



Much Ado About Hating You (Second Chance Season #2)

Author: *Charlie Lane*

Category: Historical

Description: Richard Clark doesn't need a woman.

A good thing, too, since no one would marry him. A bastard with hands rough from work, women want him only for a good tumble. Until the one woman who's always set him aflame returns for his brother's wedding. The infuriating chit has pleasure on her mind. And revenge. He likely deserves her revenge, but he'd do anything to give her pleasure

Beatrice Bell needs no man.

Unless it's to take a lover. And her friend's house party wedding offers the perfect opportunity to do just that. If she can escape the disapproving glares of Mr. Richard Shaw, her one-time friend and long-time enemy. He separated her sister from the man she loved, and Beatrice will never forgive him.

Even if he does kiss her like she's sunrise itself.

Even if he's good with children.

And excellent at apologies.

And has that lovely lock of hair curling right over one eye

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February 1821, London

Sigh no more, Beatrice, sigh no more. Friends were persistent ever .

Beatrice Bell swallowed her sighs and tapped the corner of the unopened letter on the tabletop. Nearby, the porcelain teacup with the faint imprint of her lips at the rim, rattled the tiniest bit. She had known Evelina Denby since childhood, and this letter would be no teary-eyed plea. It would be patient yet determined. Just like Evelina.

But Beatrice had made up her mind, and she would not budge. Not even for Evie. Best get this done with. She broke the wax seal, unfolded the letter, and read. Just as she expected—an impassioned plea to attend Evelina’s wedding, a reassurance that Mr. Richard Clark, the groom’s half brother, would not bother Beatrice one bit, and... was that...? Beatrice peered more closely at the paper. Yes, it was—a single teardrop dried into a single word, wavering the ink that curved into please . Cunning. Deliberate. Yet subtle.

Beatrice chuckled. It would be lovely to see Evelina again and in the bloom of new life instead of enveloped in the pallor of her husband’s death. Funerals and weddings brought people together, mourning for the past and celebrating the future.

Tonta . Silly stuff. Nothing mattered but the present.

And Selena. Beatrice’s cousin had barely survived their last visit to Slopevale. Beatrice would not allow her to revisit the pains of that particular past.

She placed Evelina’s letter at the corner of the writing desk and prepared her

response. Then, with a hearty sip of her now lukewarm tea, she set quill to paper and wrote.

Dearest Evelina,

I dislike the notion of disappointing you, but I'm afraid Selena and I will not be able to attend your wedding. My father is soon to entrust me with a translation project that will require all my time and intellect. I simply will have no room for diversion in the coming months.

In your letter, you imply I am avoiding Mr. Clark by avoiding your nuptial celebration, but that cannot be further from the truth. Mr. Clark who? is what I say.

I assume he still prowls about Slopevale like a king, charming every man, woman, and beast but for me . I am the lucky one, being immune as I am. It is a lonely path, however, to see the truth of the man. A viper should never possess such a handsome facade.

Not that I think he's handsome, mind you. I have no taste for big men like him. Too much of a brute. I prefer a more sophisticated sort.

And, if you must know, Evie, I am a bit scared Mr. Fisher will be in attendance. He was such good friends with your husband-to-be and Mr. Clark. And he disappointed Selena so thoroughly with his disloyal attentions. I will not have her old wounds reopened. As you well know, my cousin is my greatest concern.

And as you also know, Richard Mr. Clark is my great adversary.

But my inability to attend has nothing to do with him. I am simply busy. I send all my love.

Your dearest and busiest,

Beatrice

* * *

8 Days Later

Beatrice merely raised a brow when she accepted the letters from the butler. “Thank you, Mr. Cutler.” She sank into a chair in the front parlor as her cousin stripped off her gloves and bonnet. Selena possessed the pale-green Bell eyes, same as Beatrice, but they were unlike in every other way. Selena was tall and willowy with the loveliest gold curls framing her heart-shaped face. Beatrice was rather shorter, curvier; her thick, dark hair a gift from her mother.

“It’s from Evelina. Again,” Beatrice said, tugging her own gloves off and setting her bonnet aside.

Selena sat across from her. “Oh? I’ve recently had an epistle from her as well. I am terribly excited to visit Slopevale once more. And even more excited to see our friends bring one another such happiness.”

Beatrice dropped the letter to her lap unread. “You cannot mean you intend to go!”

“Of course, I intend to do so. She is our closest friend. I would not miss her wedding for the world. You’re not saying you would ?”

The paper crinkled beneath Beatrice’s folded hands, feeling hot as a coal and thrice as uncomfortable. “It is not in your best interest to revisit that scene. Mr. Fisher might be there.” She whispered the name, unwilling to see the splash of remembrance, then sorrow, flash across her cousin’s face.

But this time... nothing. Selena merely ticked her head to the side, the corner of her lips flipping up. "It will be good to finally put the past behind us."

"You are too kind, Lena. You should not be. Mr. Fisher abandoned you. And his friend supported the betrayal." Friend. The word tasted like curdled milk on her tongue. Mr. Richard Clark was no one's friend.

"No, Bea, I wish him well."

What could she say to that? Fisher had been a specter haunting Selena for years now, a whimsical what-if. If he'd followed his heart instead of his friend's advice, Selena would likely be blissfully wed instead of undeniably a spinster. Beatrice was glad to see the fantasy of a lost future no longer held sway over her cousin, but it left her on new ground, uneven and icy. Beatrice could not figure out where to step next to avoid a fall.

"If you do not attend," Selena said, "do not do so for my sake. I will go with or without you. But I do understand"—she reached across the space between them and placed her hand over Beatrice's—"if the prospect of once more facing Mr. Clark has startled you. I hear he is still a bachelor."

"And will die a bachelor because no intelligent woman will have him." The coward. Que bruto. "What a brute," she mumbled, opening the letter and reading.

Dear Stubborn Bea,

Bring your translations. I must have you. And you, it seems, must have your curiosity sated. You wish to know how Richard is? Do not think I did not see your crossed out use of his given name. No scratches could hide it! And I will give you what you most need. Richard is still charming and still handsome and terribly good with his niece and nephews. They adore him. As does everyone who meets him. But for you, as you

say. I've always wondered why that is.

That is neither here nor there, I suppose. What matters is that I see you in April for my wedding. If you do not agree, John will likely kidnap you to ensure you attend for my sake. He is adamant that my every desire is met.

Mr. Fisher will be in attendance, and Selena is well aware of the fact. It does not bother her. She is eager to speak with him, so she says. No less eager than you are to argue speak with Richard.

I look forward to your acceptance letter, dear Bea.

And if I am not appeased, you should look forward to seeing John. And the inside of a careening coach bringing you to me,

your newly spoiled friend,

Evelina Soon-to-Be Marchioness of Prescott

Beatrice refolded the letter. "Evelina has that marquess tightly wound round her finger, it seems."

"She always has. Only now she knows it." Selena straightened her gloves. "Please say you'll come. Please say you'll not let Richard Clark scare you away. I know he's intimidating, but?—"

"Me?" Beatrice shot to her feet. "Intimidated by Richard Clark? Ha!"

Selena mastered a smile, pressing her lips into a tight line. She could not keep the mirth from her eyes, however.

“Do not look at me like that, Lena. It’s true. And I will not run from him now. If you are intent on going?—”

“I am!”

“And if Evelina wants me there badly enough to turn her husband into a kidnapper, well, then, I will attend. Mr. Richard Clark be damned.”

* * *

Selena retired to her room a half hour later. They’d begun and halfway completed their travel plans for April, and she was exhausted. Beatrice had a habit of exhausting everyone around her. They simply melted beneath her enthusiasm and vivacity.

But not Mr. Richard Clark. He’d kept up with her, intellectually, physically. As cunning and sharp as Beatrice, her match in every way. Including stubbornness.

And loyalty. Selena had much to thank the man for. The least she could do was give him a chance. With Beatrice.

She sat at her small writing desk near her bedchamber window and pulled open the thin center drawer, retrieved the letter there, and read it once more with a smile on her face and a plan unfurling in her heart.

Dearest Selena,

Beatrice is proving difficult. I have resorted to threats to get her to Slopevale in April, and I promise John will oblige me. If you see him shoving her in a carriage, just go about your day and let it happen.

You said you will come without her, and I thank you, but we must have her, too. I

hate to think I will lose her friendship and her visits once I marry John. We must do everything in our power to soothe relations between her and Richard.

I think we must act on our old theory about those two. It is fascinating, is it not, that neither have married after all this time...

What say you to a bit of matchmaking?

Your fellow cupid,

Evelina Soon-to-Be Marchioness of Prescott

Selena was not as over the heartbreak of seven years ago as she'd let Beatrice think. She rubbed her chest where her heart seemed to gnaw at her muscle. Mr. Fisher. Martin. He might always twist her into knots. But it was a well-deserved suffering she'd heaped on herself. Selena's own selfishness and shame had fed her cousin's ire all these years. And she would face her painful past if it meant bringing Beatrice, finally, into well-deserved future happiness.

