



Look at Her Duke (Surprise! Dukes)

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Category: Historical

Description: Oh my God, Becky, look at her Duke

Lady Amelia Kincaid isn't the sort of duke's daughter accepted in Society. She's more of the sort who rescues squirrels and raises boa constrictors and incubates eggs in her corset. (What? She has small bosoms. There's plenty of room.) But when it comes to her brother's best friend, she's always wished she was a bit more ladylike.

Because Kipling is back in Town as the newly minted Duke of Bestingbum, and to Amelia's eternal sorrow, appears to already be betrothed. If Amelia wants to force someone as perfect as Kip to notice her after all these years, she's going to need some help from her best friend, Becky. Who happens to be a chicken.

Warning: Just as wonderfully silly and perfectly spicy as the rest of the Surprise! Dukes series. You're going to have a lot of fun!

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Page 1

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Kipling Mancheste, newly made duke and just as gorgeous as he'd always been, was currently laughing as he backed out of Amelia's brother's study.

Speaking of bad timing.

Amelia's back was pressed against the wall of the corridor, cradling a chicken. As one does.

"I'll see ye tonight, then, Alistair? Tell me ye're no' leaving me high and dry at my first Society event!"

Her brother must have responded without words—he still only spoke in short sentences and only when necessary—because Kipling laughed again and made a rude gesture. Amelia clamped her hand around the hen's beak and tried to back around the corner, praying he wouldn't see her.

It had been two years since she'd last seen Kipling Mancheste, and although he likely remembered her only as his best friend's youngest sister—gangly and awkward in her unceasing championing of God's creatures, if he remembered her at all—Amelia remembered him as the most beautiful man she'd ever seen.

The intervening years hadn't changed that.

She'd only learned he was back in London—having unexpectedly inherited the Duchy of Bestingbum—earlier this year, and despite her loitering outside her brother's study, she hadn't seen him yet. There were only so many times one can claim to be studying this portrait, or picking out the location for her new aquarium,

or—in a pinch—reapplying the wallpaper, before the butler would get suspicious.

And wasn't it just like Fate that the day she actually did see Kipling Mancheste, she was taking her little darling for a walk?

It was too much to hope he hadn't seen her.

“Amanda?”

Amelia squeezed her eyes shut and pressed her back against the wall, the squirming hen clamped firmly under one arm.

“Lass, I can see yer skirts peeking around the corner. Are ye Alistair's new wife, Olivia? I've been looking forward to meeting the lass who stole my best friend's heart.”

Amelia held her breath, praying he'd give up and walk toward the foyer. She wanted to see Kipling after all these years...but she wasn't exactly ready for him to see her .

Long moments passed, during which she heard nothing from the man. Praying he'd given up and left, she peeked open one eye.

And promptly closed it again.

He was standing right there .

“Amelia,”

he said, in that warm caramelly voice of his. She'd been rather hoping the years apart had changed it, so it would become scratchy or gravelly. Different in any way. Oh, why hadn't he taken up smoking in the interim?

Because hearing that voice she'd always loved, saying her name like that? His lips, caressing the M, his tongue wrapping around the L?

She was lost.

"Amelia, ye ken I can see ye?"

She was going to have to speak to him. Outrageous.

"I do not know anything about the state of your eyesight, Kip—sir. Your Grace."

"Well, as far as I'm aware, it's perfect. I'm standing right in front of ye, looking at ye."

Her eyes were beginning to ache from how hard she was squeezing them shut.
"Could you...not?"

"No' look at ye?"

Inspiration struck. "I am practicing hiding from raptors."

"Raptors?"

Oh God, she could hear the amusement in his voice.

"Raptors. Eagles, falcons, that sort of thing. They have remarkable eyesight, but rely mainly on watching for prey's movement. If the prey remains very still while the raptor is soaring above, they can remain safe."

He hummed. "And are they a frequent danger here in Effinghell House? Is that why ye're carrying a chicken, wee Mellie? As a distraction?"

She gasped, eyes popping open, less at the childhood nickname and more at the thought of using one of her babies as a distraction. “Whatever do you—”

Amelia bit her tongue. Really, when confronted with the fact the man had his hand splayed against the wall near her head, and he was leaning toward her—close enough to smell whatever soap his valet used to trim his beard—it seemed safest.

When Kipling grinned, her knees went weak. Oh Lord in Heaven, how had she forgotten The Grin? It was even better than The Voice. It took his normally craggy face and shaped it into a work of pure Art.

“I mean, wee Mellie, that if attacked from above by a raptor, ye could always toss yer chicken at it as a distraction. The raptor could attack the chicken, and ye could get away safely.”

By studying his lips, Amelia was able to ignore his offensive words. “My uncle used to tell me that was why he brought dogs along on bear hunts in the wilds of Canada.”

How horrific . “I do not think your uncle sounds like a very nice man,”

she sniffed.

His eyes—so blue, so very blue—flicked across her visage. “Nay, he wasnae.”

Oh.

The Grin was nice, The Voice was even nicer...but when he agreed with her?

Be still my heart .

It was possible her childish infatuation with her brother’s best friend was not quite

out of her system.

“So, wee Mellie...”

“Amelia,”

she corrected primly, trying to maintain some dignity while pressed to a wall, cradling a chicken. “I have not gone by Mellie in many years, Your Grace.”

He winced, which looked wrong on such a beautiful face. “I’ll make ye a deal. Ye dinnae call me Yer Grace , and I will try to remember no’ to call ye Mellie . It’ll be hard, since that’s how I thought of ye all these years.”

If Amelia needed proof that the man remembered her as the skinny lass with the skinned knees and torn hem, she need look no further.

But he was still staring expectantly. “Deal,”

she managed to croak out.

Abruptly, Kipling straightened. “So, Lady Amelia , are ye going to tell me why ye’re cradling a chicken?”

“A chicken?”

His lips twitched. “Surely ye havenae forgotten yer passenger? The one ye’re no’ using as raptor bait-slash-distraction?”

“Oh, Becky .”

She lifted the bird, cradling her in her palms.

Kipling blinked. “Becky?”

Becky obligingly squawked.

“This is Becky. I raised her from an egg.”

Some people— Let us be honest, most people —would flinch away in surprise at such an announcement. Kipling, bless him, merely smiled. “Did ye now? Ye must be verra proud.”

And then the man reached out his hand, and petted her chicken .

Oh, her heart!

Petting your chicken sounds a bit like a metaphor. Is that one listed in the Harlot’s Guide ?

It was difficult to ignore her chattering subconscious, but it was necessary, because Kipling Mancheste was currently cooing happily at Becky. At her Becky.

“Ye’re a pretty girl, are ye no’? I’ve never seen a hen so fluffy and white. Those little black feathers make her look as if she’s wearing a lacy necklace, aye?”

Amelia could admit that not everyone was as animal-obsessed as she was, but she couldn’t imagine a more perfect response. She had to swallow and force herself to focus. “Aye—I mean, yes. Becky—short for Lady Rebecca Marie Skye Kincaid, by the way—is a Shanghai white. She is a fancy breed, and a brilliant layer.”

She scratched beneath Becky’s chin. “Yes you are.”

Grinning impishly, she met Kipling’s amused gaze once more. “And she’s much

better company than her brother Charles.”

“As evidenced by the fact he’s no’ here, tucked beneath yer arm as ye go strolling.”

Strolling, indeed. As if she hadn’t heard from the upstairs maid, who heard it from Rocky, who’d heard it from the butler, that Kipling would be visiting today, and thus had been lingering here in the hall all morning.

But he was staring at her expectantly, and Amelia was at a loss for words. How to explain she’d been stalking the corridor of her brother’s study for a month, hoping for a glimpse of the man she’d once been so in love with she thought she’d explode from it?

Oh, to be a seventeen-year-old, angst-driven, silly lass again.

She’d doodled “Mrs. Kipling Mancheste”

all over one of her books of poetry until her sister had discovered it and tossed it in the waste bin.

He is looking at you. Clearly he is waiting for you to say something. Anything!

“Becky requires daily exercise!”

she blurted, finally, then expounded, extemporizing as she went. “I often allow her and Charles out in the cook’s garden in the mews. To hunt for—for insects and such.”

The Grin arrived again. “Sounds idyllic,”

he murmured, his gaze caressing her face once more.

Was it her imagination, or was he leaning toward her a bit? How much effort would it be to press up on her toes? To stretch toward his lips? To give into the urges which had bedeviled her for two long years?

To squish a chicken between you.

Oh, yes. Becky.

With horrible—or perhaps impeccable—timing, Rocky the footman chose that moment to wander by. “Morning, Your Grace. Morning, Lady Whichever. Need me to pick up anything?”

Amelia cleared her throat and straightened her spine. “No, thank you, Rocky. Carry on.”

“Ta, cheers.”

The huge oaf tugged his forelock—or where he likely thought his forelock was—and strolled on.

She had to stifle her giggle.

“Lady Whichever?”

Kipling murmured, clearly noticing the attempted giggle.

“He cannot keep Amanda and me straight. We have found it’s easier not to task his few braincells.”

Kipling had stepped away from her—and Becky—when Rocky had come into sight, and now he straightened his cuffs. “And he regularly picks things up for ye?”

Ah . Amelia felt her cheeks heating. “It is...mainly a game Amanda plays to irritate the butler, Hiro.”

She played it too, but she wasn't going to admit that right now. “She...drops things.”

“For Rocky to pick up? Does he no' have better things to do?”

Oh Lord. Rather be hanged for a sheep than a lamb. Cheeks blazing, Amelia pretended great interest in smoothing down the ruff of black feathers behind Becky's head. “Rocky has a remarkably toned rear end, Your— sir. ”

To her surprise, Kipling burst into laughter.

She peeked up at him and couldn't help her smile. Kipling's laughter was whole-hearted, coming not just from his mouth, but from his chest and his heart as well. He was the kind of man who made you want to laugh with him.

