddenly cheerful. “I named all my best horses Tabby, after my mentor, Truth Bridgeman. We called him Mr. Bridgeman to his face, of course. But behind his back we called him Tabby.”

Da was listening, intent on every word. Gwen hurried to wrap a proper bandage around the foot, splitting it at the end so she could tie it into a tight knot behind the calf where, she hoped, her father couldn’t find it to undo it.

Meanwhile, Captain Wrath kept talking. “When I made it to trooper and bought my first horse with my first prize money, he had a mane the same colour as old Tabby’s

hair, and a way of looking down his nose as if I'd disappointed him. I called him Tabby as a private joke, and somehow it seemed as if the man himself was with me. My horses have been Tabby ever since."

Gwen sat back on her heels, confident the bandage would hold. "Which one of those outside is Tabby?" she asked.

Captain Wrath shot her a quick smile. "Neither," he confided. "They both belong to Dr. Wagner." The smile faded. "I lost Tabby the Fifth at Waterloo, and I haven't had the heart to replace him." He met Da's eyes and sighed. "War is a terrible thing for men, but it is worse for horses."

Da matched the sigh, then suddenly announced, "It is time for bed." He got up and walked across the kitchen, hobbling only a little. Gwen followed him, to guide him to his own bed if he got confused and finished up in hers or on the sofa in the parlour.

If he made it to a proper bed, he might give her two or three hours to shoe the waiting horses and to do a few other chores. Then he would probably be up in the night, and, dear merciful heavens, she would give her right arm for a good night's sleep.

She rescinded the thought. With Captain Wrath's damaged arm as a horrible example, that was not a bargain she was prepared to make, even as a silent joke.

From his bedchamber window, Jack saw Adam Wagner leave his gig and horse in the care of a sleepy stable boy. The poor man had been called out in the night. Jack had woken the stable boy to harness the horse to the gig and made sure Adam had a good dose of coffee in him to help sober him up, then seen him off and gone back to sleep.

As he clattered down the stairs to breakfast, Jack wondered how the struggling mother and her babe had fared, and shuddered at the memory of the births he'd unavoidably seen in his years in the army. Even the easiest of them looked like hell to his male eyes.

Adam had just entered the kitchen. "From your grim visage I gather it was a difficult night," Jack commented.

Adam favoured him with a brief summary of the night. Patient and mother lived, thank God. Adam didn't go into detail, which meant Jack could enjoy the well-laden plate of eggs and bacon Adam's housekeeper laid before him.

Interesting that most of Adam's comments about the night concerned Miss Margaret Barlow, who was also attending the birth. The woman had clearly got under Adam's skin.

"I hope the surgery is quiet today," Adam said. "If I finish by noon, I'm back to bed."

No doubt only after he emptied whatever bottles he had secreted in his bedroom.

Adam was a good doctor, as Jack had cause to know since he'd saved Jack's life. He was also a good man, even though he was attempting to drink himself to death.

"Do you have any plans?" Adam asked.

Jack had a tentative plan. Miss Hughes needed help, and he could give it to her. She wouldn't hire him, of course. Didn't have the money, probably, and too proud to ask for help, in any case. So, Jack was going to just waltz into the house and start working.

He laid out the problem for Adam. The dotty old man. The woman who was trying to run a business in a man's world while looking after the house and her father. "I can help. Even with my useless arm, I can keep Hughes out of trouble, clean the house, put the kettle on, that sort of thing." And see some more of Miss Hughes. Gwen. What a woman!

Adam sighed. It was obvious he disapproved, and Jack could guess some of the reasons. All Adam said, though, was, "Will they pay you?"

Jack wasn't going to ask. He didn't need the money. What he needed was something useful to do. He said so. "I'm not much use to you," he pointed out. "I can't stop you drinking yourself to death, and I'd make a lousy surgeon's assistant."

Adam's face closed over at Jack's reference to his drinking. Jack should know better than to keep prodding Adam about it, and in truth, it was none of Jack's business if Adam wanted to drown himself from the inside out. But what a waste! Jack couldn't help wanting to fix things.

"I'll be off then," he said.

Adam waved his cup in farewell, and Jack left him to his breakfast.

He strolled through the lower town considering ways to approach Miss Hughes without her turning him away. As the farrier's cottage came into view, there she was. Gwen, his heart said. Stupid heart. What use would a magnificent woman like her have for a broken-down soldier, soon to be an ex-soldier, old before his time, beset by nightmares, with only one working arm, no job, and no idea where he was going or what he would do?

She was harnessing a horse to a little vehicle—something between a cart and a gig, with a gig seat in front and a small cart tray at the back. The frown on her face hastened his steps. She was worried, and he wanted to fix it.

“Good morning, Miss Hughes.”

She turned at his greeting, her eyes widening in surprise. “Captain Wrath!”

As an ex-cavalry man, he recognized the setup in the cart back of the vehicle—the farriers and blacksmiths in the army had carried larger versions of the little portable forge, and the other boxes undoubtedly carried the tools of Miss Hughes's trade.

“Off to work?” he asked, trying to keep the disappointment out of his tone.

“Yes, if...” Relief spread across her face as a boy of about nine raced around the corner of the cottage and skidded to a stop in front of her.

She continued to look in the direction he came, welcome turning to puzzlement. “Is your mother far behind?” she asked the boy.

“Mam can't come,” the boy reported. “Said to tell you she's sorry, Miss Hughes, but Chrissie got too close to the fire, and her apron caught, and Mam's had to take her to the doctor.”



Miss Hughes paled, her eyes widening. “I hope Chrissie is not too badly hurt,” she told the boy. “Does your mother need anything?”

“It’s not too bad, my Mam says. She dropped Chrissie in the rain barrel straight off,” he was backing away as he spoke. “I have to go back and watch the baby. Sorry, miss.” He took off the way he had come.

Miss Hughes nibbled at her lower lip, her eyes full of worry.

“Anything I can do to help?” Jack asked.

Hope lit her face, followed by rejection. “I do not know you, Captain Wrath,” she pointed out. True, but Jack was more and more certain that his heart knew hers. Which surely meant that her heart knew his?

He spread his unbound arm, palm facing her. “I am as you see,” he assured her. “A worn-out soldier, no longer fit for duty, and at a loose end. I came here with Dr. Wagner because I owed him my life and he needed someone to see him home. He will speak for me, if you ask him. But here I am, with nowhere I need to be and nothing to do, after a lifetime of being busy. Will you not let me help you?”

Her teeth worried at her lower lip again, which made it plump and full, and set his body to riot. Which was not what he was here for. He waited. He had said his piece.

He saw her jaw firm with decision a moment before she gave a single nod. She had made up her mind. “Very well, Captain Wrath. I need someone to stay with my father for the day. I have a full day of work today. Customers in town who have enough horses that they want me to come to them instead of them to me, and then the stables of the Duke of San Sebastian.

“I can’t afford to risk the work going to someone else, and I don’t have time to make

other arrangements now that Mrs. Carr can't come, so I am going to have to trust you. You were good with him yesterday."

"I'll keep him as calm as I can, stop him from wandering off, and clean him up if he messes himself," Jack offered, as he obeyed her gesture, which beckoned him to follow her into the house.

"You have cared for someone like him before," she guessed.

"Faithful Bridgeman. He was the superintendent of the orphanage where I grew up. His son Truth—I mentioned him yesterday—took over when old Faithful's memory got too bad for him to continue. By the time I left, we older boys had been taking it in turns to care for the old man for several years." By that time, Faithful had been barely able to speak except in grunts, and had forgotten everyone around him. Mr. Hughes was nowhere near as bad.

Miss Hughes seemed satisfied. She showed him the pantry, told him what her father liked to eat, and explained where to find clean clothes should the old man need them. "He is asleep, Captain Wrath. He sleeps a lot, but he might wake at any time. Please watch for him, lest he wanders off."

Jack nodded. "I once tracked Faithful through Stamford in his nightshirt. I almost lost him altogether, because I stopped to put my trousers on. That was the last time I fell asleep on the job, and in my defence, I was only ten. I got him back safely, though."

She awarded him a brief smile for the story, but the worry did not leave her eyes. "I will watch," he promised. "And I will not let him wander off."

\* \* \*

Gwen could not believe she had left a stranger to care for her father. Something about

Jack Wrath inspired trust, with his anecdotes and his eagerness to be of use. He had a calm way about him, too. Surely such a kind man could not be a villain?

Nevertheless, as she did her rounds, she worried. Was he still there? Had he got busy with something and left her father to his own devices? Had he stripped the house of anything valuable and taken off? How could she have been so rash. By noon, she could resist no longer. She would go home for a bite to eat before visiting the last customer in town and travelling on to the San Sebastian estate.

First, though, she took a little extra time and drove past the doctor's surgery, so she could check what Dr. Wagner thought about his friend. She came away comforted. "He is a good man," the doctor assured her, adding the odd codicil, "Except for his determination to fix anything—and anyone—he thinks is going wrong." Gwen didn't see how that could be a flaw in the man. She was glad of his help.

Back at her home, she soon found her father and Captain Wrath. All she had to do was follow the two voices singing in the kitchen—a somewhat bawdy song about a miller and his customer. Her father's deep bass and Captain Wrath's light tenor wound around one another to turn the silly lyrics into a thing of beauty. On impulse, she joined in the chorus.