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One

No man with an ounce of self-esteem would be caught dead hiding behind a bush. Richard Clark was a man. No doubt about that. But he must have surrendered every bit of self-worth, because he'd been crouching so long behind the shrubbery he couldn't feel his feet. His ankles were buzzing. And his knees screamed curses that would surely follow him into the afterlife.

All because of a woman. Two women, really, but one in hellish particular.

The least offensive of the two, Miss Selena Bell, blushed prettily by the peonies, talking to Richard's sister-in-law, the bride-to-be in a fortnight, Mrs. Evelina Denby. And in Richard's experience, where Miss Bell was, her cousin, the most offensive woman he'd ever met, would surely follow. Like flies to a pile of dung. Inevitable.

He had to escape. How close was the next bush? Why had his brother put the box hedges so far away from one another? Wait... Richard had done that. Following a fashionable trend in landscape gardening. Damn trends to hell. Much better to make landscape decisions and gardening choices based on covert escape routes. That other box hedge must be two fathoms away. At least. He tried to stretch out his arms on either side to measure, but his elbow met the bush, which stabbed him, sending him toppling to the side.

"Bloody—" he hissed, righting himself.

If he darted, even while crouching, someone was bound to see him. And if that someone was Miss Bell's cousin, well he wasn't sure what he would do. Something

drastic, no doubt. No options other than the drastic remained when facing a she-devil.

What he needed was a shield.

“John!” He screamed so loudly the name scratched his throat.

All the sounds from across the lawn—the chatting and laughing and whispering—stopped. Bound to happen when a man screamed another man’s name.

But the footsteps—foot stomps, more like—started the sound back up again, slamming toward Richard like an out-of-control stagecoach.

Excellent. John was on his way.

“What are you doing?” his half brother hissed as gleaming hessians appeared in Richard’s truncated field of vision. Richard craned his head back to see John grin at the party guests and raise a hand. “All’s well. Merely an injured cat.”

“Quick thinking, brother.”

“Stand up, man. What are you doing down there?”

“Hiding. I’d think that was obvious. Also obvious—I cannot stand up or risk giving my position away, thus defeating the very point of hiding in the first place. I thought you said the Bells weren’t coming.”

John’s scowl lifted. He looked damn near delighted. “I did say that, didn’t I?”

“You dirty liar.”

“If I had told you Samuel Bell’s daughter and niece would be attending my wedding,

you would have run off to London or Bath or the Continent.” He smoothed his jacket. “And I need my brother this weekend.”

“You do not. You do not need me at all. You wish to torment me.” At least Richard was currently tormenting John in a roundabout way. Everyone at the party would think it odd he was talking to an injured cat.

“That’s not true. Now will you stand up? People think I’ve gone mad talking to a bush. Or the dying cat behind it.”

Damn. He’d caught on. John always caught on.

Richard shot up to his full height a few inches above his similarly tall brother and hooked their arms together. “Run.” He took off for the other bush, placing John between himself and the crowd. “And shield me, you scoundrel.”

John chuckled but obliged. “Me? A scoundrel? You know better.”

“And you know better than to put me and Beatrice Bell in the same room together.”

Beatrice . The sharp-tongued plague to all mankind.

“Miss Bell is a delightful young lady.”

“ Miss Bell still?” Richard slowed for a moment, thoughtful. Surely she would have married by now. “Delightful old lady, more like. And hardly delightful. I know her, you forget.”

“Oh, I do not forget. The last time the two of you shared conversation, you nearly destroyed the world. Global chaos.”

“Not true.” They paused behind the second hedge. Where to next? Ah, the gazebo next to the lake offered an excellent partially obscured respite before he jumped into the lake and swam to freedom. He set them in that direction. “We would only have destroyed one another, not the world. It was merely chaos on a very small personal level.”

Technically, the last time they’d talked, there’d not been much talking... but John didn’t know about that and never would.

“Still too much chaos for my liking,” John said. “And there’s to be no destruction at all during my wedding.”

“Then you should not have invited Miss Beatrice Bell. No. You should have eloped.”

“And miss the opportunity to show the entire world that Evelina has agreed to be my wife after all this time? I think not. Everyone must share in my joy for at least a fortnight. Besides, Evelina is old friends with the Misses Bell. All of us were at one point. Or have you forgotten those wild, foolhardy days? You and me and Daniel, Evelina, Edmund and Martin, and the Bells, all dragged to Mother’s yearly house party and bored out of our minds. Oh, the mischief we managed.”

“Perhaps it’s best the old group fell apart,” Richard grumbled.

“I suppose there were several reasons for its dissolution.”

Foremost among them being that Richard’s other half brother, Daniel, was a complete, irredeemable scoundrel who’d been exiled from England. Another reason being that their friend Edmund had wooed and married Evelina before John, who’d always loved her, could take action to woo her for himself. And lastly, Richard and Beatrice Bell had fallen out of friendship with one another in a rather spectacular way.

“Frankly,” Richard said, stepping up into the gazebo, “I’m surprised she came. She... did come, didn’t she?” After all, he’d only seen the cousin.

“Yes, she’s here.” John joined him, and they leaned back against the railing. “I’m sure she is quite over what happened between you. She would not have come if she wasn’t.”

Richard snorted. John hadn’t heard the last thing Beatrice had said to him.

You have no idea how many hearts you break, Mr. Clark .

An eternity would be too soon, according to Beatrice Bell’s timeline.

“You cannot hide for the entire length of the party, Richard.”

“I’m an excellent hider, John.”

“Be a man and face her.”

“I won’t be a man if I face her. She’ll have my balls. Almost did last time.”

“Last time was at Edmund Denby’s funeral. She did nothing but glower at you.”

She’d done a tiny bit more than that. Richard sighed. “I suppose I shall have to swallow my pride and my fears and face the she-devil.”

“She-devil?” John chuckled. “Come, Miss Bell is not that bad. In fact, I thought at one point that you and her...” He grinned, wiggling his eyebrows.

Each rise and fall of those damn dark caterpillars was like a cudgel over Richard’s head. He should have added grave-sized holes to the landscape gardener’s design.

Then he could jump straight into one. Although the lake was a nice option. Sink to the very bottom and drown himself.

“Me?” Richard found himself saying. “And Beatrice Bell? Absurd.” She was too good for him. A wealthy merchant’s daughter and a marquess’s bastard? Not exactly a desirable match. Pride was a monster, wasn’t it, tearing at flesh till a man howled. And he’d mauled her. Kissed her, pawed at her like a man possessed. At his friend’s funeral. While his other friend, the lonely widow, grieved graveside. What had Beatrice called him? Que bruto . She’d told him what it meant, too, had wanted him to know. She thought him a brute, a beast. She thought right. And he hated it, every reminder of his deficits boiling his anger higher, spilling over onto the woman who made him want and ache and hate all at the same time. “You cannot make a bride of a demon. The fact that she is a spinster attests to that.”

John’s face went waxen.

Richard was being too harsh, but the words wouldn’t stop, the boiling reached higher temperatures. “I’d rather marry?—”

John’s eyes went large, and he began to shake his head.

“—the cow than marry?—”

“Miss Bell!” John said much too loudly for the small gazebo space. “And Evelina, my dear! So lovely to see you both!”

Miss Bell. Damn. Damn. Damn . But perhaps it was the cousin and not Beatrice.

“Oh,” a woman’s voice said behind him, “you used to call me Beatrice. Let us not be so formal.” That voice—rich and sharp and filled with as much intelligence as humor. She Whom He’d Royally Pissed Off. More than once. The woman who would like to

kick him off a cliff. The only woman who boiled his blood. All it took was one memory of her to make his cock twitch.

Beatrice bloody Bell.

His nether regions had long ago decided she was the North Star. They possessed horrid decision-making skills.

John shoved Richard out of the way as he stepped around him. “Yes, well, we were young then. Life was not so formal. But if it pleases you?—”

“It does, I assure you.”

“Then Beatrice it is,” John said. “Richard... will you not turn around and greet our guest?”

No, he’d rather not. But he was trapped. There was always the lake. But wouldn’t Beatrice simply love to see him so shaken he jumped in a lake to escape her?

Not today, Beatrice Bell. She would not win his pride today. He’d already sacrificed enough of it to the bush.

He turned slowly—so, so slowly—attempting to prolong the time between the last moment he’d seen her, lips swollen from his kisses, eyes wide with disbelief, hand swinging through the air to mark his cheek with the sweet violence of her palm, and the inevitable next one, the moment still to come. And to school his features, which felt rather numb and must look somewhere between wildly petrified and terribly indignant. He shifted his mandible side to side to loosen it, and he blinked several times to put his eyes in a more natural width.

But no mere half circle could be delayed as long as he’d like it to be. One more slight

turn of his foot, and... there. Done.

And there. Her .