So really, how could she help her smile?

“Lady Amelia,”

he suddenly said, scooping up her free hand, chuckles still shaking his shoulders. “Thank ye.”

As he bent over her hand, his gaze twinkled up at her. “I've convinced yer brother to attend the Stallings' ball tonight, which my—well, it doesnae matter. I'll be there, and I need some troops at my back. Alistair, Fawkes, Thorne...and ye?”

He was holding her gaze, his thumb rubbing the back of her hand.

Was he...asking her to attend a ball? With him?

Oh Heavens.

Oh, Heavens and angels and archangels and all the Heavenly choir and clouds and the Pearly Gates and whatever else went on up there.

Stop being silly. If Alistair and Olivia are going, you would just attend with them .

Well, yes. But Kipling would be there. And he clearly wanted to see her.

“Would—would it be permissible to dance?”

Good Lord, when had she grown so bold?

When you met him holding a chicken, likely.

His Grin was blinding. “I wouldnae have it any other way, milady. Save a dance for me?”

When he placed a hand on her knuckles, she made an embarrassing little sound like meep .

And then, still grinning, with one glance over his shoulder at her...Kipling Mancheste sauntered out of her life once again.

“Darling, ye could at least pretend to smile.”

Kipling stifled his sigh and forced his lips to curl as he patted his mother’s hand on his arm and watched the dancers floating about in circles. It wasn’t that he didn’t normally enjoy balls and social events like this one...it was what tonight represented.

His first appearance in Society as the Duke of Bestingbum.

A title he'd never expected would be his.

“Mother, are ye certain I cannae escort ye to the gambling tables?”

Since he'd gained the title, she'd proven that she had no qualms helping to spend the Bestingbum fortune. “Or to visit with some of yer friends?”

“And miss yer official debut?”

She scoffed, swatting at his arm. “I am right where I want to be, darling.”

Debut . As if he were some kind of young miss, being presented to the vultures. Kip stifled another sigh.

Mother meant well, he knew. She'd married a younger son of a duke, and Kip remembered his parents being very much in love before Father's unexpected death. Then her first son—Kip's older brother—had passed on as well, a few years later. Mother had turned her undaunted affections to him, and he did his best to fill what he assumed were several holes in her heart.

It was just the two of them now, against the world, and of course he did what he could to keep her happy. She'd even spent some time with him on the Continent during the last two years, since he'd fled in desperation.

“Could I at least convince ye to go make polite conversation with Lady Stallings?”

Kip murmured.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:15 am

“I plan on it. If I am standing here with ye, pretending I am no’ getting dizzy, watching these people spin in circles, then she will have to come to me. And once she does...”

She’d bring her daughter, aye.

Mother’s light brogue was layered atop a crisp finishing school tone, one she shared with her oldest and dearest friend, Lady Stallings, tonight’s hostess. Kip couldn’t be sure, but he suspected the ball itself was a scheme concocted by the two women, not just to introduce the new Duke of Bestingbum, but to link his name to Lady Emma, youngest daughter of the Earl and his wife.

And Kip’s almost-fiancée.

His engaged-to-be-engaged wife.

His mother and Lady Stallings had already arranged it, deciding Emma would be the first partner to help usher him through Society in his new role...and were just waiting on him to make it official.

And up until today, Kip would’ve gone along with their scheming. What difference would it make? They were all the same.

Up until today, he’d assumed his lust for his best friend’s sister had finally dissipated. Then he’d discovered she was still unmarried, still living under Alistair’s roof, still a beautiful lass of—what? Almost twenty, she had to be. Still just as lovely, just as impassioned, just as hoydenish as he’d remembered.

Standing there, staring down at a lass with a chicken, he'd fallen right back in love with Lady Amelia Kincaid.

“Oh look, darling, here they come! Och, try to look like ye are enjoying yerself.”

He didn't want to marry Lady Emma Iverson.

But Kip also didn't want to hurt his mother, so he attempted a credible smile, and when Lady Stallings and her daughter swanned over, he made a show of fawning over them as Mother expected.

They made small talk about his time on the Continent and he tried to be as charming as possible, while all the while his gaze swept the gathered masses, looking for Alistair and his youngest sister.

Would she come?

If she didn't, what would he do?

Tonight he was expected to dance with Emma, and if they spent enough time together, the Great Gossip Machine that was the matrons of Society would start humming. Kip would be linked to Emma before he could even formally ask for her hand.

Not that he wanted to, not anymore.

After seeing Amelia today, realizing he was still completely enthralled by her zest for life, he knew he wouldn't be satisfied with the icy blonde woman who currently clutched his arm after Mother had drifted aside to chat with her friend.

Emma was pretty enough, but in a sort of porcelain doll way; it was clear she'd never

scraped her knee chasing after a baby goat, or soaked her skirts while she caught frogs in the estate pond.

Of course, Alistair spent his days in London lately, so Kip assumed his sisters did as well. He'd expected refinements, an aloof air, a forgetting of who she was. But today's encounter proved Amelia was the same lass he remembered.

Just all grown up.

Very, very all grown up. And out. Perfectly out.

Just the memory of her curves made his palms itch.

"Oh, listen, Your Grace! The music is starting up again."

Emma fluttered her lashes, about as subtle as a locomotive engine.

He'd only known her a month, and already disliked the way she was used to getting what she wanted. It never occurred to her that she wouldn't, in fact.

"Oh yes, darling! Ye should dance,"

Mother urged.

When Kip glanced at her, she lowered her brows and darted a furious glance toward Emma, then back to him.

Ah, well, he could pick up on a hint. Especially when laid down with a shovel.

"Lady Emma,"

he began stiffly. “Would ye do me the honor of joining me?”

“Oh, Your Grace ,”

she tittered in mock surprise. “I would be delighted!”

And stifling yet another sigh, Kipling led her out to the dance floor.

“Are you well, Amelia?”

murmured Olivia, her new sister-in-law. “I expected Alistair to look ill at such an event, but I would’ve guessed you’d be excited.”

The two of them stood on either side of Amelia’s brother, the Duke of Effinghell. Earlier this year, he’d made quite the splash by not only contracting marriage to a completely unsuitable newspaper reporter, he’d been so disgraceful as to go and fall in love with her.

But Amelia loved Olivia, and knew her sister Amanda did as well. Olivia had drawn Alistair from the darkness he’d inhabited for so many years, and brought him back to his family.

So Amelia forced a smile. “Attending balls is still somewhat new to me.”

Her brother, despite his enormous influence, had hidden from Society and contented himself with written correspondence. “This is only my third such event which Alistair did not himself host.”

Her large, mostly silent brother, harumphed slightly. But when she peeked up at him, his lips twitched.

He hated Society events as she herself loved them. Or at least, she had thought she loved them; she had little experience. But years of tutoring and lessons had prepared her for this, at least.

“Well, I promised Alistair I wouldn’t nag him into dancing with me,”

Olivia murmured, pretending interest in the crowd. “But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t dance.”

“Do you think I might convince Alistair to dance with me ?”

As Olivia swallowed her giggle, Alistair turned a horrified expression on Amelia, who also had to press her lips together to keep from laughing.

Of course Alistair wouldn’t dance with her. It was hard enough for him to be here, surrounded by people who were neither friends nor family. At least when he hosted an event, he could be certain none of his guests would mock his voice, or the fact he preferred not to speak at all.

Here, his only chance was to hope no one would talk to them.

“Alistair, thank Christ ye came!”

It was apparently a vain hope.

Amelia’s heart started to beat double-time before she even saw Kipling; just his delicious-sounding voice could do that to her.

But as her brother’s lips curled into a wry grin—he was tall enough to see over the heads of everyone around them—Amelia turned to see a distinctly hunted-looking Kipling slide through the crowds.

“Quick, pretend I’m saying something fascinating,”

the new Duke of Bestingbum commanded, stationing himself with his back to the room. “So nae one interrupts us.”

“Not enjoying yourself, Your Grace?”

Olivia asked, laughter not far from her tone.

Kipling groaned and tipped his head back to stare at the ceiling. “No’ ye too! I need someone here who willnae suck up to me.”

“I dinnae...suck,”

croaked Alistair, who looked as if he was trying not to laugh as well.

“Well, no’ in a long time.”

Kipling winked. “Do ye remember the time ye bought that barrel of ale, and we couldnae fit it through the window? But we had the tubing—”

Alistair shook his head. “That was ye.”

Amelia couldn’t help smiling, for several reasons:

Despite his raspy voice, it was obvious her brother was delighted to be reunited with his best friend. After all, that was the only reason he’d agreed to attend this ball tonight, in order to support Kipling.

She’d heard there would be chocolate for dessert.

Becky had laid another perfect egg only that afternoon.

Kipling Mancheste was standing in front of her, looking divine, sounding divine, and yes, even smelling divine.

And he was sneaking peeks at her. Peeks! At her!

Why wouldn't she be smiling?

"So, Kip ,"

Olivia teased, "You are hiding? There's some nice curtains over there."

"I cannae hide in the curtains. My mother and Lady Stallings planned this whole thing so I can be seen, which I dinnae love."

"Liar,"

croaked Alistair.

"I dinnae love being seen as the Duke of Bestingbum,"

Kip quickly corrected. "I was never supposed to become a duke ."

Blue eyes flicked toward Amelia, then away again. "I wish there was a manual."

He sounded strangely...vulnerable. And Amelia felt for him.

"I am certain you will do wonderful things, Your Grace."

When he turned his full attention to her, a touch of hurt in the cant of his brows, she

wincing. “Apologies. Kipling.”

The tension around his eyes eased slowly as he studied her. Just as it had earlier that day, his gaze made her... Not uncomfortable, but...breathless?