"To me right ful la, my diddle diddle lay do,

Right ful, right ful ay."

Captain Wrath turned to smile at her. "That was just what the song needed," he observed. "An alto."

"My Ellen," Da said, smiling. Once again, he thought she was her mother. Gwen had given up arguing with him when he was like this. Captain Wrath put a bowl down in front of him—stew, which he was eating with a spoon. What a good idea! Gwen had

been serving her father on a flat plate, and with a fork and knife. And where did the stew come from? Had Mrs. Carr sent it in apology? Which reminded Gwen that she would have to call by and see how Chrissie was. Poor Mrs. Carr was raising the three children on her own, for Carr had taken the King's shilling rather than be arrested and tried when a political meeting he attended turned violent.

Captain Wrath had filled another bowl. "Are you ready for stew, Miss Hughes?" he asked. "I can make a pot of tea, too. The kettle has just boiled."

"Thank you," she said, taking a seat on the bench next to her father. Jack put the bowl in front of her. "What have you two men been up to today?"

Da was shovelling stew into his mouth. He spoke without waiting to finish the mouthful. "Jack tells stories," he swallowed. "He went to the war." He took another spoonful.

"Did he?" Gwen asked, at a loss for what else to say.

"Damn fool thing to do," Da grumbled. "No good comes of going for a soldier. Thugs and villains."

Gwen took a worried look at Captain Wrath to see if he was offended, but he grinned as he brought his own bowl to the table. All three of them with bowls and spoons, and bread they could tear with their fingers. Well, why not? It was not a formal dinner party.

"Ellen likes us to eat proper," Da said to Captain Wrath in what might be intended as a whisper. He dipped his bread into the soup, scooped soup on to it and lifted it up, dripping, to shove into his mouth.

"It's not the officers' mess," Captain Wrath whispered back. "Proper doesn't count if

it's not the officers' mess." He nudged the bowl toward Da, so more of the soup would fall into the bowl while the bread was being transferred to Da's mouth. Da had a towel tied round his neck, so the rest would at least be easy to clean up. Another good idea.

Father accepted Captain Wrath's explanation, and continued spooning up his stew, while Captain Wrath gifted Gwen with a twinkling smile.

"How has your morning been?" he asked. The kettle whistled again, and he got up to pour the water into the teapot, then brought it, a cup, and a jug of milk to her place at the table. Gwen had not been waited on since she could toddle. It felt both wonderful and slightly uncomfortable. Shouldn't it be her job to serve the food and the tea? But if it did not bother Captain Wrath, why shouldn't she enjoy it?

"Is all well?" Captain Wrath asked.

Gwen collected herself and answered his question. "I have had a busy morning, thank you. Everything is well." What was it about Captain Wrath that scattered her thoughts? "How have you and Da enjoyed yourself?"

"I think it has been a good morning for him," Captain Wrath confided. "He has been talking well, and has accepted me, though he keeps forgetting who I am."

At that moment, Da pushed back from the table and glared at them both. "What are you doing in my house?" he demanded. "Who are you?"

Gwen tensed. Last time he had suddenly had no memory of her at all, he taken offense at having a strange woman in his kitchen and had chased her from the house brandishing a broom.

"I am Jack," Captain Wrath said, "And this is Gwen. You may remember you invited

us to a meal with you.”

Da frowned, but didn’t challenge Captain Wrath’s statement. He pointed. “Something wrong with your arm?”

“Bullet in the shoulder,” Captain Wrath said. “Dr. Wagner says it damaged the nerves and muscles. Now the arm is pretty much just a useless lump of meat.”

Da nodded thoughtfully. “Poacher, was it? Or highwaymen. Not a duel, I hope.”

“No,” Captain Wrath said. “Not a duel.”

“Good,” Da said. He bent over to take a closer look. “No movement at all?”

Jack wiggled the fingers that poked out of the sling. “A little.”

“Hmmm.” Da frowned in thought. “A good sign. Keep it bound so you don’t bang it into things. But make sure you get your wife to exercise it twice a day. Massage, too. Ellen can give you some of my liniment to use. Do the dishes, Ellen, and see this stranger out. I’m going to have a little lie down.”

Gwen was back to Ellen again. She began to get up to see that her father made it up to bed, but Captain Wrath gestured for her to sit. “I’ll do it,” he said. “You finish your meal. I know you have a busy afternoon ahead of you.”

Gwen should have insisted. After all, it was her job to look after her own father. But it was such a blissful luxury to sit and eat a meal on her own; to finish a cup of tea while it was still hot. She had to admit that Captain Wrath was handling her Da well. Better, in fact, than she did.

The least she could do was offer him the liniment Da mentioned, and help him

exercise his arm. Unless he had a wife. He had not mentioned a wife.

Miss Hughes left after finishing her cup of tea, but when she heard he didn't have anyone to massage his arm for him, she said she'd do it when she got back. He probably should not accept. Adam had offered. Even done it once or twice when he was sober. Jack could afford to pay someone, in any case.

But Miss Hughes was a farrier, and used to treating muscle injuries. On horses, but presumably her experience would count for something. Who was he kidding? He wanted her hands on him. Behave yourself, Jack. She's a respectable woman .

Mr. Hughes slept for long enough that Jack was able to wash the dishes, clean up the kitchen and the little scullery, and hunt around to see what he could prepare for dinner. Miss Hughes had a link of sausages in the pantry, which was probably what she intended to cook tonight. No vegetables other than potatoes in a crock on the floor, but he found carrots, parsnips, and turnips in the garden. He pulled a few and scrubbed them clean.

He had a light hand with pastry, so he made a small apple pie with some apples he picked from the tree, put it in a pot, and raked some embers away from the main fire to sit the pot in, putting a shovel full of embers on top.

When the old man woke up, Jack had to explain who he was again, but after that, Mr. Hughes was quite amenable to stacking wood—Jack had noticed that more needed to be brought from the wood shed to replenish the wood pile by the kitchen door.

They sang again, old country ditties, some of which Jack had never heard before. Mr.



Hughes had a rich voice with a wide range, and knew some very provocative lyrics that Jack hoped the man never sang in front of his daughter. She would probably think Jack taught them to her father, whereas the reverse was the case.

After that, Jack rescued his pie from the fire and put it in the pantry to cool. He cleaned the hearth, and then he and Mr. Hughes sat and played checkers, until Mr. Hughes got frustrated and upset the board. He had forgotten the rules, and his speech was fading, too, as the day drew on. Jack suggested a stroll in the cottage's little orchard, and beguiled the minutes with a story about the time he and his men camped in an orchard in Portugal, and were so hungry they roasted and ate green apples, despite the sour taste.

“We all had a small portion, but in the night, we discovered that two of the privates had decided to finish what was in the pan. They were betrayed by their groans. The revenge of the green apples.”

Mr. Hughes chuckled, though whether at the story, his own memories, or because he liked the sound of Jack's voice, who could say? The sun was about an hour from the horizon, by Jack's reckoning. Would Miss Hughes be home by dark? Should he have dinner ready for her? Should he cook for Mr. Hughes if she was delayed? He began another tale to keep Mr. Hughes entertained.

\* \* \*

Gwen was late home. She had been unable to finish the work at the San Sebastian stable. For one thing, they had been saving problems for her to attend to when she came. For another, she had been called away in the middle of the afternoon when a cart horse on a nearby farm threw a shoe and brought an entire team of harvesters to a halt while someone ran for the farrier.

Even if she had finished the estate's shoeing, she'd have to return with medications

that she had in her stores but hadn't taken with her. No matter how often she reminded her customers to let her know if she needed to come prepared for any particular problem, they usually forgot to let her know before she arrived with her cart.

And now she would have to cook dinner and prepare her father for bed. He is all I have, she reminded herself, and has loved me all my life. Looking after him now is my privilege. Even if, on nights like tonight, it felt more like a burden.

She walked into a warm kitchen where her father sat nodding by the fire, clean, dry, and fed, and a meal waited for her in a covered dish, keeping hot on a pile of embers.

Captain Wrath waited only long enough to ask after her day, make her a pot of tea from the kettle that was waiting on the stove, and agree to return the next day. "We can save my treatment until tomorrow," he said.

He was there all the next day, and every day after. It proved to be a busy week. She managed to put in two busy mornings at the farriery, with a succession of horses to be shod or treated for some injury or illness. Otherwise, she was out in her cart, travelling from stable to stable, busy all day long.

She did not leave each day, though, until Jack—he was Jack to her now—had stripped to the waist so she could move his arm in a series of exercises and then massage his arm and shoulder.

She tried to pretend—to Jack at least—that it was no different to treating a horse. She had never reacted to a horse the way she did to Jack's naked torso, which was a thing of beauty, for all it was covered in dozens of scars, each of which had a story.

He had a little movement in his fingers, but otherwise the arm hung from the shoulder, unresponsive. He and Dr. Wagner had devised the belt, sling, and bandage

to stop it from flailing about and banging into things as he moved. He could get into the device himself, manoeuvring his arm into his shirt and jacket, and then catching the tag end of the belt in his teeth, wrapping it around his back and over the damaged arm, and placing his barely usable hand so the fingers could trap the buckle while he worked the tag into it with his other hand.