Beatrice Bell, bright-eyed and beautiful. A brazen tilt to her pointy chin, her spine the boldest of straight lines, and her brows thick brown slashes over pale-green eyes. His soul staggered backward, the sight of her a cannonball to the gut. Even now... after all this time... she rearranged his very world. Time had been so kind to her it had mostly stopped. Her chocolate-brown hair was still thick and heavy, without a streak of silver in it. She'd always despised it because it had never quite held a curl. But he'd always...

Push his fingers through it, decimate the pins holding it back, spread it against his bedsheets, wrap it around his fist ? —

It didn't matter.

The need to touch it again would not beat so persistently through his veins if he'd not already touched it once, if he couldn't remember the heavy silk of it in his hands as he'd kissed her. But he had. And he could.

That also did not matter. Better forgotten.

He swallowed and shoved the cannonball out of his gut. Rearranged the world to his liking, focused on her eyes. The last time he'd seen her they'd been rich with rage. Now they were flat, as if looking at him inspired not even the most mundane of emotions. He was less than a speck of dirt on her skirts. The speck of dirt would annoy her. He simply was of no consequence. Better that way. He couldn't abandon his brother for the next fortnight, refused to. But if he were going to survive it, he'd need to nurture the feeling her eyes reflected for him, and he'd need to do his best to spark it in himself.

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Two

No matter how much one prepared for disaster, it was never enough. Particularly when the disaster's name was Mr. Richard Clark. A cow. A cow? He'd rather wed a cow than?—

Conceited arse.

If only he'd aged into his personality. If one acted like rotting cheese, one should resemble rotting cheese.

Richard did not.

In the coach on the way to Slopevale, she'd shoved back and locked away ghostly impressions of his hands on her skin, his lips against her own. How long ago had it been since the kiss? Seven years since she'd learned to hate him, but only three years since the kiss.

She should not pretend she did not know.

He'd not changed much in the intervening time. His hands were stuffed in his pockets, a habitual gesture, but that did nothing to diminish his size, his presence. It was as if the shadows hiding him solidified, gathered in flesh and bone about him, gifting him their secret, cool appeal. No easy smile now, his lips a compressed line of irritation. And somehow, from the shadows that seemed so much a part of him, his brown eyes saw through her, into her, disarmed her. There was something in his hair, and when John stepped to the side with an inviting smile, Beatrice saw what—a tiny,

purple flower that had seen better days, propped atop his ear and stuck in his dark hair.

What an odd accessory, incongruent with the whole of him. A flower in Richard Clark's hair was like a ribbon tied round a dragon's neck.

The light beaming across him revealed more changes—the gray hairs at his temples, the lines that struck out from the corners of his eyes and crinkled when he smiled.

He wasn't smiling now. No, his brown eyes had clouded with something between humiliation and the desperate need to bolt. Those brown eyes flicked toward the lake as those thick brows pulled toward one another. Was he considering jumping in?

"I can push you if you do not possess the courage, Mr. Clark."

Now those eyes snapped to her. "Pardon?"

"The lake. You were considering your options for escape, I assume."

He rolled his shoulders backward. "Not at all."

"Will you not greet our guest, Richard?" John slapped his back. "Politely."

Richard bowed. "Miss Bell. You are looking well."

"Not so good as a cow, though."

His lips parted, and the tiniest sound slipped across his lips. A word or a grunt or a growl, she could not tell.

"Tell me, Mr. Clark, to which devil did you sell your soul to keep your looks?"

His teeth snapped when he talked. “The same one you did, Miss Hellcat.”

“Merciful heavens.” Evelina chuckled as she linked her arm through John’s. Her golden mood matched her golden looks—bright yellow hair and green eyes brimming with mirth. The picture of marital bliss, even before the wedding. “Already at it. Brings back old memories, does it not?”

“I’d rather those memories stay buried,” John said.

“Should we leave them to their mutual disdain?” Evelina asked.

“Yes,” John grumbled. “Who knows what the children have gotten into during our long absence.”

Evelina raised an eyebrow. “It’s been ten minutes. A quarter hour at most.”

“My God. Longer than I thought.” He tugged Evelina out of the gazebo. “If we don’t leave now, they’re likely to have burnt the house down.”

Evelina’s chuckle faded as John dragged her away.

And the silence seemed to congeal around Beatrice and Mr. Clark.

He dropped his gaze and drew a line on the gazebo floor with the toe of his boot.

And when she found even the slight movement of his leg in tight breeches appealing, she inspected the ceiling.

Would he never talk? She could simply leave. No reason to suffer this awkward silence. She stepped toward the stairs.

“I hear you’ve not married,” he said.

What a rude observation. “I am not married, no.” She had, however, decided to take a lover. House parties were perfect opportunities for such dalliances, and she might as well get something out of this one. “I have not yet discovered a man wise enough to wed.”

“All men are fools, then?”

“At least all men I’ve exchanged words with. Besides, they are all too young now.”

“Or you are simply too?—”

“Do not finish that sentence, Mr. Clark.”

The curve of his lip upward dimpled his cheek and flashed a sliver of even, white teeth. He’d always possessed an unfairly lovely smile.

“The problem is the men,” Beatrice said, giving him no chance to continue his insults. “Your brother is one of the few good men I know. The marquess, I mean. Not... not?—”

“I know whom you mean.”

The exiled Daniel hung like an ill wind between them.

“Yes, well. I used to think Mr. Fisher an excellent sort of fellow, too, but then he proved himself otherwise by courting and abandoning my cousin.”

“You still have no idea what happened that day.”

“I know what I need to know!”

“You always were a hardheaded termagant,” he mumbled.

She’d show him termagant. “I see you are also not wed. And you are... what? Five and thirty?” She whistled. “Even for a man, that is rather advanced in age for bachelorhood.”

“I’ve not yet met a woman without a head hard as a brick.”

“Yes, I can see how that is a difficulty. I have not met a woman with a soft enough brain to consider marrying you.”

He made the tiniest little sound, low and long and rumbling in his throat. “I see you have not lost your sharp tongue.”

“And you have not lost your dull wit.”

Mr. Clark stepped closer, licked his fine, fine lips for a length of time that made her squirm. He crossed his arms slowly over his chest, forcing her to realize—the cad—that he had lost none of the muscle of his youth. In fact, he seemed to have acquired more of it. Did that... did that seam of his jacket actually strain ? If she looked hard enough at it, she might see thread pulled tight as a hard string, singing her toward seduction.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. His chest would not affect her.

Nor would the way his jacket sleeves barely contained the bulging biceps of his arms.

Nor the way his white cravat rushed against skin kissed by the sun.

Nor the way his hands were sinewy and strong, dark hair dusted across the tops of them.

Nor would the impossible memory of all that... maleness homing in on her, dropping kisses sweetly on her lips...

Another lump in her throat. Curses.

He leaned slightly away from her, something pleased in the angle of his lips. "I must apologize."

"Oh yes, I'm sure you—" Wait. "Pardon?" The flutter of denied physical attraction dropped like a stone in her belly.

"I must apologize for my actions the last time we met."

"Which actions?" she snapped. "So many of them were reprehensible." Or rather, she wished she thought them so. "The..." She lowered her voice. "Kiss?"

His brows pulled together. "What kiss? You must be confusing me with someone else."

Oh God, he was going to play it that way. How humiliating. "Yes, I must be."

He uncrossed his arms and held his hands palms up for a moment before rounding his shoulders forward and sticking them in his pockets. A lock of dark hair fell in front of his eye. How could he appear both rakish and boyish at the same time?

"Seven years ago. I yelled at you." His voice was gruff like an unused hinge. "It was not sporting of me. It was ungentlemanly, and I have long regretted it."

“I doubt that.”

“Of course you do. But I was right then.”

He’d refused to explain to her seven years ago why he was so certain of that fact, and she would not ask now. It did not matter.

He scratched a hand through his hair, pushing the rogue lock of it into line with the others. Why couldn’t his hair have thinned over the years, retreated from his brow. It still waved thick and touchable above his ears, and as if it knew her every thought, that lock fell right back into place over his eye. Taunting her.

“I hope, Miss Bell, that we can be comfortable with one another. For John and Evelina’s sake. We are here for them, are we not?” He stuck out a hand. “Truce?”

That, not a hand extended in friendship. That, a snake, sharp teeth eager for a bite. It hissed.

She clasped her hands behind her back. He would not fool her a second time. “No need for a truce with someone whose existence I barely acknowledge.”

“You will really be so childish?” He still offered his hand, taut like a blade. His jaw knife sharp, too, and wariness in his eyes that said he was the one being cut, not her.

“It’s not childish. Simply not necessary.”

He snapped his hand away in a movement sharp enough to break bone. And with one long step, rounded her and fled the gazebo. “I see treating you like a reasonable woman is unnecessary.”

Clutching the railing, she called after him, “I’m more reasonable than a man who

thinks he can shape the world to his liking in every way. Martin and Selena are more than mere box hedges you can plant and move about the lawn. Hide behind .” She’d got him. Caught hold of his pride and yanked it clear off him like a tattered cloak.

He froze, cast her a look over his shoulder that would have sent any other woman running. “You always do have to have the last word, don’t you?”