Yes. Breathless. That was a good way to describe this feeling. The way her heart pounded in her chest, matching the throbbing between her thighs.

“Lady Amelia,”

he said finally. “Would ye be willing to help me hide from the masses?”

Her answer was immediate. Certain. “Of course. What do you need?”

The Grin flashed. “That promised dance?”

he asked as he held out his hand.

She didn’t even stop to think before she put her hand in his.

Only then did something like worry flash across Kip’s visage, and he flicked a glance toward Alistair. “That is, assuming ye dinnae mind?”

Amelia turned her attention to her brother as well, and realized she was holding her breath. Alistair studied the two of them—his gaze lingering where her gloved hand rested in Kipling’s—before his lips twitched and he shook his head.

When she exhaled, she heard Kipling echo it.

Which was strange in itself. Why would he also be nervous around Alistair?

And it wasn't quite nerves flickering in her chest...Amelia was just worried about what her brother would think if he ever realized her feelings for one of his oldest friends.

She'd grown up with Kipling coming to the estate and later to their townhouse to visit Alistair, since he rarely left home, even back then. Amelia was so much younger than her brother, she hadn't paid attention to his company when the young men had returned from university. But as she'd grown...

She'd gone from a gangly, awkward girl to an even more gangly, even more awkward young lady. And all the while, she was watching Kipling Manchestre laugh and charm. But it wasn't until he'd seemed genuinely interested in her interests that she lost her heart.

And even after two years away, he still seemed...interested.

He'd asked her to dance . Not just out of politeness, but out of a genuine desire to do so? Even now, he was sweeping her onto the dance floor, positioning her among the other couples.

He was taking her hand in his.

He was placing his gloved hand on her back.

He was enfolding her in his hold.

He was overwhelming her, with his scent and his charm and his perfection.

I swear, if you faint right now and cause us to miss this, I will never forgive you .

Right. She couldn't faint, not if she wanted to remember this dance for the rest of her

life. Because she was certain she would.

“Thank ye,”

murmured Kipling, as the music began and they launched into movement.

It was likely a waltz, but it could’ve been a jig, or a hula for all the attention Amelia was paying. Years of dancing lessons at Mother’s insistence, and it all flew right out the window the moment Kipling Manchestre held her?

“I-My pleasure.”

Make polite conversation, any conversation, you ninny . “It is certainly warm in here, is it not?”

“Oh?”

Kip had been studying her the whole time, seeming able to dance without looking at his own feet or those around him; clearly a miracle worker. “Should I take ye over to the window for some air?”

And give him an excuse to cease the incredible experience of being in his arms ? Amelia would sooner eat red meat. “No! I mean, no, thank you, I am perfectly content.”

He watched her a moment longer, as if not certain he believed her. Then, “Ye’ve left Becky at home?”

He remembered her chicken’s name? Le Sigh.

Focus. Focus!

“I know enough about Society to know they would frown upon my—my pets. My family teases me, but they also indulge me. When we have company, I have learned to hide my little friends.”

“That’s a shame,”

Kip murmured as he swept her through a turn. “They are important to ye.”

“Yes, but they are not important to others. At tonight’s dinner, for example, I will likely not eat the main meat dish, and I will be mocked if anyone notices.”

Was it her imagination, or did his hold on her tighten momentarily, as if he was reacting to that pronouncement? Eventually, however, Kip offered a relaxed, “Ye should no’ be mocked for what ye believe in. After meeting Becky today, I ken I’ll have to think twice before eating chicken again. They might be a relative.”

Amelia caught her breath, staring up at him. It was...

“No one has ever said that—I mean, felt that way.”

She swallowed, blinking rapidly as she dropped her gaze to his chin. “Thank you.”

He was silent another few turns, then cleared his throat. “Ye said ye raised her from an egg?”

“Yes.”

Amelia’s lips twitched at the memory. “My mother has a cockatoo named Hamish who once belonged to my grandfather. He is a brilliant old bird, although he is a bit vulgar.”

An understatement. “I wanted to try to raise a similar bird, training him or her from infancy, to understand the process. So I procured a dozen eggs and incubated them.”

“Really? How?”

He seemed genuinely interested.

“I had a device which reflected heat. But I learned that my own body heat was most effective. I was hoping the eggs would turn out to be peacocks or parrots, I was promised exotic birds, but instead I got Becky and Charles.”

“Chickens,”

he chuckled. “Albeit lovely chickens.”

Before she could correct him, he asked, “So ye what? Stuck the eggs in yer pocket for the time it took for them to incubate?”

She felt her cheeks heating. Well. Not exactly her pocket. Amelia glanced down at her chest, where her breasts were pushed over the edge of her lovely pink gown, remembering the feel of the eggs nestled snug in there.

“Something like that,”

she managed.

When she glanced up, Kipling’s gaze was locked on her bosoms.

The blush, which had climbed up her cheekbones, now turned around and took a direct dive back down to her chest. She felt it crawling across her skin, simultaneously hot and cold. Or at least, she told herself that’s why she was

shivering.

Or perhaps it is because he is starting at your breasts.

Yes. Well. That too.

“Are ye well?”

Kip’s tone was raspy, not at all its usual smooth self.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:15 am

“I—”

Amelia halted her instinct to assure him everything was fine, and instead, swallowed and did something scandalous. She told the truth. “I am feeling a little odd.”

“Dizzy, nae doubt.”

And before she could respond, he’d spun her out of the group of dancers. Perhaps he’d planned it, or perhaps it was a grand coincidence; whatever the case, they halted in front of the set of double doors which led out onto the balcony.

He tucked her hand in the crook of his elbow and led her sedately out the door.

Once outside, Amelia should have been able to take a deep breath. She’d always preferred the fresh air outdoors to being cooped up inside...but she was finding it hard to breathe while being pressed against Kipling’s scalding side.

They halted by the balustrade, which he propped a hip against and turned to face her. “Better?”

Her hands were in his. Granted, they were both gloved, but she could absolutely feel his warmth, and in the best way possible. How could she not be better?

But what she actually said was, “Should you be out here with me?”

His shrug, his grin, was easy. Charming. Utterly sure of himself. “I’m the Duke of Bestingbum, have ye no’ heard? And yer brother is my best friend.”

Contrary to his smile, his tone sounded a little...bitter.

“You are not excited to become a duke?”

He sighed and glanced down at their hands. He started, as if he'd forgotten their palms were pressed together, but he didn't release her. “I wasnae supposed to be. My father and my older brother both had to die before me.”

She hadn't thought of that. Oh, hell. “I'm sorry.”

He shrugged. “Both of them passed a while ago. My uncle—the last Duke—died in a hunting accident earlier this year.”

A memory surfaced of the newspaper article. “In Canada?”

she asked slowly.

“In America.”

His lip curled wryly. “This was the no'-so-nice uncle I mentioned. He and his oldest son were avid hunters, and saw nothing wrong with shooting buffalo from a moving train and leaving their carcasses to rot. Uncle was after more excitement, however, so he convinced both his sons to ride untrained horses into the herd itself.”

She winced, remembering the newspaper story. “There was a stampede, correct?”

Kip didn't answer for a long moment, even as his thumb began to caress her palm while he stared down. “I suppose wild animals were just trying to protect themselves. I dinnae blame them, but I ken my younger cousin Jerry wouldnae have chosen to be there. He lingered with his injuries, which he didnae deserve either. He was a good lad. Would've made a better duke than me.”

Instinctively, Amelia flipped her hands over in his hold, until she could lace her fingers through his. “That is not true, Kipling. You are smart. You are compassionate.”

His comment about not blaming the buffalo proved that. “You will make a fine Duke.”

He studied her face for a long moment, his gaze flicking between her eyes, as if searching for the truth.

Finally, he admitted, “I am a coward.”

What to say to something like that?

Nothing. Just squeeze his hand .

Ah, that seemed to work, because his lips curled wryly. Self-deprecating.

“I ran away to Europe because I was afraid.”

She opened her mouth to ask Afraid of what , but instead sucked in a gasp as a disoriented moth—likely attracted by the glittering lights of the ballroom, fluttered from the gardens past her face.

Her “ Oh !”

changed to a happy sigh as the poor thing alighted on her collarbone. Smiling, she glanced up at Kipling to see his gaze had followed the moth.

“A peppered moth,”

she whispered. “See how beautifully it is camouflaged? I once collected the caterpillars just to watch them pupate, then I released them into the wild.”

His gaze lifted to hers. “Perhaps this is one of them.”

He was whispering as well. Was it in awe? Or only because she was?

Either way, Amelia’s smile was bright. “Perhaps,”

she agreed, even though she knew the moth’s lifespan made such a thing impossible. Look at her, ignoring science all for a handsome man. “A descendent, at least.”

“Then we must keep it safe,”

he whispered.

Before she realized his intent, Kipling had dropped one of her hands and reached for her chest. His fingertips skimmed across her skin as he scooped up the moth and then gently—so gently—placed the poor confused thing on the balustrade beside them.

“Go on, then. Go.”

Kip was looking at the moth, but Amelia was looking at him.

Her entire body had shuddered at his touch, and her stomach was knotted from his sweetness. She found herself leaning toward him—as if he were the flame and she was the helpless moth—because whatever infatuation she’d thought herself in the midst of two years ago?

Oh, it was so much worse now.

Or better. Possibly better. Much, much better.

“Kipling?”

she breathed, and when he lifted his gaze to hers, she forced herself to be brave. To speak the unspeakable. “Why did you leave?”

For a moment, she thought he wasn’t going to answer. In the light from the ballroom over her shoulder, his blue eyes glittered with a fierceness she didn’t recognize.

Finally, he took a deep breath. “Ye, Mellie. I left because of ye.”

Her knees weakened, chest tightening in horror. Her? She’d been the one to chase away her brother’s dear friend? She’d been the one to cause Alistair such loneliness, and Kipling such homesickness?