Then it was just a matter of fitting the shaped sling over the arm. What she had thought was a bandage was sewn into the elbow so he had only to wrap it across the arm and around the body, and tie it off with a couple of deft one-handed knots.

“Thank you,” he said politely the first time, when she asked if she could help, “but if you don’t mind, Gwen, I like to do what I can for myself.”

When he suggested that she call him Jack, Gwen had been unable to resist the urge to hear her name on his tongue. He is just filling in time and doing a good deed, and you are a fool to fall in love with him, Gwenillan Hughes. A great tall streak like you, doing a man’s job and too smart for your own good.

Each day, it was a pleasure to return to her peaceful house, where a cup of tea was always ready. A pleasure, too, to have a contented father, who sometimes recognized her and sometimes not, but nonetheless had been kept happy enough to welcome her, whether it was for a short break between customers or at the end of a long day’s work. Except for the first night, Jack always stayed to have dinner with them, and afterward for a second round of exercises and massage.

They were precious moments, though she took care to make sure that the door was locked and her father occupied elsewhere. Her reputation would never survive other people knowing she had put her hands on a half-naked man, and she needed to keep her good name safe. It was too late to save her heart, so she might as well enjoy his company while she had it. Her pride and dignity—those she could also keep, as long as she never gave him any hint about how she felt.

In bits and pieces, she learned about his life and told him about her own. “You have seen the world,” she said to him one evening, as she washed the dishes and he dried them. “I have seen this town and a few of the nearby villages. And Chester, once.”

Jack gave a rueful twist of his lips. “I have seen mud, dust, the rump of the horse in front of me, and the glint of a rifle barrel in the trees. All countries look the same from a column on the march. And when we sit around a fire in camp, those soldiers who are off seeing the world talk about how they yearn for their little town or their tiny village.”

“Did you?” Gwen asked.

“Yearn for the place of my childhood? Often. Familiar sounds or sights would take me home. Or scents. Scents especially. I would walk down a dusty street in a hot town, foreign birds making an alien racket in the wrong kind of trees, surrounded by people I didn’t know dressed in ways I’d never seen and talking in languages I didn’t understand. Then out of the blue I’d walk past a spice shop and catch a whiff of cinnamon and nutmeg. In a moment, I was transported to Sister Heart’s kitchen, and the spiced buns she would make as a treat when one of us went to be apprenticed.”

“Sister Heart? Was she the cook at the orphanage?”

“She was, though the other sisters took turns helping her, we older children did, too. It was not... I have talked to other orphans, and they grew up in grim places, where they were yelled at, beaten and half starved. I was one of the lucky ones. It was not an official place, just a family home that took in babies and little children, and treated us as if we belonged.”

He paused as he left the scullery to hang a pot on the pot rack, but continued the story when he returned. “While I was there, we never had fewer than twenty orphans in the house, and the Bridgemen family as well: Father, son, and four sisters. How they paid

for us all, I have no idea. They must have raised money somehow. We wore cast off clothing donated by supporters and ate plain food, but we never went hungry. We slept three to a bed—five, for the littlest ones, but we were not cold. We had chores to do, but we were not worked from dawn to dusk.”

He took the second pot through and returned.

“It certainly does not sound like any orphan asylum I have heard of,” Gwen acknowledged.

Jack nodded. “We had our letters and numbers to learn, too, and those of us who showed promise were kept to our books even after we could read and do a bit of adding and subtracting.” He chuckled. “I didn’t appreciate it at the time. I was glad of it when I was first promoted.”

“A battlefield promotion?” Gwen asked, and the conversation moved away from his childhood and on to his career in the army. She already knew he had made his way up through the ranks, which was vanishingly rare.

She’d like to hear more about the Bridgemans and the orphanage, but she would take any stories of his life he was prepared to share with her.

She was a sad case.

For the rest of that week, Jack spent every day at the Hughes' cottage, arriving after breakfast and walking back to Adam's place in the dusk. On Saturday, though, when he mentioned the next day, she said, "No need, Jack. Tomorrow is Sunday. I don't work on a Sunday."

It was on the tip of his tongue to ask if he could come anyway; perhaps escort her to church. Chapel, rather. She and her father were dissenters, following the religion of the Welsh valleys as Mr. Hughes' father had before them. Which was fine with him, for he had been raised by a family of Puritans whose flavour of dissenting was all their own. If he had any religion at all, it was that of his childhood, and not the Church of England to which an officer had to pay lip service in order to progress in the ranks.

Before he could ask, she said, "Father and I will have a quiet day, just the two of us. Take the day to yourself, Jack, for I mean to be selfish and ask you to come back on Monday, if you are not bored with us. If you can spare the time."

That was progress, for it had always been he who offered, not she who asked. He arrived on Monday with a hopeful heart.

This week was even busier than the last. He only saw Gwen in bits and pieces, as she rushed from one job to another, managing a rush of clients and a mix of work.

"Harvest time is always busy," she said. "The gentry are preparing for the hunting season, too."

As a cavalry man, Jack knew just how important a farrier was, managing not just the essential shoeing and hoof care, but also equine illnesses and injuries. Gwen was clearly much in demand. Too much, in Jack's opinion. At least he could take some of the burden by looking after Griffith Hughes and making sure to have a hot meal ready for her when she arrived home.

Twice more, Adam had warned him to be careful of Gwen's reputation and his own heart. The latter was lost already. Perhaps it had been when he first saw her facing down Ghastly Gussie.

With that in mind, he kept reminding her of his irregular origins, with stories about the orphanage and about his years as a drummer boy and then a trooper. And every time she accepted his story without a blush or a criticism, he tumbled deeper in love.

Two days before the Harvest Festival Jack had been hearing about since he arrived in the town, Gwen joined them for the midday meal as usual. After, she announced that she was going to spend the afternoon in her still room, replenishing her medicinals. Jack would have enjoyed more time with her, but was kept busy with Griffith, who was having a testy day. I'm a bit cross myself, Griffith. There she is, the darling, just on the other side of the wall, and here I am chasing you around the cottage .

Well. There was no use being upset with the old man. Jack sometimes thought the worst days were the ones when Griffith was most aware of the holes where most of his memories and his old skills should be.

"He won't help with the chores or settle to spillikins or cards," he reported to Gwen when she emerged from her stillroom. "He refuses to sing, and he makes loud screeches when I try to tell him a story. If you don't mind, Gwen, I'll hire a pair of riding horses and take him out for a ride. I can keep him on a leading rein."

"I'll come along, if you can make it three horses," Gwen said. "I am almost done

here, and I've earned the rest of the day off. Go and fetch the horses, Jack, and I'll watch Father while I make us some food to take with us."

Some things, it seemed, Griffith remembered. He easily mounted the steady horse Jack had hired—a large placid cob that the stable master at the inn recommended. Gwen might think she had kept her father's condition secret, but the stable master knew. Adam's housekeeper knew. Jack wondered how many other people were aware. If so, they should be ashamed for leaving his poor darling to try to manage father, house, and business on her own.

He hastened to mount his own horse. Griffith was anxious to be off, and was becoming frustrated when his horse refused to obey his commands. It wouldn't ignore the lead reins that tethered it to Gwen's horse and Jack's.

"This was a wonderful idea," Gwen said half an hour later. She had taken them to an idyllic spot by the river. As soon as Jack spread the blanket for their al fresco meal, Griffith had commandeered it to wrap himself in and had gone to sleep. Jack put his coat down for Gwen to use instead.

She sat on one side, her knees and ankles decorously together, her sensible half boots off the edge of the coat. "There's room, Jack," she said. "Come and share."

Jack shook his head. "Not a good idea, Gwen. I cannot sit that close to you and keep my hands to myself."

She looked puzzled. "Do you mean that you want to touch me? As if...? Jack, what do you mean?"

Perhaps he'd be off to hell in a hand basket, but he could not resist just once telling her how he felt. He would regret it if she sent him packing, as she should, but just once, he wanted her to know.



“I want to touch you.” It was a ravenous growl. “I want to kiss you until you don’t remember anything but my name. I want to devour you, Gwen, and if you have the least sense of self-preservation, you’ll let me sit over here while you sit over there.”

Was that a flare of interest in her eyes? Heaven help them both if it was, for her father was no sort of chaperone at all, being sound asleep.

Then she floored him. “You don’t have to pretend to desire me, Jack,” she said. “I know I am too tall, too old, and too manly. Believe me, Jack, I know what they think. The only man who has ever kissed me told me to my face that I was a fool to think he was truly interested.” She shrugged. “I don’t know why he pretended. And I am much older now.”

For a moment, Jack couldn’t think of a word to say, then he strode over to where she sat and lowered himself to sit beside her, so close that his thigh touched hers all the way to her bent knee. “Let me prove it to you,” he said. “May I kiss you, Gwen? Please?”

She stared at him, and her eyes gave him hope. Definitely interest. Curiosity, too, if he was not mistaken, and a touch of longing. She nodded.

His muscles quivered with the effort he made to restrain himself. “I cannot touch you without your permission. Words, Gwen. Yes or No?”