“Because my words are better than yours.” Oh, his jaw was tick, tick, ticking—a powder keg, an imminent explosion. And that vein pulsing on his forehead that the rogue lock did nothing to hide—it had leapt to angry life as the skin stretched taut over his knuckles drained of life entirely. Then he strode away, leaving her with no words, nothing but the horrifically entrancing sight of his leg muscle working beneath the wool of his buckskins.

She may have had the last word, but he’d always possessed the very finest of arsens. She slapped her cheek. “What nonsense,” she mumbled. “What absolute nonsense.” She strolled the length of the gazebo and back several times, trying to work out her frustration, before finally collapsing instead with a huff on a bench.

No use denying. Impossible to do so though she very much wished she could. But her body did not care what her mind wanted. It still harbored the girlish attraction she’d felt for him ages ago when she’d thought him an easygoing man, always aware of others’ needs, working ceaselessly to make everyone feel comfortable, acting as a bridge between his two half brothers—the gentleman and the rake. Mr. Clark—Richard —had been better than them both. He’d seen her hesitant on the edges of their group and looped her into its very center, made her feel... a part of something.

An act. He’d abandoned her readily enough, allowed his friend to abandon her cousin. He’d proved himself a beast back then, and he was still one now. That should be enough to snuff out attraction entirely.

As long as she didn't drop her gaze to his arse.

Beatrice wandered toward the others strolling about the garden. When she reached the tall box hedges that bordered the perimeter of the garden, she stopped, hesitating in the private shadows where no one could see her, but she could see all. Where was Selena? She couldn't simply walk into that collected group of people without a clear destination. No better way to feel adrift, to feel like unwanted, floating detritus after a shipwreck.

There was Selena, talking with a man. Oh. Not just any man. Mr. Martin Fisher, tall and lean and smiling as he'd ever been.

They stood just out of reach of one another, biting their lips, studying their feet. Selena fidgeted with ribbons while Martin rubbed a gloved hand through his yellow hair. The strands of it floated up and out as he beat a rhythm with his hat against his leg. They laughed, their bodies naturally leaning, shrinking the distance between them.

And Beatrice clasped her hands against her chest. Perhaps the old hurt was gone for Selena. Perhaps she could move on now. And perhaps it was good, after all, that they had come. Selena could put the past behind her finally.

And Beatrice could find a man to teach her the pleasures of the body.

"You know," a voice said right behind her. His voice. "You should not insult a man's box hedges, then use them for your own nefarious activities."

"I was merely seeking shade. It is unusually hot." She found her fan in her pocket and snapped it open, then stalked off. A retreat. Humiliating. But necessary.

He followed. His long, smooth strides were enough for him to catch up with her and

keep pace. “It is a bit hot. And only April.”

“Why won’t you leave me alone?” She snapped her fan closed, stuffed it back into her pocket.

“I couldn’t let you have the last word. It has been itching at me. I hate being itchy.” His hands were still in his pockets, rolling his broad shoulders forward, an old attempt to lessen the impact of his presence. He failed. At least with her, he did. Perhaps she was too small for the trick. When he rolled those massive shoulders forward around her, he seemed to curve himself into a soft yet impenetrable shield. He blocked the sun. He blocked the wind and the world. There had been a time it had felt like protection. Now it nipped like an annoying, yapping dog at her ankles.

“Haven’t you already had the last word?” she asked.

“That was you. I distinctly remember.”

“Oh yes. You had the first words. What were they? Hm.” She tapped her lips. “Ah. I remember. ‘No wonder she’s a spinster.’ You’d rather marry a cow than?—”

“Beatrice.” The curve of his body deepened, bringing his eyes close and glittering to her own.

She stood her ground, lifted her chin and—oh. Oh no. Unintentional that—the scant inches between their lips, the heat of his breath across her face.

“I didn’t mean it,” he whispered.

“The hell you didn’t.”

“I was angry. I... was scared. It’s been so long.”

“Scared of little me?” She fluttered her eyelashes.

“Of course. You are absolutely terrifying.” He made it sound like a compliment. “Do not pretend you don’t know it.”

“You cannot flatter me, Clark.”

“I’m not trying to, Bell. It’s the truth.”

So few words. Yet they ripped her asunder. She was insulted and complimented at the same time. Which one was right? There was no right with Richard Clark. “Oh, do go away.”

“Very well.” He stepped back, unrolling to his full height. Oh yes, there went the sun. Goodbye, light. Apparently no matter what he did, he shaped her world. “But only because I have much to do.”

She snorted. “Quite busy being a marquess’s son.”

“A marquess’s bastard , you mean, and yes, the to-do list is fathoms long. Goodbye, Miss Bell.”

She let him have the last word this time. Mr. Clark could jump in the lake and sink to its very airless bottom for all she cared. But his head was so very full of air. He just might float. Those muscles, though (her mouth was not watering), big and thick and heavy, surely they would drag him down to the silty bottom. His lack of buoyancy would ensure she and Selena survived the house party and Beatrice found a man willing to warm her bed for a night or two or three.

Let him drown, then. No matter how fine that man’s arse, she’d find one much better.

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Three

Richard haunted the shadowed end of the drawing room as the after-dinner crowd began to thin. A group of guests remained near the bookshelves, chatting over refilled glasses of wine, and another group still inhabited a card table. John and Evelina remained, sitting near an open window, knees kissing, hands tangled, as they looked out on the evening garden. Blissful almost matrimony.

Richard snorted and pulled his book up to block his view of the guests.

“I’m done for the evening,” a guest said. Richard peeked over the top of his book. A woman stood up from the card table, and a man sitting nearby stood with her. She nodded to John. “Thank you, Lord Prescott, for a lovely evening.”

“I look forward to tomorrow’s diversions,” the man said, escorting the lady from the room.

When they were gone, the two remaining at the table broke into complaints.

“Who will play with us now?”

“It is too early to retire.”

“Come along, someone. Please. Evelina?” The young woman shuffling the cards looked with pitiful eyes at her host’s betrothed. “Surely you wish to play.”

Evelina shook her head. “I’m not in the mood. And I shall have to return home with

my mother shortly.” Her mother lived in a nearby manor house, and Evie had decided to sleep there instead of taking at a room at Slopevale. “But perhaps... Beatrice?”

From her corner, the opposite of Richard’s, Beatrice lifted her head from her own book. She wore green silk this evening, and her dark hair shone in the candlelight. “Me?”

“Yes, they need you for cards,” Evelina said.

“But that’s only three,” the card shuffler’s companion said. “We need a fourth for whist.” She crossed to a different chair.

Beatrice, having abandoned her book, took the now open seat. “I enjoy whist. With the right partner.”

“Mr. Clark.” This from Miss Selena Bell. “You have been alone in that corner all evening. You must come out and have some fun. Partner Beatrice. You must.”

He must not. He waved a hand. “No, thank you. I’m quite happy here in my corner.”

“Come, man,” John said. “Do not be so aloof.”

“Not aloof. Merely tired. I’m afraid Miss Bell would find me a slow-witted partner this evening.”

Her arm resting across the back of the chair, Beatrice lifted a brow, a challenge. “Just this evening?” A slow chuckle rumbled around the room, and she basked in the approval of her insult.

It made him want to sit across from her and show her how very sharp and cunning he could be.

But he didn't belong at that table. She was a wealthy shipping merchant's daughter. And the woman who sat to her right was a baron's wife. The woman who sat to Beatrice's left was a politician's sister. They all wore jewels Richard's own mother had never known; the sort his stepmother had draped about her neck as casually as a chain of daisies.

"I'll play." A man stepped away from a group conversing near the fire. Richard had not yet had the pleasure of an introduction, but he knew who he was—Baron Peterson. He settled into the chair across from Beatrice with a warm grin and an easy slouch.

Beatrice returned the grin, her confidence matching his. "Lord Peterson. Thank you for rounding out our numbers."

"Anything to please the ladies. Do you mind if I smoke?" The baron pulled a cheroot from his pocket.

Beatrice's eyebrows winged together almost imperceptibly. She did mind. But she shook her head. "So long as you remain sharp, I can forgive a bit of smoke."

The woman could forgive everyone and everything but for Richard. He was tired. He wanted his bed. But he stayed right where he was, watching. Pretending not to.

The back of her slender neck, that tiny dark tendril of hair that curled against it, fallen and oh-so strokable. Her shoulders squared when she had a good move and wiggled when she didn't. When she laughed, the sound went straight to his veins like a jolt of starlight.

Peterson dangled a cheroot from the side of his mouth and held his cards with thick fingers. He and Beatrice made good partners, quickly perfecting the art of silent communication. A symphony of glances passed between them.

Each one of them like stepping on a nail, sending sharp, unexpected jabs of pain through Richard's chest.

Beatrice laughed again, starlight shooting through him again, this time with a frenzy. And something darker, too, as she tilted her head to the side, curved that lovely neck out for everyone to see.

For Peterson to see?