“What did I do wrong?”

she croaked.

“Nothing.”

Kip’s whisper was feather-light, a caress. “Everything.”

Staring up at him, she tried to make sense of what he was saying. His hand lifted, reaching to cup her cheek, but he hesitated, hand hovering.

This was bad. This was very bad. He couldn’t even touch her?

Amelia’s eyes were burning. Do not cry, do not cry, do not cry . “Kipling?”

she whispered again.

“Och, Mellie.”

When he said her name like that, full of yearning, like it was a curse and a blessing, she didn’t hate it.

“I left because of ye .”

Finally Kip’s fingertips rested against her cheek. “For so long, ye were just wee Mellie, Alistair’s youngest sister. Passionate and stubborn and outspoken. I thought of ye as a younger sister—always there, and even when ye were being annoying, I cared for ye.”

He...cared for her?

Cared for you like a little sister! Pay attention! That is not what we were going for!

“And then...”

He took a deep breath and dropped his hand. “And then ye grew. I came to visit Alistair one day, and ye were suddenly no’ a lass any longer, but a young lady. A beautiful young lady. Almost eighteen, a lady grown... But I kenned I could no’ lust after ye. No’ after I saw what ye’d become.”

“What I had become?”

His gaze was almost sad. “Perfection. I couldnae stop thinking of ye, Mellie. It was wrong , to lust after Alistair’s younger sister, to desire ye, to need ye—particularly having nae title, nae prospects. I was a coward. I couldnae handle the guilt and temptation and anger at myself. So I left. I ran away, and I’ve stayed away.”

Her heart was pounding in her chest and her lips parted, trying to make sense of what he was saying.

He'd...lusted after her? Kip thought she was beautiful? Perfect?

He'd known her for most of her life, known her eccentricities, known her hoyden behavior, known her outspoken beliefs, known her nonsense...and he still thought she was perfect?

Tears were absolutely prickling at the backs of her eyes.

“Mellie?”

Kip's eyes looked sad. “I'm sorry to frighten ye like this. I hadnae intended on telling ye, truly. I thought I'd come home and ye'd be married and I could forget my obsession.”

Obsession .

Amelia swallowed. “I am...glad you told me,”

she whispered. “Because...”

“Because?”

Kip prompted when she trailed off.

She found herself leaning toward him again, unconsciously pushing herself up onto the balls of her feet, balancing herself in her dancing slippers, reaching for him with her lips, her breath, her very being .

“Because I felt the same way about you,”

she breathed. “I have spent two years missing you as much as Alistair has, though differently, I’ll admit. I knew I had no claim to you, but I used to live for your visits, your smiles, your voice. Even if it was just a glimpse.”

Kipling’s eyes closed on a whispered curse, and then he was pulling her against him. “Mellie—” he began.

“What is going on out here?”

The new voice—strident, shrill—cut through the peace of the balcony. Before Amelia could suck in a breath, Kipling had set her apart from him and was doing his best to appear nonchalant.

“I asked a question!”

The woman was stomping up beside them, and Amelia tried to gain control of her breathing as she turned to face the vision in blue beside her. The woman was blonde and poised, her eyes shooting angry darts, the jewels at her neck and in her hair sparkling almost as much as she herself.

Kipling cleared his throat. “Lady Amelia had an insect—a moth—land on her shoulder. I was assisting her.”

“That is disgusting ,”

the woman spat out, shivering. “An insect touched her? Did you kill it?”

Amelia was trying desperately to regain her equilibrium. Kipling wisely ignored the question.

“Lady Amelia Kincaid, may I introduce Lady Emma Iverson?”

The newcomer smiled nastily and reached out her hand. “His betrothed. ”

Kip told himself he wasn’t hiding. Not really. Hiding was such a strong word.

Aye, he was spending a lot of time in his study, and aye, he was avoiding his mother, and aye, he was having his butler turn away visitors, but he wasn’t hiding . Not exactly.

Dinnae lie to yerself, ye dobber. Ye’re absolutely hiding.

“I cannae believe ye actually admitted it to her,”

Fawkes Mackenzie mused, staring into the depths of the whisky he hadn’t sipped. “Are ye daft? Did ye forget ye were engaged?”

“I’m no’ actually engaged,”

Kip snapped, sagging back in his chair. “Fine, if our mothers had their way we’d be engaged, but I havenae asked her.”

“Ye danced with her—Emma, I mean—a few times at that ball.”

With a grunt, Kip lifted his booted heels to the large desk in front of him. How did Fawkes always seem to know so much of what was going on? For that matter, how had the man found his way in here?

The butler wouldn’t have let him in, especially not so early in the morning. But this morning Kip had come downstairs, settled himself behind the big desk with the piles and piles of paperwork...and nearly shat himself when Fawkes had unfolded himself

from one of the chairs by the hearth.

Had one of his oldest friends taken to house-breaking?

Still, it had been a nice distraction, and the pair had spent several hours catching up and reminiscing. His friend had even proven a steady hand when it came to transcribing the columns of acreage Kip had been wrestling with, and a keen mind when it came to devising a solution to the problem with the retaining wall along the river at Bestingbum.

They'd taken luncheon together, and eventually Fawkes had steered the conversation toward what he clearly wanted to know and perhaps why he had crept around the butler in the first place; what had happened at the ball between Kip and Amelia.

It hadn't seemed disloyal at the time, to tell the man Kip had known since they were in school together. But now he was second-guessing himself.

"I dinnae love Emma,"

he pointed out. "I didnae ken I was expected to marry her until I returned home."

"As a duke. She likely wouldnae have looked at ye twice, without the title."

Fawkes's lips curled bitterly as he swirled his drink, but didn't lift it. "Luckily, ye have made nae public insinuation of a match. But being caught on the balcony with Mellie..."

Amelia .

She preferred to be called Amelia now. But Kip had fallen back on that nickname because to him, that's who she would always be; Mellie, wild and free and exuberant.

He'd admired her as a lassie, and as she'd grown, that admiration had turned to something else. Something delicious.

"Do ye love her?"

Fawkes's sudden question had Kip's head jerking up. "What?"

"Ye said ye dinnae love Emma. Do ye love Amelia?"

"I—Christ, Fawkes."

Dragging his hand through his dark hair, Kip glowered at his friend. "What kind of question is that?"

"The kind Alistair is going to be asking, if he finds out ye compromised his sister."

Kip's boots slammed into the floor. "I didnae compromise her!"

Of course he'd thought about it enough over the years—tasting those lips, touching that skin—but he cared too much for her and her family to try such a thing. And yes, he'd only not compromised her because they had been so rudely interrupted... "We were just...talking."

"And ye told her ye left England because of her. That's the truth?"

Kip winced. "Aye. I'm sorry."

His lithe friend studied him a few heartbeats too long to be comfortable, then shrugged. "Dinnae fash. I figured it out ages ago, and I suspect Alistair has as well. We're no' fools. Mellie was the only one in the dark."

Until he'd opened his big mouth.

“So, Kip...do ye love her?”

Yet again, Kip took the coward's way out. “I dinnae ken.”

He didn't know her. Not the Lady Amelia he'd discovered in that corridor. Did he?

Was she the same person he'd loved all those years ago? The strength of his feelings had been what had caused him to flee to the Continent, after all.

“Well, friend, I think ye ought to figure that out.”

When Kip raised a brow, his friend shrugged and placed the un-touched whisky on the desk between them. “Emma—yer mother's choice for ye—has already started declaring herself yer fiancée, aye? But clearly ye have stronger feelings for Amelia than ye expected. Is it that ye dinnae want to marry at all? I can understand that.”

Kip's denial was immediate. “Nay, and I ken I must marry. My uncle's demise—me inheriting this title—has proven there's nae guarantee of tomorrow. Bestingbum needs an heir, and—”

“And ye want to be happy,”

Fawkes finished.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:15 am

Well...aye. Of course. Didn't everyone want that?

"I dinnae ken what to do,"

he sighed.

"First of all, decide on yer feelings for Amelia. If ye're no' going to marry her, ye might as well match with Emma. She's wealthy, she's beautiful, and ye've said ye need heirs."

He shrugged, his body language communicating nonchalance, belied by his intense study of Kip. "It wouldnae be a hardship, would it? So why no' marry her?"

Marry Lady Emma? A week ago, Kip hadn't objected to the plan. He might not have agreed whole-heartedly, but he'd been willing to get to know the young woman. Now, however, the thought left a sour taste in his mouth.

He didn't want Emma.

Not for the rest of his life. Not ever .

Not since he'd held Amelia in his arms.

Groaning, he dropped his head back on the chair, wincing at the dull thud .

Why had he asked Mellie to dance? Why had he looked into her eyes, inhaled her scent, felt how perfectly she fit? He'd been better off not knowing. Just imagining.

This is why ye left for so long. To protect her from yer lust .

It was a good thing she hadn't pressed herself against him that night on the balcony, or she would've felt exactly how strongly his body was reacting to her.

There was a polite knock at the door, then the butler opened it. "A visitor, Your Grace,"

he intoned.

Without opening his eyes, Kip groaned, "Nay. Nae visitors."

The butler ignored him. "It is the Duke of Effinghell."

"Fooking hell."

"Nay,"

Fawkes quipped dryly, "Effinghell."

Alistair nudged the butler aside and stepped through the door, then closed the door in the old man's face.

"What the shite, Alistair."

Kip gaped at his friend. "I thought ye never left yer house!"

"He does sometimes,"

murmured Fawkes, as if he knew something Kip didn't.

“Dinner,”

croaked Alistair, folding his huge frame into the second chair across the desk from Kip. “Tomorrow.”

Kip’s brow twitched. “Was that an invitation, or a command?”

“Yes,”

his friend rasped.