“Yes.” It was a whisper, and did not satisfy her, for she repeated it louder. “Yes, please, Jack.”

He started carefully, his hand cupping her face, his lips gently covering hers, moving to caress and stroke. She must have been kissed before, because she responded instantly, and opened her mouth to trace his lips with her tongue.

He deepened the kiss. She had not been kissed very well, or perhaps it had been a long time, for her every response was hesitant and then enthusiastic. She was proving to be a fast learner. As Jack's hands found her luscious curves and her own hands stroked his back, he was in sore danger of losing all control.

He drew back, panting. "We have to stop, my love, before I cannot."

She looked as dazed as he felt, but she squeezed her eyes shut and then gave her head a quick shake. "You do not have to address endearments to me, Jack," she said, opening her eyes again. The haze of passion was gone, and a bleakness remained. "I know what people think of me."

Jack's voice was sharp. "Look at me, Gwen."

"Don't take that tone with me, Jack Wrath," she snapped back.

It was his turn to shut his eyes. He took a deep breath and gazed into her eyes. "I apologize. I am not angry with you. I am furious at all the fools who have made you feel this way about yourself. You call yourself too tall. You are the perfect height for me. If we were standing, I could kiss you without my neck and back complaining for hours after. If we danced, I would not be afraid of crushing you." Danced was not the first activity that had come to mind.

"You are eleven years younger than me," he continued. "I am too old for you, I know. I don't know if I'll ever have the use of my arm. I have been at war for twenty-five years and have nightmares about the things I've seen and the things I've done. Heaven help you, Gwen, for I've decided I'm not going to let that stop me from trying to win you. I won't blame you if you turn down this broken old man, but you? Too old? What rubbish. You are still in your twenties. You are a young woman."

She was staring at him, wide eyed, as if he was speaking in a foreign language of

which she knew only a few words, and she was not sure he was saying what she thought she was hearing.

“As for manly,” he scoffed, “I have felt your curves, remember. Yes, and seen them, too, when you bend over to shoe a horse.”

She frowned at that. “It’s not my shape that I mean. I assume from the times I’ve been accosted it is well enough. Jack, you must have seen that I don’t behave like a woman. I run the farriery. I bargain with my customers and the merchants I buy from. I do business like a man, and I do not let any man tell me what to do.”

“You are a strong determined woman. It is one of the reasons I’ve fallen in love with you. You can hold your own in a man’s world, and you do. I respect you more than I can say. I like you, too. We have become friends, have we not? We work well together, and we never run out of things to say to one another. We laugh at the same jokes. I want to be with you forever, Gwen.”

She frowned, more in bewilderment than rejection, he hoped. “You are suggesting marriage because we are friends?”

His irritation took over for a moment, and he grabbed her hand and put it on the fall of his trousers, behind which his cock was an obvious and insistent presence. “Does that feel as if I just want a friendship?” he growled, then let go of her hand, his cheeks heating. “I beg your pardon. I should not have done that.”

Gwen ignored his words. The way his body spoke was much more interesting. The hard length under her exploring hand grew impossibly harder and larger, and his whole body quivered as she stroked her hand up and then down.

She spread her thumb and curled her hand around the girth as far as she could, given the concealing fabric of his trousers. The evidence of his desire.

She had a theoretical knowledge of human mating, gained mostly from her observations of horses and a little from listening to others talking. Men who forgot that their farrier was female and shared bawdy tales in her hearing. Women who thought her age exempted her from the usual care they exercised in front of maidens.

Remembering what she had heard, she squeezed. Jack groaned as if in pain, and Gwen nearly snatched back her hand, but then his hips thrust forward to encourage her, and she tried the same manoeuvre again.

For a moment, he remained still for her explorations, but all too soon, he put his hand on her wrist, not grasping but just halting her movement. “Enough, Gwen. I am holding on to my reason by a thread, but I’ve enough sense to realize that someone could come along at any moment, or your father could wake up.”

He had a point. She reluctantly let go. He gathered her close to him with his good arm and pressed a kiss to her hair. “Believe me, there is nothing I want more than to let you explore my body, and to explore yours in my turn. In private, though, my Gwen, and with the benefit of marriage. Are you my Gwen?”

She rested her head on his chest and put her arms around him as far as they would go. Her heart and her desire screamed Yes in unison. But what would become of Da? What of the business? She had kept it going not just so she had a roof over their heads and food to eat, but so Evan would have something to come home to. Wouldn't it be selfish to put her own wants and needs ahead of those of her family?

“How would it work, Jack? My home is here. My work is here. My father needs me.”

He kissed her hair again, his hand stroking her nape. “You have a home and a life. I don't have a home, and I've lost the only life I know. If you are willing, Gwen, I would like to share yours. I don't know exactly how that would work. We would have to decide that for ourselves. Together.”

It sounded too good to be true. “We are courting then?” she asked.

“If that's what you need,” he confirmed. “Courting, and then, when you are ready, betrothed.”

“If we can decide,” she cautioned. “If we are both happy to go ahead.”

“I will be happy with whatever makes you happy,” he assured her. “But shall I tell you what I think our life might be like?”

She nodded. This was probably a dream or a mistake, and tomorrow or the next day it would all fall apart. In the meantime, she would enjoy it.

“I'd like you not to have to work so hard,” he said. “Is it like this all the time, or is it the season? Have you thought of taking on another person?”

Gwen shrugged. Thought of it over and over, and done her budgets to see if she could make it work. “The trouble is I am a woman,” she pointed out. “Men do not want to

work for a woman, but they might pretend just to get a job, and then refuse to take my orders. And would a stranger treat my father with respect? And if I choose the wrong person, might they take my customers and set up on their own?"

"But you need more help," Jack insisted, "or am I wrong?"

"The work is there," Gwen confirmed. "We used to support three farriers—my father, Evan, and an apprentice, with me helping out when things were busy. I used to have time to make garden ornaments and fancy hinges and other frivolous things. We had a cook and a housemaid, too. But Evan left and the farrier across the river stole our apprentice, and Da..." she shrugged helplessly. "On my own and with Da to care for, it is all I can do to earn enough to pay our bills."

"I can provide money to take a chance on an assistant," Jack told her. "I've won a few prizes and found a bit of abandoned treasure over the years, and most of the money has been invested. And I haven't yet resigned from the army. I'm on the invalid list, and half pay. We could afford to hire one man to start with and then take on an apprentice when business picks up. You'd have to interview the applicants, but I could sit there and look grim."

Gwen smiled at the thought, for he was usually so mild, but then she remembered him taking Lord Gussie's whip and decided he could look grim when he had to. It sat poorly with her, though, to give up her business to a husband, however loved.

Jack seemed to know that without being told. "You would be in charge, Gwen, never doubt it. But I can make sure they respect you and your father. And I've seen your frivolous things. You're an artist, Gwen. There's a market for the things you make, and I'd love for you to have time for them."

She twisted so she could look up into his eyes. That could actually work! "If your arm heals, will you go back to the army?" She didn't think she could bear it if he left,

too.

He shook his head. “Not a chance. Even if I could bear to be separated from you, Gwen, I couldn’t go back to that life.” He shut his eyes and took a deep breath. “No. The army and I are finished. They have no claim on me. I did the twenty years I signed up for, and five more besides. As an officer, I didn’t have to sign up again. Once I’ve resigned, I still have money enough for a wife. I get around two hundred pounds a year in interest, and sometimes a bit of a bonus when a ship I’ve invested in reaches harbour. With what you earn, we could also pay for a housemaid and someone to do the laundry. Or a cook. A cook would be good.”

Two hundred pounds a year! “It is a fortune,” she protested.

“Not a fortune, but enough for a family to live on in a country town.”

She settled back onto his chest. “I thought soldiers spent all of their money on gambling, women, and drink,” she said. “That’s what Father told Evan.”

She could hear his chuckle rumble in his chest. “I did some of that when I was young,” he admitted. “But it isn’t as much fun as you might think when Truth or one of the other sisters visits your dreams or whispers in your drunken ear.” He managed a good imitation of a woman’s quavering voice. “Wrath, I am disappointed in you. We raised you better than that.”

“My mother’s voice in my head sounds exactly like that,” Gwen mused. She remembered a question she had been wanting to ask him. “Wrath is an unusual surname. Was it your mother’s name?”

Another rumbling chuckle. “It is actually my first name,” he admitted. “Or part of it. Mind you, I have been Jack Wrath for more years than I was Refrain-from-Anger-and-Forsake-Wrath Thursday. Wrath for short. My mother’s name was Thursday, so

Sister Heart told me. Magdalen Thursday. Sister Heart collected me from the brothel where my mother died birthing me. I have always thought she must have been an orphan too, with the christened name Magdalene and a surname like Thursday. Some orphanage supervisors have no imagination.”

Gwen was still thinking about Jack’s name. “Your Tabby named you for a bible verse?”

“Not him. His father Faithful, or more properly, He-Will-Guard-the-Feet-of-His-Faithful-Servants Bridgeman.”

“I am beginning to see a pattern,” Gwen noted.

“You are correct, of course, my clever love. He named those orphans who arrived nameless in the same way he was named, and the way he named his children. He opened the bible at random, then hunted the surrounding verses to find one that the child could live up to.”