What was she thinking? She was still an unmarried and damned attractive woman. Cheroot would get ideas with all those glances she threw his way. Intimate ideas.

Richard popped to his feet and marched toward his brother and Evelina. "What," he hissed "were the two of you thinking?"

Slowly, they regarded him. John scowled, bewildered.

Evelina wore the sort of sly, shy smile he knew meant trouble. "We are enjoying the evening. Have you enjoyed it, Richard?"

"Not at all, and you two know why."

John cast a lazy look at the card table. "You tell us why."

"Who is he?" He thrust his chin at the man sitting across from Beatrice.

"Do you mean Lord Peterson?" Evelina said.

"I do if you mean the sausage-fingered cheat partnering Miss Bell."

"I do mean the gentleman partnering Beatrice. I have no opinion on the shapes of his

fingers. And no idea if he cheats.”

“Better not,” John grumbled.

“I find myself very clever,” Evelina said, “for making the match.”

“A match!” It was only once the entire room went dead silent that Richard realized he’d said that bit more loudly than he should have.

The conversationalists by the fire disregarded him and returned to their wine and each other. Those at the card table blinked, then stuffed noses back into their cards.

All but for Beatrice, whose gaze seemed armed with bullets aimed to kill. Him.

He shoved John and Evelina apart and sat between them. “You have no regard for the poor baron, I see.” Richard crossed his legs, then uncrossed them, then crossed them again. “Miss Bell will claw his eyes out.”

“You think so?” Evelina asked, turning slightly to view the card table.

A laugh rose high and sweet, tugging at Richard’s ribs. It was joined by a laugh of a deeper timbre.

“Sounds like she’s amusing him well enough,” John said. “Look. They’re getting along.”

Richard would not look. Nothing in the world could induce him to look. Again.

He looked. Beatrice was smiling at Cheroot as if she knew no other expression. And the man had the sort of gleam in his eye that boded well for an unmarried lady. Or disastrous. Depending on intentions.

“Good for them,” Richard mumbled.

“You sound jealous, brother.” John elbowed Richard’s ribs, the cad.

“I’m not. How absurd. Evelina, how could you be so unfeeling? Ruining this man’s life.”

“I’ll pretend you did not say that. Beatrice is my friend, and I would not promote a connection if I thought it unwise.” Evelina crossed her arms and pursed her lips.

“What exactly happened between you two?”

“We were casualties of a broken romance.”

Silence. Silence so loud Richard could hear his brother’s interest. Evelina’s, too, their curious pulses thumping like rabbit feet on hollow ground.

Oh hell, they’d thought... “Not ours ! Martin and Selena.” He shoved to his feet, and his brother and Evelina melted back toward one another like water poured into a cup, shoulders bumping, hands twining, and gazes locking in complete understanding.

There was nothing to understand.

Except maybe what had Beatrice leaping from her seat, holding her cards flat against her chest with a wide grin as Peterson leaned back, enjoying the sight of her.

“I hope they’re happy together,” Richard grumbled. “Now tell me the itinerary for the next fortnight, so I can do my best to witness your joy and avoid the harpy at the same time.”

“Absolutely not.” Evelina kicked his ankle.

“Just enjoy yourself.” John said. “Evie, I need to speak with Richard for a moment. Estate business.” He guided Richard back toward the shadowed end of the room where he scowled at the assembled guests for a moment. “Do not tell Evelina, but I need you to do what you do best.”

“Annoy Beatrice? Easy. All I have to do is breathe.”

“No. Be jolly. Bring people together. This entire event has only just begun, and I’m already seeing fissures.”

“What do you mean?”

“My guests and Evelina’s guests are not exactly compatible.”

“Ah.” John was a marquess. He’d invited friends and acquaintances from parliament and the London social season. But Evelina was a country gentleman’s daughter, had married a man without title or wealth the first time around. She’d invited farmers and artists and tradesmen. “A felicitous union may be possible between you two but not between your acquaintances.”

“See there.” John pointed to the group by the books. “That’s Chesterton and his brother and their wives. Old friends of the family. But there”—he nodded at the card table—“those are Evie’s friends. The two groups have segregated themselves, and I’m afraid if they remain so, Evie will take it as an omen. Or some ill feeling will arise between the groups, and...” He shrugged.

“You cannot have that.”

“Precisely. Can you do what you do best? Be jolly and likable and make everyone feel comfortable and welcome? No hiding behind bushes from now on.”

More laughter rumbled from the card table, shared by Beatrice and Mr. Peterson again. Richard did not have to look to recognize her laugh, and Peterson's had, somehow, become quickly burned into his memory. They sounded horrible laughing together. Discordant.

"I'll help you, John. You know I will." Richard clapped his brother on the back and made for the group situated by the bookshelves. He hesitated. These were not his people. Bastard that he was, they tolerated him, and only because his father and now the present marquess accepted him so fully. Taking a breath that broadened his smile, he parted the space between Lord Chesterton and his wife with his shoulder.

"Good evening, my lord, my lady."

"Oh..." Chesterton's fuzzy gray eyebrows bounced up and down. "You're the old marquess's basssss... boy."

He'd been about to say bastard. Richard pretended he'd not heard the drawn-out s. "I do not mean to interrupt your conversation, but the gentleman at the card table... Peterson?" He paused as the group's attention wandered across the room, landed on the man with a cheroot in his mouth, cheroots for fingers, and attention for one Miss Beatrice Bell. "He was wondering what the best wine for a spring evening was, and I told him only you would know for sure. My father always said you had exquisite taste. Would you condescend to make a recommendation?"

Chesterton's lips parted in a grin. "Indeed, I would. You have your father's charm, my boy, even if you are a by-blow." He patted Richard's arm as he wandered toward the card table. His wife and the others followed close behind, moving past Richard as if he were a ghost.

Good. Richard had nothing left to give them. He paused in the doorway only to make sure the little trick hadn't erupted in a fight, but Peterson seemed entirely pleased that

Chesterton had singled him out.

Beatrice, however, seemed unamused. She'd put her cards face down on the table and leaned back in her chair. She was looking right at Richard, her expression pronouncing one word as loudly as if she spoke it: Retreating ?

Yes, maybe he was. Only for tonight.

He trudged up the stairs and found his bedchamber. He peeled the clothes off his body in slow, heavy movements, but finally he could climb into his bed in only his smalls and lie on his back like a starfish. His hand hit the table beside his bed, the book always there atop it, and he picked it up, held it above his face as he opened it.

El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quixote de la Mancha. She'd always simply called it Don Quixote . Had called the author, the Cervantes fellow, a genius. But Richard couldn't even read the damn thing. Well, not most of it. There were three words on the title page in the top right corner, written in faded ink, he could read well enough.

Beatrice Bell's book.

He rubbed his thumb across the words she'd put there in her own looping, slightly messy script, as he had done most nights since he'd first discovered it abandoned in the library seven years ago. Just after Beatrice and Selena had left. He knew the last time she'd touched it, could see her carrying it as she entered the library. They'd agreed to meet there; she had agreed to begin his education in reading Spanish. He'd hoped to sneak a touch of her hand, but she'd entered the room pale and trembling, clutching the book at her chest...

"Beatrice?" Took three steps to get to her. "What's happened?"

Her eyes lifted slowly, her head tilting back so he could see her face—pale and drawn

and pinched. “Have you not heard?”

“Heard what?” The catch in her voice alarmed him, and he took her hands, drew her across the room, and sat her near the crackling fire.

“Mr. Fisher has left. And he has told Selena that she will not hear from him again.”

Richard nodded. “Yes, well, I’m sure your cousin has other concerns at the moment.” Like Daniel. “You should tell her to be careful. As I told Martin.”

Like a firecracker popping to life in the sky, her gaze flared, sparked. “You told Martin? What does that mean?”

He couldn’t tell her everything. He’d promised not to speak of secrets that weren’t his own. And despite his parentage, he possessed a gentleman’s soul. He wouldn’t gossip and ruin a lady, no matter how guilty she was. “That is between he and I.” This meeting was not going as planned. He should redirect it. “Come, let us look at the book you’ve brought.”

“No.” She snapped it to the table as she stood. “Tell me about Martin and Selena. Did you advise him to leave here, to abandon my cousin?”

“They were not yet wed. And nothing is final until they sign a registry.”

“They are in love, you brick head!”

He snorted.

“What does that mean?”

“It’s a sound. It means nothing.”

“I am not an imbecile. What does it mean?”

“Fine!” His arms exploded outward. “I suppose it means that if your cousin is in love, she has odd ways of showing it.”

Her mouth dropped open. “You insult her?”

“She insults herself.”

Impossibly, her mouth’s shocked O widened.

He snapped it closed. Two fingers beneath her chin, kissing her soft, warm skin for a single blessed moment.

She batted his hand away.

Frustration, deep and sharp as lightning, ripped through him. “It is for the best. For Martin and for Selena. They are young. And likely it is not love so much as ? —”

“Who are you to say if it is love? Do you have so many more years than them? Are you Romeo or Tristan, so deeply in love with some poor woman you would die for her?”