But the man’s eyes were scrunched with humor, and now he pulled from his breast pocket one of those little cheap notebooks a reporter might carry. That’s right, his wife owned a newspaper, did she not?

Alistair’s writing was bold as the small pencil scratched across the paper. “ Amelia told us you danced. Talked. You are engaged to be married? ”

“No’ quite,”

Fawkes murmured.

“No’ at all,”

Kip countered. “Ah—what else did she say?”

“ Nothing much. ”

Alistair’s lips twitched upward as he wrote. “ But she blushed often. Are you sweet on my sister? ”

Fawkes broke out into guffaws as Kip groaned again and sunk down into his chair.

“Sweet on her? Christ, Alistair, ye make me sound like I’m a young lad.”

Alistair didn’t correct the assumption, just watched Kip expectantly, one brow raised. There was no judgement in his gaze, but faint amusement.

Damn. He wasn’t going to let this go.

“Christ,”

murmured Kip again, scrubbing a hand over his face. “ Aye! There, are ye happy? Aye, I’m sweet on yer sister. I have been for years.”

It took a minute to figure out the noise Alistair was making was supposed to be laughter . Even when they’d been in school together, Alistair had rarely allowed himself to laugh , because the sound was even odder than his ruined voice.

What in the effing hell?

“I’m sorry,”

Kip admitted stiffly. “I dinnae mean to overstep the boundaries of our friendship. It was why I left.”

Abruptly, his friend’s strange laughter ceased. “ Why?”

came the scratch on the paper. “She is a good lass woman. Smart. Funny. Bold. A bit strange when it comes to animals. You’d have to take Becky. Is she not worth having your admiration ‘ sweet’ ? ”

Fawkes snorted. “A bit?”

But Kip held Alistair’s gaze. He...wasn’t angry?

All these years, Kip had kept his feelings a secret because he didn’t want to offend his best friend. He was no lout, to break a friendship over a woman. But...

“Ye...dinnae mind me... admiring yer sister?”

Alistair slowly shook his head, holding Kip’s gaze.

Letting out a whoosh of breath, Kip sat forward in his chair. “I ken she’s worth any man’s admiration. But she’s the sister of a Duke, and I couldnae hope ye would consent...”

When he trailed off, Fawkes—rather unhelpfully—pointed out, “Ye’re a duke, Kipling.”

“Well now I am. Then I was just a—”

Alistair held up a hand, palm out, to stop him, then reached for his pencil. “A hard worker, a moral man, and a good friend.”

Before Kip had a chance to decide if he should be flattered or embarrassed, his friend wrote, “My only concern is if you plan to marry her, or just dally .”

Dally ? Sweet on? Good Lord, was the man stuck in the last century?

But Alistair was watching him closely, and Kip found he couldn’t give the man the answer he immediately needed. That he deserved. That Mellie deserved.

“That’s what we were talking about when ye came in,”

Fawkes explained, shifting a booted foot across the opposite knee. “He’s supposed to marry a lass his mother’s picked out for him, but he doesnae want to, now he’s set eyes on Amelia again. He’s gone all sweet and melty on her.”

He glanced at Kip. “Is that a fair summary?”

But Kip was still watching Alistair, an idea clawing at his brain, uncertain if he should actually give it voice. But...if he didn’t ask, he’d never know.

“Are ye saying...if I offered for Amelia, ye wouldnae object?”

Another slow shake of the head from Alistair, this time accompanied by a slight smirk.

Kipling exhaled.

“I’ve no’ dallied with her, nae matter how much I wished to. I’d rather court her. Proper, like. As she deserves.”

“Nae need,”

croaked Alistair. Then, grinning, he wrote, “ Amelia has always fancied ye. Come to dinner tomorrow evening, and plead your case there.”

The thought was terrifying and exciting and incredibly arousing, all at once.

Could he do it? Could he convince Amelia to marry him? She said, the other night at the ball, that she’d cared for him before he’d run away. It had been two years, two years apart, perhaps two years wasted. Kip had had no idea, but now that he was here,

and she was here...could they start a future together?

With no secrets?

But then reality began to drizzle on his excitement.

His shoulders slumped. “I—I cannae. Mother has been talking about a dinner tomorrow evening with Lady Stallings and her daughter. I’m supposed to escort all three of them out to a fine meal somewhere where we can all be seen.”

Alistair frowned but Fawkes just grinned. “I can think of nae place finer than Effinghell House. Why no’ bring them too?”

“Because, ye great git, Alistair doesnae like too much company,”

Kip shot back.

But Alistair shrugged. “Perhaps...worth it.”

When they turned their attention to him, he shrugged again and wrote, “Stallings would not pass up an invitation to my house. I would not mind meeting the woman you are throwing over my sister for.”

“I—I’m no’ —”

sputtered Kip, but when Alistair began to grin, it was obvious he was teasing. Teasing ? Marriage certainly had mellowed this friend of his.

“Look, Alistair, Emma was my mother’s choice. I care nothing for the lass, but I dinnae want to hurt my mother, or her friendship with Lady Stallings. Or Emma herself, I s’pose. Perhaps this is a bad idea, to have them all together when I set out to

woo Amelia.”

“ Or —hear me out—it’s a brilliant idea,”

Fawkes grinned lazily. “Get it all out in the open. Clear the air. Cause a scene.”

“I had nae idea ye were such a fan of chaos and drama,”

muttered Kip.

His friend shrugged. “I’m bored. And I’m going to invite myself, if ye dinnae.”

“Ye’re invited,”

croaked Alistair.

“Excellent.”

Kip’s gaze swung from one friend to the other. “We’re really doing this? Inviting my almost-fiancée and her family to the dinner where I hope to woo yer sister? It sounds like a bad dime novel, or one of those torrid romances ye used to read, Alistair.”

Instead of being insulted, Alistair’s grin grew. “Still read. So...eight tomorrow?”

Kipling blew out a breath.

The thought of being able to finally confess his feelings for Amelia, his true feelings, and doing it with her brother’s blessing...aye, that was exciting. But doing it in front of Mother and her friend—and Lady Emma...was daunting. He had no wish to hurt any of them.

But he couldn't pass up the opportunity.

"Aye,"

he sighed, his heart already pounding. "Aye, dinner tomorrow."

One way or the other, his life would change shortly after eight the following evening.

Amelia wasn't certain if she was giddy with excitement, or on the verge of vomiting. Perhaps both.

Kipling would be joining them for dinner! Tonight! Mother had announced it that morning, and Alistair had confirmed it.

But he'd also said the Earl of Stallings' family would be joining them. Which meant Kipling was bringing his betrothed.

Almost betrothed.

The distinction didn't exactly help.

That night on the balcony, when the other woman had introduced herself so boldly, Amelia's heart had dropped into her stomach. Then Kipling had grinned—a sickly grin, not his usual one—and assured her the betrothal wasn't official yet. Lady Emma had merely clucked her tongue, slipped her arm through Kipling's, and laughed.

"A mere formality, darling!"

she'd declared.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:15 am

And Amelia might have sunk into the floor in a puddle of embarrassment, or slapped Kipling for making her think he had feelings for her.

But what stopped her was the look on his face; he looked awkward and uncomfortable yes, but more than that...he'd looked sad. Like it wasn't what he'd intended.

So unlike the brilliant, beautiful expression on his face when he'd told her he'd cared for her, that she was the reason he'd fled.

So he used to care for you. Two years is a long time, especially when he has been abroad flirting with gorgeous mademoiselles in France, and returned home a duke . Just because he once cared for you does not mean he still does.

Yes, well. The argument was nothing new.

Amelia frowned at her reflection in the mirror.

Her subconscious had been reminding her of this approximately every twelve minutes for the last several days. She woke up thinking of Kipling, and went to bed thinking of Kipling.

In fact...

Amelia's eyes cut to the side, resting on the small bookshelf. There, hidden between a treatise on the feeding habits of goats and volumes one through thirty-seven of Birds of Britain by Ava Ian, her battered copy of A Harlot's Guide to the Forbidden and

Delightful Arts was hidden.

How many times over the years had she pulled out the book, hidden beneath her covers, and touched herself breathless, thinking of Kipling Mancheste?

Well, last night, she'd done it again—only this time, it was with the knowledge that at one point, he'd cared for her. Wanted her. Lusted after her.

Could he care for her again? Could he still care for her?

Not if he is bringing his betrothed to your home for dinner tonight .

Ah, yes, there was that.

Amelia sighed, stomach in knots. She had no idea what tonight would bring, but she was ready. As ready as she would ever be, she supposed. Tucking one last strand of hair behind her ears, she heard a distinctive cluck behind her.

“I know, I know. I am being silly.”

She twisted in her chair to see Becky pecking at the fringe on the bottom of her curtains. “He either cares for me, or he does not, and worrying will not change that.”

When she crossed the room, her dear pet lifted her head, gave a happy little cheep just as she had when she'd been tiny, and toddled across the room toward Amelia. She scooped up Becky and cuddled her under her chin.

“You are a good little friend, are you not?”

she murmured, stroking the hen's feathers. “So beautiful. So sweet.”

Dumb as a bowl of corn, but still, sweet.

Becky tried to gobble at her pearls.

“Come along, dearest. Let us get you out to the garden with your brother before the guests arrive.”

But as she stepped onto the landing, the bird tucked up against her chest, she realized she was too late. Had she really lingered in her room so long? The butler was accepting wraps from Lady Stallings and Lady Emma, while Olivia urged them to join her and Mother in the parlor.

Drat .

Amelia shrank back against the wall.

Perhaps they wouldn't see her. Perhaps she could hide here, and once they all retired to the parlor for a visit before dinner, she could sneak Becky out to the garden, then join them.

As she watched, Kipling stepped up and offered Emma his arm. Amelia wanted it to be perfunctory, cold...but he was incapable of being impolite, she knew.

And Emma simpered happily as she slid her arm through his proprietarily. As if she owned him already.