“Truth?” she asked.

“Sanctify-Them-by-the-Truth Bridgeman. And before you ask, the sisters were Heart, Blessed, Meek, and Joy. My-Heart-Rejoiceth-in-the-Lord, For-the-Lord-Thy-God-has-Blessed-Thee, The-Meek-Will-He-Guide-in-Judgement, and Your-Sorrow-Shall-be-Turned-Into-Joy.”

Gwen’s arms tightened in an effort to comfort. “I am sorry,” she said. She tilted her head to look up, and he was staring at her, his eyes narrowed in bewilderment.

“Sorry for what?”

“For your loss.”



He shook his head. "My loss?"

"You said 'were'. I thought you meant they were dead."

"I wouldn't know," Jack admitted. "I ran away to join the army, and I have never been back."

Like Evan. Or did Jack have good reason to abandon and ignore the people who raised him? "Were they unkind to you, Jack?"

His brow furrowed again, and he made almost a question of his answer, drawing out the single syllable. "No?"

"Oh. I thought that might be why you did not keep in touch."

"It was me, not them," he admitted. "I thought about at least writing a letter, but by then it was a couple years later. I figured they would have forgotten about me. They must have been angry at me running off, in any case. They disapproved of fighting and of war. I daresay they haven't given me a thought since I left."

Gwen couldn't let that pass. "They think about you every day. They wonder if you are still alive. They search the casualty lists for your name and give thanks when it doesn't appear. They remember you in their prayers. They worry that you are dead or badly wounded, and that they will never know. They write to the war office to ask for reassurance, but they never hear back. Not even just a small note."

He wiped under her eye, and examined the drop of water he brought away on his thumb as if it was a diamond. "Your brother?" he asked, the sympathy in his voice her undoing. Gwen buried her head in his shoulder. "Family should not ignore family, Jack. Are they not your family?"

\* \* \*

The question stunned Jack. Were the Bridgemans his family? “Perhaps they are,” he mused. “Certainly, I never had another.” Her attentive silence drew a confession from him. “I used to wish they’d write to me.” He chuckled at his own foolishness. “Not that they knew where I was, or even what name I was using. I could have written to tell them. I should have, I suppose.”

How did he explain that he was afraid that the people he loved would ignore his letter. If he never wrote one, he could pretend they were waiting to hear from him. If he told Gwen that, surely she would despise him.

“They hated war, Gwen,” he told her. “When I ignored their teaching and went for a soldier, they must have been disgusted, surely?”

“War!” The snort of disgust came from Griffith. “Only a fool goes for a soldier.”

Gwen had moved away from Jack at the first sound from Griffith. “Time to go home,” she said.

Jack helped her to ready the horses, roll up the blanket and persuade Griffith to mount. He was disappointed and relieved in equal measure that their intimate conversation was over. She’d given him a lot to think about.

“I’ll take the horses back,” he offered, when they arrived back at the Hughes’ cottage.

“Thank you, Jack,” Gwen said. “Just wait one moment?”

She led her father to the door and sent him into the house with a whisper in his ear, then hurried back to Jack, who had tied the horses to the hitching rail and waited beside them. “I told him to set up the checkers,” she said. “Kiss me, Jack?”

He did not need to be asked twice. She came into his one-armed embrace so sweetly, lifting her lips for his, and the tenderness that welled in his chest kept his initial forays gentle, but she opened her mouth under his ministrations and when her tongue tangled with his, he could not resist deepening the kiss.

The passion with which she responded was almost his undoing. It was as well that Griffith shouted from inside the house, and called Gwen back to her senses. "I must go," she said, her hand lingering in his.

"Shall I escort you to chapel tomorrow?" Jack asked. It was an impulsive offer, but it felt right when he said it.

She blushed and smiled. "Of course. We are courting, are we not?" She had taken two steps away when she thought of something else to say. "Jack, perhaps your family is longing to hear from you. You will never know unless you ask."

He let her have the last word, bent to place one last sweet kiss on the corner of her mouth, and led the horses away. He returned them to the inn, his mind still on her untutored but enthralling response, the taste and the scent of her.

He paid little attention to conversation with the ostler, responding almost at random. The path from the inn stable to Adam's house required even less thought, since he'd walked it twice a day for more than a fortnight.

She thinks herself undesirable. At least he had been able to show her undeniable physical evidence that he, at least, wanted her desperately. He groaned as he remembered her enthusiastic explorations.

What is wrong with the men of Reabridge? It had worked to his advantage, since she was still single, and willing to allow him to court her. But their neglect of her had caused her pain, and he would wipe that away, if he could. Though I am not saint

enough to wish her married and happy, and therefore lost to me.

So lost in thought was he that it must have been his soldier's instincts that had him twisting out of the way of the assailant who leapt from a narrow alley between two shops. He stuck a boot in the way of the man's legs, and the villain's own speed sent him crashing head first into the pole that supported the shop's awning.

Just as well, for a second man rushed Jack, this one with an upraised stick that would have done damage if Jack hadn't ducked under it and come up swinging. A fist to the jaw saw this attacker laid out on top of the other one.

A third man lingered in the alley.

"Come out," Jack invited, his fighting spirits high. Even lacking the use of his arm, he'd flattened two men. "There's more where that came from."

"I don't want any trouble," quavered the alley lingerer.

"I won't attack you if you don't attack me," Jack offered, peering into the shadows.

Slowly, sidling along the wall of one of the shops, the man approached. Like the two groaning their way back to consciousness beside him, the third man was respectably dressed—a tradesman, merchant, or clerk, at a guess.

Not the sort of ragged denizen of the slums that Jack expected, and all strangers to Jack. Theft? Some sort of vendetta against out-of-towners?

"What's this about?" Jack asked the third man.

One of the others began to struggle upright as he replied. "Leave Gwenillan Hughes alone! We saw you, kissing her in the doorway, leading her astray with your foreign

ways.”

The third man seemed to take heart from the revival of one of his accomplices, for he said, “Poor old man Hughes might not be able to protect her anymore, but she isn’t without friends. If you hurt her, you’ll have half the town after you and you’ll not be able to use your fancy fighting tricks on everyone.”

His words gave Jack a clue to the missing pieces of the puzzle that was Gwen Hughes. “You’ve been chasing off her suitors!” Jack accused.

“We’ve been looking after her,” protested the third man. “We promised Evan we’d watch out for her.”

“And she does not know a thing about it, does she?” Jack speculated. “That’s why she thinks she is undesirable and unmarriageable. Because you have scared off anyone who so much as looks at her.”

The two men gaped. The one who had attacked first spoke without opening his eyes. “Undesirable? Gwen Hughes? Hasn’t she looked in a mirror?”

“She’s stunning,” one of the others said. “That’s why Evan wanted us to warn off anyone who might give her a slip on the shoulder.”

Jack shook his head. “And you never said a word to her, right? Come along, gentlemen. We are going to go and explain to Miss Hughes exactly what you have been up to.”

\* \* \*

Gwen could scarcely believe it. No, that wasn’t true. She could well believe that Evan had thought to protect her after he was gone, and that his idiot friends had carried out

his instructions with a heavy and indiscriminate hand. Come to think of it, Evan himself had intimidated a suitor or two when she was still a girl. If he was here, he'd probably be proud of his friends.

She wished he was here. He was her brother and she missed him. Even if he was over-protective, bossy, and a terrible letter writer.

The three men shuffled their feet and turned their caps in their hands as they responded to her interrogation with the names of some of the men they had chased off over the past few years. It was impressively long, and the man she'd thought was courting her nearly six years ago was up near the top of it.

They were a bit ashamed of that one. They had not been keeping as close an eye on her as usual, since two of them had just got married and the third was away on his quarterly training with the militia. "I came back and saw him with you at the festival," he said. "Had his hands all over you, he did, in the bushes down behind the church. He didn't hurt you, did he, Gwen?"

"Only when he abandoned his courtship," she retorted. "You fool. Didn't you think to ask him his intentions?"

They exchanged glances and shuffled their feet some more.

"Just to be clear," she told them, "Jack Wrath has asked to court me. So, you will keep your noses out of my business, if you please."

"But Gwen," one of them protested, "he's a stranger. How do we know if he is good enough for you?"

"And what business is it of yours?" she retorted. "I am a grown woman, and will make up my own mind. Now off you go, and stay out of my affairs, or I shall tell

your wives what you have been up to. I'll tell your mothers, furthermore, and see if they don't box your ears for you."

Jack left with them, but knocked to be let in again some ten minutes later. "I told them that I know I'm not good enough for you, but if I am lucky enough to win you, I will spend the rest of my life striving to make you happy," he reported.

"What business is it of theirs?" she asked again, as she moved into his one-armed embrace.

"Did I do the right thing by making them come to tell you what they have been up to?" he asked. "Does it help to know I am not the only one to have found you attractive?"

"You are the only one to ignore their intimidation," she pointed out.

"I've faced the French Imperial Guard, my love," he said, "and the Iron Duke. Three slightly flabby townsfolk are hardly a challenge." He kissed her nose. "I was furious on your behalf when I realized what they'd been doing, and I still want to give them all a good kicking. But at the same time, I am grateful that they were so presumptuous and so foolish. Someone could have stolen your heart years before I even came here, and where would I be now?"