“No.” The word sounded like a growl and felt like a lie, but her sneer cut him to the bone, made him hide the truth to protect himself. “And you know better than I? Have you ever been in love then?”

A flutter of her lashes, the sneer disappearing. She swallowed, and her slender throat bobbed, and something inside him cracked in two.

“Beatrice, can we be done with this argument? The matter between Selena and Martin

is not about us. Has nothing to do with us.” He ventured a step forward. “Please. Let us sit and lose ourselves in study.” In each other.

“She is like a sister to me.” Her eyes glistened. “My only real family.”

Oh hell. “And Martin like a brother to me. As you wish for what is best for your cousin, so I wish for what is best for him.” He held out a hand. “Come, Beatrice. Sit with me and let us make a pleasant afternoon.”

She shook her head, closed her eyes. When she opened them again, the tears were gone. “You have no idea how many hearts you break, Mr. Clark.” And then she was gone, leaving him with a book he could not read and a single certainty.

He knew exactly how many hearts he’d broken. One. His own.

He snapped the book back on the table and turned on his side away from it. He would not think about what had been, what might have been.

Christ . What would never be. Even if she ever forgave him, he couldn’t pursue her. A bastard courting a rich man’s only daughter? Even if she had been entertaining a friendship with him, she never would have accepted anything else. Fairy tales were made of less impossible pairings.

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Four

Beatrice hated boats. They may have secured her family's fortune, but nothing made her stomach turn faster than the leaping boards of a boat at sea. Or a rowboat at lake, as the case may be. As the case was that very morning. The guests milled about the lakeshore, inspecting the watercraft and holding bonnets and beaver hats to their heads. The wind was playful, and it tore at ribbons and lifted skirts, much to the delight of gentlemen unexpectedly rewarded with glimpses of stockinged calves and knees and thighs.

They were to have a boat race or some such nonsense that would only leave Beatrice queasy and sequestered to her room for the rest of the day. She'd leave the boating to everyone else. She turned back to the house.

"Where are you going?" Evelina called behind her.

Caught. Qué mala suerte . How terribly unlucky. She forced a smile and faced her friend. "Back to the house. I forgot to work on my translation yesterday." Not that she needed to. Her father had given the affreightment contract he'd promised her to another for translation. And he'd not told her until she'd shown up at his office asking for the documents the day before they'd left London. Somehow her father's ability to forget she existed still pained her, even if it no longer surprised her. But work offered as good an excuse as any to avoid boats. And Mr. Clark. "I thought to work on it now."

"No, no!" Evelina pulled her toward the shore, the gaggle of guests, and the waiting boats bobbing at the shoreline. "It's too lovely a day to work inside. We're pairing

up. It will be quite diverting.”

“Pairing up?” Sounded rotten. Purposefully rotten. “And who have I been paired with?” Lord Peterson. Please let it be the baron. She’d caught his eye yesterday, and today she meant to test his willingness to liaisons. Subtly, of course.

“Richard.”

Blast. “You cannot do that do me, Evie!”

“I’m doing nothing to you but putting you out to sea—well, lake—with the most accomplished swimmer in residence. I wouldn’t dream of pairing you with anyone less capable. I know how you feel about water.”

Deep water. She suppressed a shiver. “Yes. It’s wet. You should understand why I’d rather be inside. Translating shipping agreements.”

“Let someone else do it.”

“I’m the best at it. And I enjoy my work.”

“Your father’s agreements can wait a few hours. Look.” Evelina pointed toward a boat nearby and lowered her voice. “Lena and Mr. Fisher are going out together. They’ve been quite friendly since their reacquaintance.”

Beatrice narrowed her eyes. “Are you one of those women that insists on pairing everyone up once she’s been happily paired herself?”

Evelina shrugged. “I can try.”

Selena and Mr. Fisher stood closer than they had the day before, snatching gazes at

one another, laughing softly. Lena's cheeks were pink as posies. Beatrice sighed. "Very well. I suppose trapping myself in a boat with Mr. Clark keeps him occupied." If Selena wanted Mr. Fisher, she could have him. This time, Mr. Clark would not intrude.

Evelina poked Beatrice's shoulder and pointed through the crowd. "And look there. Richard is not all bad. See how excellent he is with the children?"

There, where the water lapped against the shore, a boat rocked violently to the tune of happy shrieks. Richard grasped the end of it, plunging it first one way and then the other. Water splashed over the edges, and the boat's smallest occupants, twin toddlers, squealed with delight as the little girl, five or so years old, gripped the edges tightly, her eyes wide. Nothing so enjoyable as being terrified to death.

He was impossibly masculine. Impossibly beautiful. And impossibly dangerous.

"Pair me with Peterson, Evie. Please." Beatrice hated begging, but for this... she would.

Evie patted Beatrice's shoulder. "If all partners agree to swap, I suppose that's fine." With a too-casual shrug, she joined John beside a boat of their own.

Beatrice slipped back into the crowd, entirely focused on the boat, the man rocking it. So focused, she accidentally bumped the shoulder of a man striding in the opposite direction.

"Careful," the man growled, hunkering into his greatcoat collar and tugging his hat lower over his eyes. They flicked toward her, then away. "Always were a shrew," he mumbled as he darted into the crowd.

She swung around, hands on hips. Who was that ? She didn't suffer insults without

retaliation. She took one step after him, but he had disappeared. Reluctantly, she returned her path toward Mr. Clark. No one had called her a shrew to her face since... since Daniel. Yes, she remembered now. The scoundrel. He made Mr. Clark appear a saint. But at least he'd always acted exactly who he was. Unlike his half brother, who pretended to be lovely and sweet but would stab you in the back when you least expected it.

There he was, bouncing the children about as if it was his sole delight.

"Mr. Clark," she said when she stood behind him.

He froze, then straightened as the young sailors objected and faced her. "Miss Bell."

What had she come over here for? His forearms? Uncovered, sleeves rolled above the elbows, crisp hair ranging across the muscled length of them.

No! Not that. One didn't go in search of forearms.

Unless they were perfect forearms like?—

No! "I have a few questions for you," she snapped. "Do you have time? Are you done tormenting the children?"

"I do not have time. I am currently a pirate." And didn't he look it, a bead of sweat on his brow just beside a rakish curl...

The little girl screamed, and one of the boys climbed on top of a seat, tilting the boat sideways.

Somehow Richard knew, and he whipped around and grabbed the boy before he toppled into the water. "Everyone out!"

“No!” That, the little girl.

“Walk the plank, girlie, and that’s an order.” Richard propped the toddler on one hip and held the boat steady with his free hand as the girl stomped her way off the craft. Then he picked up the second boy and propped him on the other hip.

Oh my. Beatrice squirmed. Forearms straining against wiggling toddler limbs, lock of dark hair falling rakishly across one eye. She tingled. In places she shouldn’t. “Ow!” She looked down at her throbbing foot, at the little girl glaring up at her. “Did you stomp my foot?”

“Did you ruin my fun?”

She had a point. Beatrice knelt. “I did not mean to. I think that was your brother. And possibly your uncle. I’ll extend my apologies anyway. Do you need help guarding your boat from pirates right now?”

“You know how to fight pirates?”

“She does,” Richard said, settling the boys—twins—on the ground beside the girl. “She’s been fighting marauding evildoers since I’ve known her. But it’s time for you to run off now. Bishop and Pope are waiting for you.” He nodded toward the back of the crowd where two nursemaids of a same size in frilly white caps and aprons stood side by side in identical postures.

The girl groaned, but when the boys ran, she followed. Each nurse scooped up one boy, and then the group was gone, trudging up the hill to the house.

“Who are they?” Beatrice asked.

“My niece Lucy and my nephews William and Henry—or Willy and Henny, as Lucy

calls them. Daniel's children."

Ah, yes. "Evelina wrote of them." The young girl had, apparently, been conceived just before Daniel's exile from England. And the twins had come to them from the Continent. No matter how far he roamed, Daniel's actions rippled back toward home.

He seemed to be dissecting her with his gaze, as if he could see beyond her flat tone to her true feelings beneath. "Different mothers."

Like him and his brothers. "Your brother and your father have much in common."

Mr. Clark exhaled sharply. "John is afraid there are yet more children out there waiting to be discovered."

"He doesn't seem to mind."

"He wants them all. If no one else wants them. We found one who was in a lovely home, well cared for and happy. Another little girl. He wouldn't dare move her for the world. She didn't want it, and her parents didn't want to lose her, either. But he's set up a fund for her. A dowry for her use only. And the mother receives a yearly sum as well."

"John always was a knight in shining armor."

"To Daniel's devil. How any man could abandon his children as he has—" Anger bit Richard's sentence in two, swallowed it in a single gulp.

She understood well how men could do such a thing, even if Richard did not. When men—like her father, for example—had no use for a child, they simply ignored them, gave them away, and did as they pleased. And what her father pleased was not acknowledging her existence. Until he needed something.