Amelia felt her chest clench. Perhaps it was the truth. Perhaps Kipling had chosen that woman for good by now. Emma said something, and Kipling's lips twitched. Yes, as Amelia watched, he turned down to the beautiful blonde woman at his side, and quipped something in return, which caused Emma to laugh—a tinkling laugh as beautiful as she was.

Amelia hated it as much as she hated the crushing weight in her chest, the knowledge Kipling Mancheste would never be hers...and now she was going to have to pretend to be polite all through dinner.

Perhaps she could feign a headache and stay in her room.

In her arms the hen shifted, and Amelia knew she needed to get the bird to the garden, lest she risk chicken shite on her pink gown.

“Shh,”

she murmured, stroking the hen as below Emma tossed her head back and laughed gaily yet again. Anger spiked in Amelia’s throat. “Oh my God, Becky. Look at her duke.”

Becky, showing all the social nuances of a brain the size of its eyeball, squawked loudly.

Lord and Lady Stallings had already entered the parlor, but Emma swung around, taking Kipling with her, as her gaze went unerringly to the landing.

“Why, it is little Lady Amelia, our favorite animal lover! Amelia, darling, are you feeling quite well? Your throat is paining you?”

The mockery in her tone made it clear she knew Amelia’s reputation, so there was nothing to do but lift her chin, gather her skirts—and chicken—and march down the stairs. “Lady Emma,”

she acknowledged coolly. “Your Grace.”

Emma tsked . “You should greet His Grace first, you know. He is a Duke .”

As if Amelia could forget. She turned her full attention to the man standing stiffly beside Emma. “Kipling,”

she managed, past a lump in her throat.

Something flashed in those beautiful blue eyes, something like...gratitude? “Taking Becky out for a walk?”

he asked nonchalantly.

Amelia hefted the chicken slightly. This was an easier conversation if she pretended Emma wasn’t here. “She helped me get ready. Now I need to deposit her in the garden with Charles.”

It was clear Emma was irritated at being left out of the conversation. “Charles?”

She laughed shrilly. “A servant?”

Kipling stiffly explained, “Charles is Becky’s brother. Another Shanghai white.”

He...remembered Becky’s breed?

Amelia felt the band around her heart loosen a little.

“You have chickens ,”

Emma stated, as if she couldn’t quite comprehend something so ridiculous. “Which you carry around? As if they were...reticules?”

She burst into laughter. “Oh, how delightful. I knew you were eccentric, Lady Amelia, but this is preposterous!”

Before she could give anyone a chance to answer, she'd tugged Kipling toward the parlor. "Come along, Your Grace. You must introduce me formally to the Duke of Effinghell!"

Over his shoulder, Kipling shot Amelia an apologetic glance, but it didn't help, not really.

Sighing, Amelia turned toward the back of the house and the kitchen gardens. This was going to be a truly terrible dinner.

Dinner was truly terrible.

Oh, Emma was polite enough, and Mother and Lady Stallings dominated the conversation, sharing stories of their time in school. Their shenanigans kept Alistair's wife, mother, and sister Amanda giggling throughout, which was a bit of relief.

But Kipling was incredibly uncomfortable. It just seemed like such bad form to have invited the Stallingses to Alistair's home, when the man was so reclusive.

Remember, Alistair suggested it .

In fact, the man seemed completely oblivious to any sort of tension. He ate his chicken à la King , he sipped his wine, he watched indulgently as his new wife Olivia kept the conversation moving...but he didn't participate.

The other person at the table who didn't participate was Amelia. In fact, she hadn't looked his way since they'd all been seated. She took an occasional sip of water, she pushed her rice around her plate, and she occasionally picked out a mushroom or two...but she absolutely wasn't enjoying herself.

Anyone could see that.

Anyone who could be bothered to really see her, that was.

Every once in a while, Alistair would catch Kip's eye and dart a gaze toward Amelia, and Kip would have to press his lips together and study his own dinner. He didn't know what to say to her...how to engage her in conversation after that stunningly awkward encounter in the hall.

How to engage her at all .

She thinks ye're betrothed to Emma, and ye've really done nothing to disabuse her of that. Especially the way she saw ye follow Emma like a dog with yer tail between yer legs .

He'd thought it best to leave Amelia to her chickening alone, but now he wondered if he ought to have gone with her to the gardens, to have the conversation he so desperately wanted to have.

Across from him, Emma was clearly disgruntled by not being the center of attention. She frumped, she frowned, she sighed deeply...but she didn't interrupt.

He should've known she was just waiting for an opening. After a particularly funny story Mother told about Lady Stalling's attempts to sneak into the stables to win a dare by painting a horse red, the laughter had died down and Emma clearly decided it was her time to strike.

"Lady Amelia, are you not hungry?"

Her tone was overly sweet, too solicitous. "I notice you are not enjoying this scrumptious meal. I hope you are not ill?"

Amelia's head jerked upward, but she seemed confused, surprised at being addressed.

What had been occupying her mind?

Before she could decide how to respond—thank goodness—Olivia answered. “My sister-in-law doesn’t eat meat, Lady Emma. Unfortunately this dish can’t really be altered much to suit her tastes.”

“Does not eat meat ?”

Emma sniffed, still staring down her nose at Amelia. “How freakish . And such a headache for the rest of you, I am certain.”

As Amelia blinked in surprise, Alistair began to frown, and the others at the table stifled their gasps at the insult. Again, Olivia responded, her tone sharper. “Amelia’s preferences cause no headaches for us. Our cook is supremely talented with cheese and eggs and all sorts of non-meat options. This is her home, after all. We often partake in such fare ourselves.”

It was clear Emma understood when she was being put down, because she offered the hostess a weak smile. “How...delightful.”

“Emma,”

murmured her mother, but Emma merely waved away the warning and pierced Amelia with another glare, another too-sweet smile.

“I am surprised, Lady Amelia, that you are not choosing to partake in this particular dish, even so.”

Kip watched Amelia swallow. “Oh?”

He wanted to reach for her. To protect her. To block her from Emma’s snide tongue.

“Indeed. While we were waiting for you to join us in the parlor—so strange that you were not on hand to greet guests, I thought—I overheard the servants chatting about tonight’s dinner. Apparently the chicken was one the cook caught in her own garden! I assumed, with your interest in animals, you would find that fascinating.”

Amelia had gone suddenly, alarmingly pale. “The garden?”

she croaked. “Our garden? Out back?”

Emma tapped a perfect fingernail against the white linen tablecloth. She was trying for thoughtful nonchalance, but her sharp gaze belied the effect. “Yes...yes, I believe that is what they said.”

“Excuse me,”

Amelia announced abruptly, shoving her chair away from the table and standing. “I must check...Charles was... Excuse me,”

she repeated, as she stumbled away from the table.

Was Kip the only one who’d seen the tears in her eyes? He wanted to call out to her, to tell her this meal had been cooking since long before she’d even deposited Becky in the garden, but he had no idea how long the other chicken had been outside...or not.

As Amelia fled, her sister made to stand, but caught her mother’s eye and slowly sank back down. The responses were mixed; Mother and Lady Stallings hummed in concern, Olivia grabbed Alistair’s hand, and Emma...

Emma smiled a wicked, cruel sort of smile and sat back in her chair, as if pleased with herself.

And Kip finally understood what needed to happen.

Tossing down his napkin, he stood. “Lady Emma,”

he began, “I ken our mothers once hoped for a match between us. But ye have proven yerself to be a cruel, spiteful bitch, and although ye’ve hurt a beautiful soul, I have to thank ye for doing it in front of our families. Now they’ll understand my reasons when I tell ye I would never marry a woman like ye.”

Emma had sucked in an offended breath and now watched him, wide-eyed. “Why, I—How dare you, sir!”

“That’s Yer Grace to ye, Lady Emma.”

Kip planted his fists on the table and leaned closer. “And I dare , because Lady Amelia is kind, gentle, passionate about her interests, and wholly without subterfuge. She doesnae deserve the kind of maliciousness ye’ve heaped upon her.”

Emma folded her hands in her lap and sniffed haughtily. “Well, after the way you were cozying up with her at my ball, it suddenly makes sense why you would defend her in such a way, Your Grace. You might think it fine to dally with an Earl’s daughter, but surely even a savage Scot like yourself understands there are consequences from ruining a Duke’s sister?”

There were more gasps around the table, and Emma’s father, the Earl of Stallings, blustered, “I say, gel, shut your mouth.”

Kip’s eyes narrowed. “If ye’re implying I’ve ruined Amelia in any way—”

“It is obvious, is it not?”

Abruptly, he straightened, his mind made up. "I've no' dallied with ye, Lady Emma, any more than was required of me to satisfy my mother."

He turned to the two ladies. "I will no' be offering for Emma, Lady Stallings. I ken my mother values yer friendship, so I'll no' tell ye what I think of the way ye've spoiled yer youngest daughter."

His gaze swept the table. "I'll no' spread any stories about her hateful tongue, but I make nae promises of others here tonight."

Emma was sputtering. "Hateful! How dare you! Everyone knows Amelia is an oddity, and you have clearly been having your fun with her!"

Kip's smile was slow, wicked. "No' yet."

He nodded to Alistair. "Effinghell,"

he acknowledged. "Ladies."

When he shoved his chair away from the table, Amanda was the one to ask meekly, "And where are you going, Your Grace?"

Kip smiled at Emma when he answered. "To the gardens. To find that odd woman, and beg her to marry me."

Alistair grinned, and Kip felt his heart lighten.

This is what he'd been looking for.

Amelia .

“Charles!”

Amelia had never been so happy to see a chicken in her life. “Oh, Charles, there you are!”

She threw herself forward, not caring that the autumn dirt caked her gown as she fell to her knees, reaching for the white cock. “You naughty boy, I have been looking for you everywhere!”

she declared as she cuddled the bird to her chest.