She lifted her face so that the next kiss landed on her lips. "Perhaps I should bake them a cake," she suggested.

"We could invite them to the wedding," he suggested. "Will you marry me, Gwenillan Hughes? Will you be my wife, my partner, my friend? I worry that I am older than you, and I have too few years ahead of me to offer you. I worry that I have spent my life as a man of war and I will wake you with my nightmares. But I love you, my fierce magnificent maid. I cannot walk away and pretend I never met you. If

you will take a chance on me, I will spend every day of the rest of my life being the best husband I know how to be.”

Gwen was going to do it. She was going to seize the chance with both hands, for he was the man who refused to be scared away by her brother and his stupid friends, or even by Gwen’s own prickly nature. And she loved him. “I will marry you, Jack Wrath. Life is uncertain, and one day I might be gone and you will be alone. Or you might be gone and I shall be alone. So, I shall be your wife as soon as we can manage it and live each day as if we shall be separated tomorrow and as if we shall be together forever.”

He kissed her again, and she found that, enthralling as earlier kisses had been, he had been holding back. The kiss spun out into a symphony of sensation—lips, tongues, teeth; his hands on her body and hers on him; touch and emotion blending in an overwhelming cascade of feeling that left her panting and bereft when, after a mindless stretch of time, he drew back.

“We have to stop while we still can,” he said. His breathlessness and the anguish on his face were reassuring. He wanted her as much as she wanted him.

“Why?” she asked. “We are betrothed. We will be wed as soon as we can.”

He kissed her hands, then groaned and pulled her back against his hard body. “A common license. We shall talk to the vicar tomorrow, and I shall ride to the bishop in Chester on Monday. No. You need me to look after Griffith while you work at the Harvest Festival. On Tuesday. We can wed the following Wednesday.”

She nodded. That would work. But she wanted more. “In the Welsh mountain valleys, when the winter bites hard and there’s no pressure to stand witness, a promise exchanged makes a marriage,” she commented. “Why should we wait? Stay with me tonight, Jack. Come to bed, and make me your own.”



“I want to treat you with all honour and respect,” he insisted.

Gwen buried her face against his chest, her mouth curving in a smile. That was not a no. “Treat me with honour and respect by believing I know my own mind, love of mine. Come.”

She stepped away, but took his hand to draw him after her. He did not resist.

\* \* \*

He left her in the early light of dawn, giving her a lingering kiss at the door. “Latch it behind me, my love. I will be back in time to escort you and Griffith to chapel.”

By that time, he was regretting he had taken advantage of her invitation. He should have stepped back. Now that her three stupid self-appointed guardians had been discovered and stopped, he should have let a better man win her. A man who could be the husband she deserved. It was too late, of course. He had taken Gwen and made her his own. He would have to marry her, though he was not fit.

He did his best to smile as usual, though he sat brooding beside her and Griffith. Then the preacher announced his theme for the day. “Today, we look forward to tomorrow’s harvest festival, brothers and sisters. Let us ponder therefore on those ancient words: “To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.”

As he read the passage, certain words leapt out to Jack. “A time to kill, and a time to heal,” the man said. “A time of war and a time of peace.”

Jack listened, absorbed as the preacher spoke of building things up, and all things in their season, and something in his heart shifted. He had had his fill of war, of killing, of tearing down and mourning.

For everything there is a season. He could do this. His harvest for all those years in the army was peace and all that came with peace. He could be Gwen's husband and the father of her children. It is my season for love .

Gwen was proud to walk into chapel on Jack's arm, if a little apprehensive about everyone guessing where Jack had spent the night. But she was not struck by lightning as she walked in the door, and even the old matrons, who knew everything, did not point at her and berate her for licentiousness.

Not that she regretted a thing. We are as good as married, Gwen reminded herself. We have made our promises, with our words and with our bodies.

Jack showed no signs of regret or guilt. He joined in all the songs. He listened attentively to the preacher. He smiled at those who smiled at him. For the first time in months, she was happy to linger outside after the meeting, introducing Jack to her friends and neighbours.

"May I make known to you Jack Wrath?" she said, or some other variation of the words, over and over to one group after another. "Jack is my betrothed." Each time she said it, the words warmed her heart, and so did his eyes, straying in her direction every few minutes, as if he could not look away.

At first, she was ready to leap in to deflect any criticism of her father. However, people seemed unbothered that he talked as if he was new to the town and greeted the people who came up as if they were their own parents. Jack had said people already knew her father's condition, and it seemed he was right.

"When are you and our Miss Hughes planning to wed, Mr. Wrath?" asked one of the matrons, and it seemed that everyone wanted to know the answer, for conversations

stopped as people waited for his reply.

“We are sending for a common license,” Jack said. “We will be man and wife before the end of next week, if all goes well.”

“Very good,” said Da, approvingly. “It is not good for man to be alone. I can tell you that, young man. I do not know where I would be without my Ellen.” He looked vaguely around him. “Where is Ellen?”

“I expect you will be having a lovely Sunday dinner,” one of the matrons commented.

Gwen nodded, and the matron continued, “Ellen always had the most wonderful meat on a Sunday.”

“Forge doesn’t go out, you see,” Da explained. “Ellen knows just where to set the meat and when. Vegetables, too. Ellen makes the best tatties. I’d best be off. Good day to you, Missus. Cannot keep Ellen waiting.”

He headed for the gate, and Jack and Gwen said hasty farewells to follow after him.

“They are friendly people at the chapel,” Jack said, as they walked home. “Do you go to Sunday meeting every week?”

“Every Sunday unless Da is sick,” Gwen replied. “You do not have to join us, unless you wish to.”

“I will happily come to meeting with you,” Jack assured her. “I won’t lie, Gwen. It has been a long time since I made the effort to attend anything but regimental church parades. But this was nice. It was like coming home. Better, in fact, because I was with you. And dinner to follow!”

“Just a small piece of beef, Jack. But lots of veg, and baked apple to follow.” For as long as she could remember, it had been a Sunday tradition in their family. Mama left everything prepared and ready in the pantry. It took skill and timing to cook on the forge fire (or rather near it). A lack of care and the food would be half-cooked or crisped black—or both on different sides. But Mama had the skill, and she had taught Gwen.

In less than half an hour, the meal would be cooked and on the table, especially if Jack distracted Da with another game of checkers.

\* \* \*

They were sitting in the sun out behind the cottage, pleasantly full, when the messenger arrived—a footman from the Barlow manor with a letter for Gwen.

“I am to wait for an answer, Miss Hughes, and I was also asked to give you this note. Also, sir, may I ask if you are Captain Jack Wrath?”

Jack admitted that he was, and the footman sorted through a pile of invitations in the leather satchel he carried and handed one to Jack.

Gwen paid no further attention. She broke the seal and read the contents of the letter. An invitation to dinner at the Barlows. Tonight. She did not belong at a formal dinner with the Barlows. To be sure, she had tagged along with Evan a time or two in her youth, when Lady Barlow needed to make up numbers. Evan was friends with Ford, Lord Barlow. But since the pair of friends went away to war, the farrier’s daughter had had no further place at the lady’s table.

She opened the note, read the few lines, and read them again, though the note trembled in her hand so that she would have had trouble making out the words. Except that she had read them the first time, and they had not changed.

A warmth in the small of her back, a strength at her side. Jack was there, his hand moving in gentle circles against her spine.

“Jack, this is a note from Lady Wright.”

His nose wrinkled in confusion.

“Her sister ran off with Evan. Or, I suppose, Evan ran off with Yvette. Oh, Jack, she begs me to come to the dinner tonight. She needs to talk to me, she says. What about, I wonder? It must be Evan and Yvette, surely?”

He kept up his gentle circles on her back and said, “I have an invitation too, my love. Let us go and find out what Lady Wright wants. Would your neighbour Mrs. Carr sit with Griffith, do you think?”

Mrs. Carr agreed, so Gwen sorted through all her clothing to find something fit to wear to dinner at the Barlows’, then sat in the parlour and took in the side seams of a gown she’d worn years ago. It was well out of fashion, but the finest thing she owned.

Jack helped Da with a bath before hurrying home to Dr. Wagner’s to get cleaned up himself and changed for dinner. He and Da had been cleaning out the stable and currying the old horse, so Da was tired enough to go straight up to bed. He was sound asleep before Mrs. Carr knocked on the door.

Gwen was struggling with her buttons, and had to put a shawl around her shoulders to go down and let her neighbour in. Last time Gwen had worn this gown, she had had to ask Evan to button her up, and been so embarrassed that she’d sworn she’d never again buy a gown that buttoned at the back. The memory made her smile, now. Tonight, perhaps she would at last find out what had happened to her beloved brother.

With Mrs. Carr's help, she was ready by the time Jack arrived with a gig he had hired at the inn. He was in full regimentals, looking magnificent. "My goodness," Mrs. Carr said. "Look at you, Captain Wrath."

"Look at Miss Hughes," Jack suggested. "A prettier sight by far."

Mrs. Carr's eyes twinkled as she and Gwen exchanged smiles. "Just what a man in love should say," she told him. "Now off you go to that fine manor, the pair of you. You look the part, you do. Go and make the tradespeople of this town proud."