The old pain still clawed at her heart. Useless and ugly. Her nose and ears too big, her body too small, her face too little like her dead mother's. She'd served no purpose to her father. He'd sent her away before they'd both been done wearing black, then welcomed her back when she'd become proficient enough at Spanish to benefit his business.

"Beatrice." Richard's voice could be like bathwater, warm and soothing. She remembered that now. "Are you unwell?"

She shrugged his concern away. "Daniel always called me a shrew. Among other things."

"If he wasn't already deported, I'd have sent him away myself."

"Is it true what I heard? What I read in the papers? Bigamy?"

He crossed his arms over his chest, nodded. "Poor girl. The second wife. Ruined. She disappeared after. A man like my half brother has no right calling anyone names. Especially not intelligent women like?—"

"Are you trying to charm me, Richard Clark?"

His gaze on her suddenly intense, hot. "If I tried, would it work?"

"No." Not after all that had passed between them. No matter that, when he looked at her that way, she couldn't quite breathe as easily as she should be able to.

"Do you let Peterson charm you?"

"Who?"

“Good.” His voice sounded like a smile.

Not good! “Oh, yes. Lord Peterson. He is charming. We’re to go out in a boat together.”

“You’re to go out with me. Evie said.” He turned back to the boat, pulled it higher on the shore until it was stuck tight, and God help her, she tried not to watch his waistcoat strain across his broad back.

And she failed, her mouth dry, the tingling between her legs returning. “Ah, yes. But that’s why I sought you out.” This was why she must take a lover. If she knew the pleasures shared between a man and a woman, this man’s forearms wouldn’t make her knees weak. She’d tried to once, to take a lover. After she’d returned from Evie’s husband’s funeral, after Mr. Clark had kissed her. Her father’s secretary had been willing, and she’d educated herself well, but she’d not been able to go through with it. Too many horrid things could have happened. To her. Not to him. A grim and unfair reality.

She would not let fear limit her this time. She’d brought a French letter. A deuced difficult thing to come by as a woman, but she’d done it.

Now she needed Peterson in that boat.

“Bell...” Clark’s voice low and so very near her ear. “Quit looking at me like that or I’ll think you like me. And”—he straightened, looking quite pleased—“use more detailed language to tell me why you’re over here undressing me with your eyes.” He dusted his hands on his thighs and grinned. “Or don’t. And continue admiring my arse.”

A couple approached before she could do more than sputter an inarticulate sound, and he helped them into the boat. Then he turned to her, and it felt like the simple quarter

spin of his body through space sent all the air flying off. She was breathless beneath the magnificence of his smile, the width of his shoulders.

And yes, she had been busy admiring his arse.

She was talented enough to admire and be irritated at the same time. He had no right to be so magnetic! To cause women to imagine what his neck looked like beneath that cravat, to wish to feel the bone of his scruffy jaw. He'd clearly not shaved that morning. She'd always had a bit of an appreciation for a man's jaw with two days' worth of scruff. A bit of a beard, though unfashionable, showed he was a man, showed he was different from her, rougher. And she... she liked that.

"Que bruto," she mumbled, rubbing her hand up and down her arm, trying to erase the tingles traveling across her skin.

"What does that mean?" A quirk of his lip.

"A beast."

"Me?"

"Naturally."

The other side of his mouth joined the first. A smile, broad and true. "So clever. I have never learned a second language, try as I might."

Oh no. A sincere compliment. Her weakness. But also a reminder. She'd promised to teach him another language. Every good thing between them dead before their first lesson.

"Why are you being nice to me?" she demanded.

He looked out across the water, hands on hips. “For John and Evelina. Shouldn’t we make nice for them?”

“Humph.” He had her there.

“Looks like they cannot resist one another.” He nodded toward the middle of the lake where Selena rowed with Martin.

“Leave them be.”

“I will.”

“Last time you supported Martin’s rejection.”

He ruffled a hand through his hair. “Circumstances are different than they were. It all depends on your cousin.” Disapproval set his jaw.

“My cousin has done nothing wrong.” She wanted to stomp his toes. “I would prefer to row out with Peterson. Will you switch?”

His chin tipped down, and he finally met her gaze. His eyes flashed. “No.”

“You cannot tell me who to row with!”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “I’m not. Evelina is. Why him?”

“Because unlike some men, he looks like he knows how to make a woman happy.”

Was that a growl? He stepped forward, his tall, taut body as menacing as that gruff sound. “Happy how, Bell?”

She shouldn't.

She really shouldn't.

Do. Not. Do it. Beatrice. Bell.

She bounced her eyebrows up once and licked her lips. "In the only way that matters, Richard Clark."

Absolutely no question about her meaning.

Fury ticked in his jaw.

"Now," she said, "will you switch with me, or?—"

"Or." He picked her up and swung her into a nearby boat.

"Don't you dare!" She gripped the sides of the swaying vessel, her heart hammering in her chest.

He pushed her out into the water, then jumped aboard, and the boat tossed wildly for a moment. She was going to die, and she held her breath and slammed her eyes closed against the inevitable biting water.

But the boat calmed. It lurched forward, but with controlled precision. She ventured to open an eye.

Her nemesis sat across from her, rowing, each stroke testing the strength of the linen that hugged his bulging arms. Testing the strength of her own cursed fortitude.

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Five

No way in hell would Beatrice go anywhere with Peterson. Certainly not onto a lake. She was spitting mad, but at least she was spitting mad with Richard and not happy with some other nodcock.

Oh yes, he'd taken her meaning.

But had she ever taken a lover? That was the real question. He shouldn't care. He did care. Some things just couldn't be fought.

Her knuckles were white where she clutched the sides of the boat, her body a strung bow of tension.

"Calm down, hellcat. You're safe. I've got you."

She hissed.

He laughed.

"It's not funny! I do not like large bodies of water! Take me back to shore now."

"You were going to go out with Peterson."

She shoved her nose into the air. Tried to. She couldn't get a good angle with her arms spread to both sides of the boat. "He would have taken me inside instead. He knows what a woman wants."

“How many innuendos are you going to throw at me? A more important question—have you taken the man into your bed?”

“Mr. Clark!” She snapped upright, crossing her arms over her chest. “How could you ask that?”

“Because you’ve been implying it. Have you?”

“It’s none of your business.”

“Perhaps not, but I’d still like to know.” His entire body seemed to be waiting for an answer, though he wasn’t quite sure what he’d do with the information.

“A woman of my age and standing can take a lover if she pleases. As long as she’s quiet and careful about it.”

An evasion. He snorted.

“I do not care what you think.”

“I never thought you did.” He grinned.

“What? Why that”—she circled a finger at his face—“wily expression?”

He lifted the oars, dipped them into the water again, pulled, and watched as her gaze grew hazy, fixated on his arms. “You’re not scared anymore.”

She blinked and looked around, took a few steadying breaths and relaxed, her shoulders lowering, and her lips softening.

“You’re welcome,” he said.

Irritation blazed once more, bright in her eyes. “Oh yes, thank you for abducting me.”

“Come now, Beatrice, you’re safe with me. I swear it.”

“I’d rather hear a dog bark than listen to a man swear to protect me.”

“You know... you’re the only beautiful woman I have trouble charming.”

“Was that another attempt at charming me?”

“Did it work?”

“It never will.” A pause as she purposefully set her gaze away from him, looking out across the lake. “Why would you want to charm me?”

“You’re the sort of woman a man likes to please.”

“You’d rather please a cow, no doubt.”

“I shouldn’t have said that.”

“If it’s true...” Her voice trailed off as her shoulders tightened, threatened to cover her ears.

“It’s not.” Far enough into the lake now, the ground had dropped deep below them. He pulled one oar out of the water and set one in, using it to turn them in a slow circle until his back was to the broad center of the lake. “I apologized once, but now I will venture a clarification. I said it only because I was scared.”

Why not tell her. So much else he couldn’t tell her. This meeting, this renewal of acquaintanceship had brought back all the emotions he’d long fought to bury deep.

He probably couldn't make her look beyond their shared past or how he'd hurt her cousin, and he couldn't tell her the one thing that might win her forgiveness for that. But he could try.

Not because he could have her. He never could. But he might be able to earn back her good regard.

He settled the oars in the water and rushed them forward with a backward stroke. "I was scared of seeing you again. And sometimes fear comes out ugly. Sometimes it comes out like a swiping claw. Or a hiss." He grinned. "Hellcat."

Her eyes narrowed.

"You hiss when you're scared, swipe a sharp paw my way."

"I'm not scared."

"Very well."

"You do not believe me!"

"Do you know"—he rested one oar in its bracket and tugged at his cravat before picking it up once more—"before you left in a rage seven years ago?"

"A justifiable rage!"

"Yes, a righteous one. But that's not the point. When you left, I was in the middle of a mission, one I never got to complete. Or even attempt."

She rolled her eyes. "Learning Spanish. You do not need me for that, Mr. Clark. Hire a tutor."

“None so pretty as you.”