Well, fine, not really . The garden wasn’t that big. Effinghell House was larger than most Town homes, but the garden was still only tucked back near the mews. The cook used it for herbs, and Becky and Charles used it to peck for insects.

And for one, horrible moment, Amelia had believed that the cook had used it to scoop up poor Charles and serve him for dinner.

Do not be silly. Of course that would not happen! Charles and Becky are family!

Charles, and Becky, and Amelia’s collection of sea urchins, and the white mice she had to breed to keep her python fed, and the lemurs...

All family. Her family , at least.

The frantic tears which had threatened during her mad rush toward the garden now spilled, even as she felt Becky pecking mindlessly at her slippers.

Her family .

She had Mother, and Amanda, and Alistair and Olivia...and one day, those two

would have children and she would become an aunt. Her family, and her animals...

And that was it.

Tonight proved she never had a chance with Kipling. He might have claimed he wasn't officially engaged to Lady Emma Iverson, but he hadn't stood up to Emma's cruelty, had he?

"Come here, Becky,"

she ordered, and reached around to scoop up the hen. When she buried her nose in the fancy ruff of feathers, Becky squawked in what Emma chose to believe was comfort. "You are a good girl, are you not? And you, Charles. I am so pleased you are safe."

"I am too."

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:15 am

Amelia stiffened. For half a heartbeat, she'd thought Charles had responded to her—thought she was going mad—until the sound of the voice registered.

That soft caramel tone. The Voice. The Voice.

Kipling .

She froze, even as she felt him moving behind her.

“Safe from the cook’s chopping block,”

he murmured as he lowered himself to the dirt beside her.

“Yes,”

she rasped, staring down at the birds in her arms because that was easier than looking at him. “I should have known they would both be safe.”

“Are they?”

Kipling reached out to brush a fingertip over Becky’s head. “Because, love, I hate to tell ye...but ye’re choking yer chicken.”

A startled laugh burst out of her lips, and she loosened her hold on the birds as she settled back on her heels.

Both of them turned in her arms. Charles jumped down, oblivious to her worry—

Men !—but Becky settled into Amelia’s lap.

Her gaze was locked on the hen, her breathing shallow. Why was he here? Why had he come to the garden?

Was it possible he’d chosen her over Emma?

“Amelia, I...”

He began, but when he trailed off, she held her breath.

When his hand covered hers—where it rested atop the chicken—she startled and darted a glance at him.

“There ye are,”

he murmured, his lips curling softly. “This is easier with ye looking at me.”

“What is?”

she whispered.

“Me telling ye my feelings.”

Oh .

He shifted until he was kneeling in front of her, his back to the rosemary, his gaze intense. “Amelia, ye ken I cared for ye before I left, aye? I told ye the reason I ran, because I didnae want to besmirched yer honor—or my friendship with Alistair—by acting upon any of my feelings.”

She swallowed, now unable to look away.

“What I didnae tell ye,”

he whispered, “was that my feelings havenae changed.”

It took a moment for his words to sink in, and her lips formed a little “oh”

of surprise. “They...have not?”

Kip shook his head. “I love ye, Lady Amelia Kincaid. I have for so many years, and I thought I’d go mad from it. I wasnae worthy of loving ye, no’ then—”

She squeezed his hand. “You are the worthiest, Kipling. You are the same person you have always been.”

The silence lasted a dozen heartbeats, before The Grin slowly arrived.

“Ye’re the only one who can see that,”

he murmured, his blue gaze caressing her face. “Ye and Alistair and Fawkes, I guess. To everyone else, I’m a duke.”

“Well, yes.”

Amelia shrugged a little awkwardly, what with the chicken in her lap. “You are a duke. But you are also still Kipling...the man I used to spy on when he visited my brother, because I thought him the most handsome man in the world.”

He lifted her hand to his lips, kissing her fingertips without dropping her gaze. “And now?”

Amelia forced herself to take a deep breath. “I still think you the most handsome man in the world. But...”

When he nipped at the skin on the back of her knuckles, a jolt of something shot through her body, and her eyes opened wide.

“But?”

Kip prompted.

“But I also think you are...kind...and supportive and-and-and—”

“Ye’re having trouble concentrating, love?”

He’d flipped her hand over, and his lips were now pressed against her wrist. Each kiss was a brand against her soul.

“And you see me ,”

she gasped out, pressing her thighs together and squirming a bit. “You always have.”

“And I always will,”

he promised.

That vow seemed... important . It probably was. But Amelia was having trouble concentrating.

“Amelia, ye have my sincere apologies for everything that bitch has ever said to ye.”

She gasped, half horrified, half delighted. “Emma?”

“I wasnae going to speak her name.”

There was a sparkle in his eyes as he brushed his lips across her wrist again, then reached for her other hand. “But aye, her. My association with her—my mother’s friendship with her mother—brought her into yer orbit. Thus her cruelty is my fault.”

“N-nay.”

The man had turned his attention to her other wrist, and without dropping the first one. “She is— oh .”

“Ye told me that ye once cared for me.”

He watched her over the top of her knuckles. “Do ye think ye might learn to love me again, Mellie?”

Oh, my heart.

“I-I do,”

she gasped, delighted by the sensations coursing through her body, and the look of promise in his eyes.

He grinned. “I like the sound of those words on yer lips. If ye ask me the same...?”

“Could you—could you love me again, Kipling?”

Amelia whispered, eyes wide.

“Och, darling, I already do. I’ve loved ye for years. I still love ye. I’ll love ye forever.”

She melted.

That was the only explanation.

Between the heat of his gaze, and his teasing kisses, and the whole sitting-on-the-damp-ground thing...she melted.

Right into his arms.

One moment, she was upright, the next she was clasped to Kip's chest, her arms around his neck, and he was beaming down at her.

And Becky the chicken was still in her lap, somehow.

"Can I kiss ye, Mellie?"

he murmured.

"If you do not, I shall likely perish posthaste."

The Grin flashed, and then his lips claimed hers.

Finally .

Part of Amelia was singing in joy, knowing that after so many long years, she was finally able to taste Kipling Manchestre. Another part of her was telling the first part to shut up and pay attention, because this was a truly remarkable experience.

And all of her was melting again.

His lips were remarkable. Soft and determined all at once, his beard a delightful

sensation against her skin. He showed her how to tease, how to play. When he nibbled at her lower lip, she gasped, and he used the opportunity to drag his tongue along the crease of her lips.

Well, that was even more delightful, wasn't it?

Their tongues caressed one another, playfully at first, then intensely. The kiss grew too large to contain, and exploded into a dozen smaller kisses, each of which was placed along her jaw, and her throat, and once, the tip of her nose, which made her smile.

Amelia was still smiling when they finally broke apart, breathing heavily. His palm cupped the side of her neck and he rested his forehead against hers, looking as if he was desperately fighting for control.

“Marry me, Mellie?”

Kip murmured.

She thought her heart had been full.

It turned out, it could take a bit more shock. “Marry...?”

Kip straightened, pulling away just enough to look into her eyes, but not so much that it broke their connection.

“Marry me, Mellie,”

he repeated. “I swear to ye, I'll make ye a fine husband. I'll spend the rest of my days loving ye, and proving how much I love ye. I'll support ye in all yer endeavors, whether that's raising prize ornamental chicken breeds or reform charities. I'll be

more than happy to find space at Bestingbum for all of yer— our —pets. I'll even give up eating meat, if that's what ye want."

She was crying, wasn't she? She was absolutely crying.

"Kipling,"

she choked out, her palm cupping his cheek. "You mean it?"

"Aye."

He winced. "I'll miss bacon desperately, but if it means so much to ye—"

"No!"

She was laughing through her tears now. "I would not separate a man from his bacon. The rest? About loving me forever and wanting to marry me?"

His lips found hers once more. "I meant all of it, love. All of it ."

In between kisses, he murmured, "Marry me, Mellie. Make me the happiest man in Britain, and I swear I'll spend the rest of my life making ye happy."

"Oh, Kipling!"

She tightened her hold on him. "You already do. You always have."

His lips were trailing down her throat now. "So?"

"Yes! I would be honored to be your wife!"

“The Duchess of Bestingbum?”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:15 am

“No.”

She stopped him by brushing a kiss against his lips this time, remembering what he'd taught her of kissing just moments before. “Not a duchess. I mean, not especially. Just...your wife. Mrs. Kipling Mancheste. It is all I have ever wanted.”

That beloved grin grew. “Ye mean it, Mellie?”

“Forever,”

Amelia whispered, just before his lips claimed hers.

“I'm happy for ye, Kip,”

Fawkes murmured, standing in his formal kilt at the altar beside Kipling. “Took ye long enough to realize the truth.”

Kip glanced sideways. “The truth?”

His friend grinned, his gaze still on the doors at the back of the church. “The rest of us could see yer feelings for Lady Amelia, even if ye couldnae.”

“I could .”

Kip cleared his throat, rolled his shoulders, and settled back on the balls of his feet. Why in the hell did this have to take so long? Where was Alistair? “I just didnae think I...”

“Had a chance with her? She’s loved ye just as long.”

Kip refused to look at his friend when he admitted, “I didnae think I was worthy of her,”

in a low voice.

“Ah.”

A moment passed, then Fawkes blew out a breath. “Well, I cannae pretend to understand that. Ye are the same man ye’ve always been. A title doesnae make ye more worthy, and she loves ye for ye . Always did. Ye did hear me say that bit?”

Kipling’s heart stuttered for a moment, and he turned an incredulous expression toward the man at his side.

A title doesnae make ye more worthy. She loves ye for ye.

Well... hell .

Fawkes was right, wasn’t he? Mellie had hinted as much, on the balcony, before Emma’s interruption.