"I do not expect anyone will care about whether we are there or not," Gwen said. "Jack, perhaps, because he is so handsome. But I am just Gwenillan Hughes, the farrier's daughter, invited because one of their guests is a connection by marriage. I doubt anyone will notice me."

"I saw Mr. Owen, the vicar, on my way to Adam's," Jack told Gwen. "He can do our wedding at ten o'clock on Wednesday a week and a half from now, but he wants to see you, first. I think he wants to make sure that you know what you are doing, marrying a crippled old soldier."

Gwen gave his knee a slap, not enough to hurt but enough to express her irritation. "Do not refer to yourself that way, Jack Wrath. You are insulting the man I love; the man I have chosen."

He turned his focus from the horses for a moment to flash an amused smile at her. "I take your point. Let's make a deal. I won't insult your husband, and you won't insult my wife."

She returned his smile. "The vicar might be there tonight," she said. "I'll be sure to tell him that I'm a grown woman and I am marrying a good man. A man I love."

Dr. Owen was attending the dinner, and greeted Gwen in front of everyone with the words, “Miss Hughes. I understand you intend to marry Captain Wrath, here. Are you doing this of your own free will? Has anyone vouched for the man’s character?”

Everyone crowded around to congratulate Gwen and Jack, and Gwen’s hopes of going unnoticed disappeared.

It took some time for the hubbub to die down. When Lady Wright approached Gwen after dinner and took her to a corner for a private conversation, Gwen expected more of the same. What Lady Wright had to say left her reeling.



“Do you know about the boy called Sam?” Gwen asked Jack as he escorted her home. “The one from France who is staying at the vicar’s?” She was sitting as close to him as she could get on the gig’s bench, her hand tucked into the elbow of his disabled arm. When he had arrived in the drawing room with the rest of the gentlemen, she and Lady Wright had been alone in a corner, heads close together, talking earnestly. He was, he assumed, about to find out why.

“Yes. His mother came from this village, or so those who brought him here claim.”

“Lady Wright thinks he may be Yvette’s son. Hers and Evan’s. Jack, she had a letter from Yvette a year ago, saying they were with the army near Toulouse, and Yvette was about to give birth.”

“Sam was found near Toulouse,” Jack mused.

“True, but it was an army, Jack. I do not know how many women who followed the drum might have given birth, but what are the chances that a random pair of English tourists might come across my nephew? And know to bring him here?”

Jack shrugged. “What does Lady Wright want to do?”

“Visit. See him. She thinks she will be able to recognize her sister in him. I have seen him, Jack, walking with Charité, who cares for him. Fair-haired with blue eyes, which Yvette had, but he is a baby. Just eighteen months old, I understand. Babies look like babies.”

“Eighteen months,” Jack mused. “The siege of Toulouse. What do you want to do?”

She was quiet for a moment, but he could tell the strength of her feelings by how tightly she held his arm. “If he is Evan’s—he would be a piece of my brother. I could not walk away. But Jack, how would we manage? We are about to be married. We have Da to care for and the farrier business will fail if I cannot attend to it. It matters even more if I am to save it for Evan’s son. But I am not ready to be a mother. I want children, Jack. But not yet.”

“Family is family,” Jack reminded her. “We shall work it out.

\* \* \*

The child was the son of Gwen’s brother. They were in the middle of the marketplace when Gwen told Jack about it, Griffith being distracted by a Punch and Judy puppet show.

Gwen had recognized the chain on the amulet that had been discovered among Sam’s mother’s possessions—the Harvest Festival amulet that was given to all Reabridge maidens when they reached the age of sixteen.

She had tears in the eyes she lifted to Jack, and he yearned to hold her, though it would cause a scandal if he did so right here in Reabridge’s market square, in full sight of all the townsfolk and half the countryside.

“I made that chain, Jack. It was a triple link, very fiddly, and each link was flattened on the long side. I couldn’t mistake it. Oh, Jack. Yvette died giving birth to him. To Sam. Those who sheltered her found the amulet and kept it for the child.”

Gwen shook her head, as if doing so would dislodge the tears. “Vicky wants him. She has the money and the home. She made a promise to her sister. But we will be in his

life, will we not, Jack? We will be uncle and aunt to him? A boy needs his uncle and aunts.”

“He does,” Jack agreed, “and we shall be there for him. Lady Wright plans to stay in Reabridge?”

“I don’t know her plans,” Gwen commented. “But if the way Lord Barlow is looking at her means anything, I think she might.”

“Whatever happens,” Jack said, “We will make it work.”

“Family is family,” Gwen commented, returning his own words to him. “Write to Truth Bridgeman, Jack. Invite him to our wedding.”

Jack stared at her for a moment. He had always been afraid Tabby and his sisters would reject him, or write back to abuse him for his choices. But Gwen had said it, and she was right. Perhaps they worried about him. Perhaps they wanted to hear from him. He owed it to them to find out. Hell. He owed it to himself.

“Yes,” he said. “I will.”

Gwen looked up at him, so happy that she glowed, and Jack couldn’t resist. He threw propriety and discretion to the wind, and kissed the woman he loved, and to the devil with what people thought.

It was a glorious and mindful while later that the pair of them were distracted from their kiss by the sound of applause. Their friends and stood around them, clapping and laughing.

“Just as well you are getting married next week,” grumbled one of Evan’s friends, and the woman with him, who must be his wife, nudged him none to gently in the

side.

“We are so happy for you, Gwen,” she said.

“Here!” Griffith Hughes shouted, pushing through the crowd. “Who is that you are kissing, Jack?”

“The love of my life, Griffith,” Jack replied. “The love of my life.”

“Well done,” Griffith approved. “She has the look of my Ellen, the finest woman who ever lived. Well done, my friend. Does she like fidget pie? They sell a good fidget pie here at the market.”

“Good idea, Griffith,” Jack agreed, wrapping his good arm around Gwen. “Will you watch the forge?” he asked Evan’s friend. “Griffith, let me buy you and Gwen a fidget pie and an ale.”

He cast an anxious glance at Gwen, knowing that it upset her when Griffith forgot who she was, but she smiled up at him. “And you, Jack Wrath,” she said, “are the love of mine.”

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:05 am*

Gwen was finishing up a few jobs before the holiday, while supervising her daughter Rina. Not that Rina needed a great deal of supervision. At nearly nine years of age, she could already make a simple chain that was nearly indistinguishable from one made by her mother. The triple chain she was attempting was far fiddlier, but not really a great deal more complex. Not once you got into the pattern of it.

“It is hard to keep the heat only on the joint you’re cooking,” Rina commented.

“Slow and careful,” her mother advised, and Rina flashed a smile.

She was not yet heavy enough for much of the farrier work, but she had taken to the more delicate work like a duck to water.

Salt, the apprentice, was making nails. He was getting faster, managing around sixty in an hour, and she had begun giving him other simple tasks. When he could consistently produce one hundred nails per hour, he would have the confidence and the speed to copy some of the metal puzzles she had made herself, both as an apprentice and later for sale. That would teach him much he needed to know about twisting, turning, and shaping the hot iron.

She walked over to examine his bucket, which was more than half full of finished pieces, all of them of the right shape and size to attach a horse shoe.

“Mr. Bridgeman will be very pleased with you, Salt,” she told the boy. Uncle Truth, as Gwen and her children called him, was expected before nightfall, with as many of the aunts as could get away from the orphanage. Almost everyone in the household old enough to keep a secret knew about their visit. Only Jack had no idea that his

Bridgeman family was coming for Sunday, the Harvest Festival the following day, and Jack and Gwen's tenth anniversary the day after that. This year, the three events fell three days in a row.

The Bridgemans had been thrilled to reconnect with Jack when he wrote to them a decade ago, though they had not arrived in time for the wedding. They came for the following Harvest Festival, though, and remained to celebrate Jack and Gwen's first anniversary later in the week. Victorine Charity Hughes made her first entrance to the world on that auspicious day, a week late and demanding attention. Gwen had been attended by all the Bridgeman sisters as well as Meg Wagner, who had become a close friend.

Gwen's assistant Michael and her journeyman, Richard, would be handling the forge at the Harvest Festival the day after tomorrow. She had hired the assistant farrier when she was heavy with Rina. Richard was another protege of the Bridgemans, starting as an apprentice with her eight years ago. Richard had been known as Righteous when he arrived, but within two months had followed Jack's example and chosen a name of his own.

Uncle Truth had taken the news in his stride, as he had the name Jack had chosen so long ago. He had also been fully in support of Jack's decision to take Gwen's surname on their marriage, which had been more than a seven-day wonder in the neighbourhood. Indeed, some of the old people had been sure it signalled the second coming of the Christ, or at least the downfall of civilization.

People got used to it in time, and Gwen adored Jack for making the choice. The Hughes' name lived on at the forge even though her father was seven years in his final rest. It would continue into the next generation if just one of her children chose to follow their mother's path. They were young yet, though Rina certainly had a gift for iron and the fire.

The double celebration on Tuesday would be particularly special: Rina's ninth

birthday and the tenth anniversary of hers and Jack's wedding. And within the next hour or two, Jack's surprise would arrive. She wanted to hug herself with glee as she thought of his reaction.