The last two years on the Continent...wasted? He should have stayed in London and wooed Amelia as soon as he knew he loved her. And Alistair was approving, wouldn’t have stood in the way of the match?

Fook .

His friend caught his eye and grinned. “Dinnae fash, Kip. Ye needed some time to grow, same as she did. The fact neither of ye found love while apart just proves this match was the truth.”

Truth .

It really was, wasn't it?

"I owe Mellie an apology, I suppose,"

Kip murmured.

"I dinnae think so."

Fawkes shrugged. "She's an intelligent lady, and seems thrilled with how things turned out."

He jammed an elbow in Kip's side. "Even if that means she has to marry ye ."

Refusing to rise to the bait, Kip merely grinned, turning back to the church filled with his friends and family as he rubbed his side. "And I'll spend the rest of my days making her the happiest woman in the world."

In the front row, his mother sat, beaming. Viscount Thornebury lounged beside her, one arm resting entirely too close to her; the man couldn't not flirt, could he? As Kip watched, Thorne lifted his hand and waggled his fingers in greeting, a smirk curving his lips.

Behind them, Alistair's wife Olivia sat with Amelia's mother and sister, Amanda. Amelia's sister was grinning hugely, as if she was thrilled with Amelia's match. Perhaps the sisters had shared secrets. Perhaps Amelia had wanted this match for as long as Kip himself had.

This wedding felt as if it had taken forever to plan, but Kip's mother and Amelia's mother had risen to the occasion. A mere three weeks after Amelia had agreed to marry him, today they would be joined forever. Twenty one long days...and very

empty nights.

“Are ye ready?”

Fawkes murmured as the music swelled and Kip’s heart began to beat double-time.

The doors at the back of the church opened, and Alistair stepped through with Amelia on his arm.

Kip’s heartbeat calmed as he exhaled. There she was. Here she was. With him. For him. By him. Where she was meant to be.

His lips curled into a slow smile as she began to walk down the aisle toward him, head held high under her veil.

Things were perfect. He was ready.

“Aye,”

he whispered. “I’m ready.”

The sun was still high in the sky when Amelia—breathless with laughter and anticipation—pulled Kipling into their chambers and slammed the door shut. She’d thought the wedding celebrations would never end!

Well, actually, it was likely the celebrations were continuing, but she’d been delighted to sneak away with her new husband . What an exciting word!

“Eager, are ye, lass?”

Kip was chuckling as he pulled her against him. “Perhaps we should call back yer maid to help ye with yer gown?”

She plastered a fierce frown on her face. “Are you saying you cannot undo a few buttons? I shall vow to help you undress if you return the favor.”

“Och, wife, ye drive a hard bargain.”

With twinkling eyes, Kipling thrust his hips forward, so she could feel his arousal.

As if she wasn’t already aching with need?

Over the last weeks, they’d managed to sneak away plenty of times to be together. They’d explored one another with kisses and touches, and on two delightful, extremely memorable occasions, Kipling’s hand had found its way into her bloomers and brought her ecstasy.

But today was their wedding night—day?

Today she’d have all of him. Finally.

Luckily, Kipling was really quite good at tiny buttons.

As her wedding gown fell from her shoulders, he reached around to cup her breasts through her corset. “Delicious ,”

he murmured against the sensitive skin on the back of her neck.

She shivered, even as he pressed together the sides of her corset to pop it free, leaving only her chemise between her skin and his hands. “What—you have not tasted me yet,”

she managed.

“ Yet ,”

Kip growled, then he nipped at her earlobe.

It should have been funny. It should have been disgusting. So why did it make her shudder and lean back against him, reveling in the hard length of his arousal pressed along the cleft of her rear end?

Really, it was a miracle the man could manage to undress himself, she was useless.

They fell, naked now, into bed, her arms around his neck. When Amelia murmured his name, Kip's lips trailed hot kisses down her throat. Tasting her, as promised.

His mouth closed around one nipple and she gasped, thrusting herself up against his hold. She could feel him smile, even as his other hand caressed and stroked and loved in the most wonderful way.

Oh Heavens , the sensations he was causing!

...and then his lips moved lower, and before she could object— did she want to object? She could barely form coherent thoughts right now!— they were brushing over her curls.

“Kipling?”

she gasped.

“Hush, wife,”

he murmured. “I said I would taste ye, aye?”

“Wh—what are you doing— oh .”

His tongue touched her core, and she flopped—boneless—back against the pillows.

Oh Heavens, indeed!

How had he become such an expert at— No, do not ask that. She didn't want to know more about her now-husband's past. She just wanted to be able to appreciate his practice now.

Finally.

Kipling licked, and suckled, and kissed and stroked, as the pressure built. And built. And built.

She might be innocent, but she wasn't ignorant of her body; she'd nearly worn out her copy of *A Harlot's Guide to the Forbidden and Delightful Arts* , and knew what to expect from a man's body. She'd explored her own often enough over the years.

But her touch never felt like Kipling's!

He slid one thick finger into her core, and when her hips pressed upward to meet him, he chuckled against her skin and slipped another in to join it.

She was so very close, on a precipice...

His lips closed around the pearl of her pleasure, hidden in her curls...

And she gasped something incoherent as ecstasy burst over her.

"Aye, that's a good lass,"

Kip murmured, continuing to stroke her as wave after wave of pleasure rolled through her. He lifted his head to meet her eyes, and he was grinning.

"That— Oh , Kipling!"

She flopped back down. “What was that ?”

“That, wife, was me showing ye how much I love ye,”

he declared as he crawled back up her body to lie beside her, his fingers deep within her. “It’s my duty to make ye ready on our wedding night.”

“And that was—”

Heavens, she was having trouble controlling her breathing, wasn’t she? “That was you getting me ready ?”

His smile turned wicked. “Almost.”

When he curled his fingers, still inside her, she gasped, her eyes widening as she met his gaze.

“Ye feel that, lass? Ye feel how wet ye are for me?”

Mutely, she nodded, her hips wriggling slightly, reveling in the sensation.

“Ye came for me like a good lass, did ye no’?”

“Please Kipling,”

she whispered, reaching for him. “ Please make me yours.”

He didn’t answer, but when his lips found hers, she could taste herself on him. That was answer enough.

His fingers continued to tease her, and the pressure built once more—or perhaps it had never really left her.

When he rolled atop her and spread her legs, Amelia eagerly welcomed him. Kipling didn't pause, but pulled his fingers from her wetness, gripped his cock, and slid into her.

Then he froze, lifted his face from hers and watched her.

She knew he was doing it for her benefit, but he needn't have worried. She'd experimented enough over the years that the minor discomfort was already receding. So she shifted slightly, arching her back and thrusting her hips toward his.

"Christ, Amelia."

His eyes squeezed shut on his harsh whisper. "I'm trying to-to give ye time..."

"No more time, please."

It was amazing how prim and proper she could sound when she wanted to shout fook me please! She planted her heels on his buttocks. "Take me, Kipling,"

she whispered.

His eyes opened and when his gaze met hers, it was full of heat. She smiled, and he returned it.

The first time he moved, she gasped out loud. The sensation was...different. Fascinating. Wonderful. He did it again, sinking a little farther into her, then again. Each thrust felt as if it brought her closer to him, closer to that pleasure he'd given her only a short time ago.

But soon it was impossible to judge where one thrust stopped and the next started. She was being lifted higher and higher, closer and closer...

He was growling with each push, the sound of need as delicious as the feeling of him. Amelia wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer, seeking his lips.

And as she did so, she felt her inner muscles begin to squeeze.

Yes . “Yes,”

she whispered against his mouth.

“ Amelia .”

As her pleasure burst over her, she wrapped her legs tightly around his waist which allowed her to lift her rear end off the bed. He pounded into her twice, thrice more, and then he froze.

For one moment, they were both suspended, her orgasm crashing over her...then he roared her name and spilled his seed against her womb.

“Amelia!”

Her core milked him, and she squeezed his hips with her thighs, trying to get even closer to him. Impossible, but she wanted to try.

It felt like forever—and then, too soon—before they both collapsed, exhausted, tangled together in the bed. They didn’t speak, but her husband pulled her against his chest and kissed the top of her head, stroking her back with such gentleness she wanted to shiver.

Kipling was hers now. After so long, so much waiting, he belonged to her and she belonged to him.

“I love you,”

she whispered.

She heard him smile.

“And I love ye, lass. Wife . God Almighty, I’ve waited a long time to say that.”

He kissed her again.

“Not as long as I have waited. I think I loved you back when I was just a gangly little girl, and you followed my brother home from school.”

“Och, well, ye were quite gangly.”

When she giggled, he pinched her, and she retaliated by rolling over. He followed, of course, and soon they were kissing again.

This kiss was slow, sensual. Not desperate, not yet.

Amelia was enjoying the way the hair on his calves tickled her toes when Kipling’s head suddenly lifted.

“Did ye hear that?”

She stilled. “Hear what?”

“There it is again!”

Amelia began to chuckle. “I do not believe it. Really, Becky?”

With a third cluck and a frantic flapping of wings, the chicken hopped atop the foot of the bed. She bobbed her head unconcernedly.

Kipling mock-glared. “Ye brought yer hen into our bedroom?”

“Well, why not?”

she quipped back, feeling wicked. “ You brought a cock!”

As he began to laugh, Amelia lifted herself on her elbows. “Oh my God, Becky, look at my duke. Laughing at a naughty joke?”

In response, Becky decided to check to see if Kipling’s toes were edible. They were not, but his subsequent hiss and curse made Amelia laugh.

Kipling joined in, wrapping his arms around her and rolling them both to safety, out of reach of the hen’s beak. Pinning her beneath him, he smiled down at her.

“I love ye, Amelia Kincaid Mancheste.”

Her heart swelled. All those years, pining after her older brother’s best friend, and now she was finally married to him. She wrapped her arms around him once more. “And I love you , husband.”