She found herself turning toward the back wall of the forge, as if she could see through it to the training ring beyond. Between schooling young horses and teaching young riders, Jack had made himself a full-time career, and their nephew Sam loved nothing better than to escape from lessons for an afternoon to assist.

Jack had recovered use and strength in his damaged arm over the years. In the early days of their marriage, they had continued the exercises and massage for months without result.

Jack had been ready to give up, but Gwen insisted on continuing, and was rewarded when he began to get movement back again. Full recovery was achingly slow, but her reward was to see him now, carrying a child or fixing the hinge on a door or, as he was now, training a horse. No one who had not known him ten years ago would be able to guess that one arm had once hung limp and useless at his side.

Right now, Jack and Sam had the new horse on a long lead and were putting it through its paces. Undoubtedly, the rest of the children were watching from the rails. Not that they were visible from here. Jack is my sun, and I turn toward him whether I can see him or not. She laughed at her fancy, but it held a core of truth. Jack and the children were the centre of her world.

The rumble of wheels and the clop of hooves drew her attention to the gate, through which a smartly dressed lady was driving a curricule. Victorine Lady Barlow had come to collect Sam.

"Carry on, Salt," she commanded. "The bucket needs to be full to here before you can have the day off tomorrow." She pointed to a spot a bare half inch above the current level, and put one hand in the small of her back to help her straighten.

This fifth child seemed to be twice the size of any of its brothers or sisters. It was not due for another three weeks, but was already inhibiting her bending—and especially her unbending. Meg and Adam Wagner said it would arrive when it was ready, and predicted that the Bridgeman aunties might be attending another Hughes birth in the week they planned to visit.

“Gwen,” Vicki called. “Good afternoon. I am here to pick up Sam. Am I interrupting?”

Gwen picked up the soap to wash her hands in a bowl of water. “I have just finished. Let me wash my hands, Vicki, and I’ll be with you. Rina, came and say hello to your Auntie Vicki.”

“Auntie Vicki,” Rina greeted. “Would it be rude for me to finish just this single joint?”

Vicky told her to go ahead and hurried over to watch the process.

As Gwen dried her hands, Jack and Sam came around the farrier, followed by three more of the children, with the fourth riding on Jack’s arm. “Auntie Vicki,” shouted Ellen, who was seven. “Did Yvette come with you?”

Vicki held out her hand to Ellen. “Non, ma cherie,” she replied. “Yvette and her brother Etienne are at home, which is where Sam and I must be, soon.”

“Sam should live here,” announced Adam, who was five, and very dogmatic. “His name is Hughes and our name is Hughes.”

Sam ruffled Adam’s hair. “I belong to the Hughes, sproglet, and I also belong to the Barlows.” At nearly twelve, he still had his mother’s colouring, but he was also showing signs of his inheritance from his father. For one thing, he was shooting up. In time, he would be as tall as Evan, or even taller.



Evan the first, that was. Evan the second was wriggling in Jack's arms, begging to get down. "Me bang hammer," he demanded. "Me bang hammer, please, Ma." They had named him for her brother when Lord Barlow had finally managed to confirm with army records that Evan Hughes had died at the Battle of Toulouse. Gwen was glad that neither he nor Yvette could have known that the other was gone, and took comfort that their love lived on in Sam, and in the warm friendship between their sisters.

Evan was fascinated with the forge, and kept the nursemaid on the hop, except when Jack stole all the children from the nursery, which was not unusual.

Sam and Vicki had no sooner trundled out of the yard, than another conveyance approached, this one a carriage dusty with travel. Sam waved wildly as Vicki passed the vehicle, and Gwen's heart kicked up a beat.

She slipped her hand into Jack's elbow. "Come and see who is here, Jack. It is a surprise."

In moments, the Bridgemans were descending from the carriage. They were quite agile, given their ages. All five had come, and were exclaiming over how the children had grown. The aunties had a kiss, a hug, and a twist of barley sugar for everyone, and Uncle Truth could not stop grinning.

It took them quite fifteen minutes to sufficiently conclude greetings to take the Bridgemans into the house and up to their rooms in a joyous procession.

"You'll see we've finished that new wing since you were last here," Jack told Uncle Truth. He shrugged. "What with the apprentice and the journeyman, as well as our own growing family, it seemed like a good idea."

"Very nice," said Uncle Truth. "Very nice indeed."

Salt came inside, swearing he'd finished his task, and saying that Tom was home and was banking the forge, which left Gwen with nothing to do but bathe and change for dinner.

What a difference ten years had made. She now had a cook and a kitchen maid to prepare the food, a parlour maid to put it on the table, and an upstairs maid who doubled as her ladies' maid when she needed help with her gown and Jack was occupied.

As well as that, a nanny ruled in the nursery with the support of a nursery maid. The laundry, which had grown with the family, still went out to be washed, dried, ironed and folded. Two women from the neighbourhood came in twice a week to help with the cleaning. And out in the stables, three grooms helped Jack look after the horses.

The nursery servants would have little to do in the next week. The Bridgeman sisters were there in the nursery when Gwen went to put her little ones to bed. They had the children bathed and into their nightgowns, and were reading them a book, one aunt and one book with each child.

On a previous trip, Gwen had protested that they did not need to work, and had been firmly told that spending time with the children was not work but pleasure.

"We will not linger after dinner," Aunt Blessed said, as they came downstairs. "Old bones do not travel as easily as young ones. When did you say that baby is due, Gwen, dear? It looks as if you might deliver at any moment."

"Babies arrive when they please," Aunt Joy pointed out.

"It should be another three weeks," Gwen insisted. "It certainly cannot be before Wednesday. On Tuesday, we have all our friends coming for a meal to celebrate Rina's birthday and our wedding anniversary."

And the niggles in her back was merely a result of spending too much time bending over the past couple of days. She hoped.

Tuesday dawned sunny, which meant they could put the trestle tables up under a marquee on the meadow closest to the house, with lawn chairs borrowed from all their neighbours. The weather held, too. Aunt Heart had spent the morning with the kitchen staff, and a series of wonderfully smelling trays made their ways out to the tables.

By noon, their closest friends had begun to arrive, all with plates of food and bottles of liquid. The group of veterans who had arrived back from the wars a full decade ago had become comrades in life, even if they had never actually been comrades in arms. Their wives, too, formed a tight group—sisters under the skin who could be depended on to lend a hand or a shoulder at need.

Soon, the older children teamed up into games, some chasing a ball, some skipping or playing tag. A group of girls sat under a tree making daisy chains, and some of the boys were trying out the stilts one of the fathers had made, with many falls and lots of laughter. The older children kept an eye on the younger ones, all under the supervision of the adults who sat near the tables or under the trees, joined in the games, or walked around the grounds.

As the afternoon wore on, the niggles in Gwen's back became quite clear contractions. She continued to ignore them, though she whispered to Meg asking her to follow if Gwen disappeared into the house for any length of time.

Just as a precaution. Each baby had arrived more quickly than the last, but she figured she would have at least two hours before she needed to take her labour seriously. And everyone would be heading home by then.

She almost made it. Only their closest friends remained when she was beset by an urge to push. By five that evening, Meg put newborn Griffith Hughes into his father's

arms. Jack always insisted on staying with Gwen while she gave birth. “My doing, my responsibility,” he told Gwen, who always assured him that she had an equal part in the conception.

To which Jack always responded, “I cannot have an equal part in the birth, my love. But I can, at least, hold your hand.”

Except this time, apparently . Jack had his arms full, and Gwen had given birth to enough babies to know what was happening again.

Ten minutes after Griffith, his brother slid easily into the world. Jack stared at him, stunned. “We only have one name prepared,” he stammered.

“This one will be Jack,” Gwen decided.

Meg and the aunties sent Big Jack downstairs with his new sons, one nestled in each arm, to be admired by his waiting friends and the children. He was back again by the time the ladies had finished cleaning Gwen up and settling her against her pillows, ready to put the babies to her breasts.

Everyone except Jack tiptoed away once mother and babies were settled, leaving the four of them together. “What do the children think of their new brothers?” Gwen asked.

Jack chuckled. “Ellen asked why we always have babies in the harvest season,” he said.

It was true. In addition to Rina, and now her two smallest brothers, two of the others had birthdays in October. Only Adam was an exception, being born in March.

Jack’s eyebrows shot up and he smirked. “I told her that Autumn is a season for love,” he said.

Gwen blushed. “Midwinter is a season for love, you mean,” she said. “But I can understand why you did not want to explain that to her.”

He kissed her cheek, being careful not to disturb Griffith, who had fallen asleep on her chest. “Midwinter, when it storms, and there’s little to do for days on end.” His voice had dropped to a sultry purr.

She smiled because it was true, but also because it was not the whole truth. “To everything there is a season,” she said, knowing he expected it, and he did not disappoint. As he had, so many times since they married, he said, “Now, and for the rest of our days together, it will always be the season for love.”

THE END

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If you like returned soldier heroes, you might enjoy Jude’s Lion’s Zoo series, about a group of men who served as exploring officers with Wellington’s army, under Colonel Lionel O’Toole, known as Lion.

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