“Richard.” Her voice a warning, a stone. Immovable. But... she’d used his given name, and she’d not done that for too damn long. Felt like the first rays of sun after a cold winter, the first drop of rain after a drought.

He picked up the oar once his cravat was loosened enough to let a cool breeze calm his fire-singed skin. “Learning Spanish was merely a maneuver, a means of accomplishing the true mission.”

“I’m sure you wish me to ask what it was, but I’ll not satisfy you.”

“Ah, but that’s the point— satisfaction . That was the mission.”

She finally looked at him, the thick brown slants of her brows lightly bending toward one another. “I do not see...”

“The satisfaction of tasting your lips.”

She gasped. “N-no. You did not want that.”

“I did.”

“Impossible.” But the look in her eyes—she knew the truth. She must have tasted it on his lips after Edmund’s funeral.

She’d been crying, and he couldn’t have that. Knew the best way to banish her tears was to rouse her ire.

“Didn’t know witches could cry, Bell,” he said, cornering her in the deserted stairway. “Or are those fake tears?” He turned his head every which way, inspecting

her body. “Where’s the bottle? Show me.”

Her eyes flashed, the only remaining evidence of sorrow, the streaks across her cheeks. “Go away.”

He couldn’t. He’d not seen her in four damn years, and she was a vision, a mercy, a heartbeat. He pressed her against the wall. Still so bright. Edmund gone, Daniel exiled, Evelina a widow—their youthful group blasted and broken. But Beatrice Bell as bright as the sun. Still.

“Tell me how much you hate me,” he demanded. He needed to hear her speak of him with passion in her voice.

“I hate you,” she hissed.

He leaned into her, heard her back bump against the wall, and he braced his forearm on the stone just above her head. “You think of me.”

Her eyes flashed in the shadows, and her palms fluttered against his chest. Likely to push him away, though for now they rested. Only rested. “Only to imagine you trampled by a rampaging herd of horses escaped from Astley’s.”

He laughed, the first since his brother’s sentencing four years earlier. “You’re a goddamn delight, Beatrice Bell.” Then he kissed her, tipping her chin up with his knuckles and keeping her there until her lips began to move, until he was sure those palms on his chest did not intend to shove him down the stairs. Oh no, they curled into his coat, pulled him closer as her lips opened for him.

Damn. He slid his hand off the wall and curved it around her nape, tugging her closer, sighing into the kiss, tasting her hate, her pleasure.

Noise in the hallway.

She shoved him, slapped him, and with a chuckle, dark and dreary, he left her in the shadows. Alone.

Impossible that he'd thrown her in this boat today without wanting to kiss her? She had no idea.

"Entirely possible," he said, meeting her fiery gaze with his steady one. "And you know it. You remember it."

That stirred up silence. No sound but the splash of the oars and the slice of the boat through the water. She looked away from him again, but one hand, folded nicely in her lap, hovered upward. She touched her lips with her gloved fingertips.

And he allowed himself to look. Pink. The bottom lip full, pouty. The top one a series of hills and valleys, kissable little curves.

With a circle of one oar, he shifted their course, and with several hard strokes, he brought them to the far edge of the lake beneath the shade of a line of trees. He let the oars rest and studied the other boats dotting the lake. The men rowing them rested in the sun, leaning back, hats tipped over faces. The women turned to one another in intimate conversations.

Nothing so intimate as the semiprivacy of this little bower.

He shouldn't kiss her. Even if she didn't hate him, there was no future.

But goddamn it, couldn't a man have something for himself? Some little thing to get him through the aching loneliness of a lifetime?

They didn't even need a future. If she was intent on taking a lover, let it be him.

He leaned forward, reached out, plucked the fine muslin of her skirts where they spilled over the curve of her knee. That wrenched another gasp from her, this one smaller, more of a hot inhalation. Between his forefinger and his thumb, the muslin slid smooth and warmed by her body. He held on to it. That little pinch seemed enough to draw her forward, closer.

"Beatrice?" Her name a soft whisper that felt like a kiss as it brushed past his lips.

She curved nearer, as if he spoke too low for her to hear otherwise.

"Beatrice." He said her name again. He liked how it felt on his tongue. "When I said I'd rather marry a cow than marry you, it was only because I never thought I would have a chance to marry you. It rather stings my pride, you know." And something deeper than that. "Particularly because most days I'm certain you're the only woman I could ever marry."

Her head was shaking, curt little side-to-side movements. Her face was pinched. "You hate me. You think me not good enough. You think my cousin not good enough. You think?—"

"That's not true. You're much too good for me." He didn't want to talk about her cousin. "And when I feel like I might hate you, I think... that's when I think I wish to marry you most."

Her gaze met his, those pale-green eyes almost vibrating with... what? Some cavalry of emotion rampaging through her. "You are absurd." She bit her lip. "But you are not absurd." She closed her eyes, a little sound—half moan, half groan—rumbling in her throat. "I know because I have felt it, too. I hate you. I want you. Oh." She dropped her face into her hands. "Row me back to shore."

Row her back to shore? After that little revelation? “No, Beatrice. Not without a kiss first.”

Her head snapped up. “I hate you.”

His hand, sneaky little thief, stole toward her face, cupping her cheek. “I know. And I try to hate you, too.” Hating her the only way to survive loving her.

He kissed her. An inhale as he swiped his thumb across her jaw, then an exhale as he settled his lips lightly across hers. So lightly. A test. To see. What would she do?

Pull away and strike him with the palm of her hand?

Or give in and kiss him in return?

She did nothing, moved not a single muscle. Not even the breeze riled her hair. So he wrapped his hand around the back of her neck and pulled her closer. She startled, a little flinch of movement that bloomed her body into life. And she did not pull away. She did not strike him.

She melted into him, her hands finding the tops of his thighs and settling there as if they meant to stay. Her head tilted, slanting her lips across his in a new direction. Her fingertips curled into the wool of his breeches, past that into his muscle, sinking in hooks to catch him. As if she already hadn’t.

A wave of victory swept through him, tightening his muscles, heightening his need. He’d been waiting years for this, and he should kiss her carefully, risking nothing.

He could not.

Instead, he kissed her with years’ worth of longing pulsing at every point their bodies

touched. He gave her the heat of his rage, the intensity of his sorrow, and the bittersweet joy of his pleasure. God, he'd missed her.

And he told her with that kiss.

He opened his mouth and deepened it, and his brave Beatrice didn't flinch. She welcomed it, coasting closer to him. Her hands crawled up his abdomen, his chest, settled on his shoulders and squeezed. He felt each of her fingertips like coals, her nails sinking in and claiming him. No need for claiming. God, he was already hers. Had been for too damn long.

A crack from the nearby shore startled her, broke the seal of their kiss.

"Is someone watching?" She studied the shoreline with panicked eyes. "Did someone see?" She lifted a hand and began to wipe her mouth with the back of it, but he stopped her, holding her wrist.

"Do not wipe my kiss away."

In the sun-yellow shadows, ire blazed to life in her eyes.

He used his other hand, still around her neck, to tug her closer. His knees, spread wide, made a little nest for her knees. He placed her hand, safe from wiping his kiss away, around his neck.

"There." He sounded gruff. He kept his voice quiet. "This is how it should have been." He did not think he'd done wrong with Martin and Selena. Except, perhaps, in that it had lost him this—her hand at his nape, her chest rising and falling with fast little breaths. He nudged his nose against the side of hers.

He must release her now. The idea tightened like a chain around his heart until it

strangled, until it squeezed the damn organ into two jagged halves. When she left this little boat, this floating world for two, would she run to the arms of some other man? A lover. Peterson.

He did not want to know. But in the end, the words slipped out. “Have you kissed other men, Beatrice?”

Her hand on his neck squeezed, her body going rigid. “What does it matter?”

“It does not.”

“You think to own me? Or to shame me for my past? I’ll not allow it.” She tried to pull away from him.

But he held her nape tight, squeezed her thighs between his knees. “No, darling. No one can own a wild heart. And I’d never shame an independent mind.” He settled his forefinger and thumb at her chin, lifted it. “I want to be their champion. Your champion. And I want my kisses to be the only ones that matter. We do not always get what we wish for most, but maybe...” His voice softened. Her breath hitched. “Maybe if all I want is a kiss, I can have that.”

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Six

A nother kiss? She wanted to melt into her answer—yes—and into him. The last few minutes had blown every minute before stepping into the boat with Richard quite out of existence. Had there been other men? Other kisses? Anything outside this tiny, gently rocking world?

Not when his hand at her nape felt so warm.

His breath on her skin so intoxicating.

And her legs between his thick, muscled thighs so very exciting.

Another splash beyond the branches, out in the sunshine where an entire world existed. A world in which she loathed him.

Selena there too. And her broken heart.

Another crack on the shore, like a boot stepping on a stick, the rustle of branches. So many eyes about. Another kiss would change her. It would change everything. On the shore, nothing, no one. Except—there, a flash of clothing, a body appearing from behind a tree, a hat tipped back above a wide grin. The man waved. The man she knew waved.

Daniel Bartlett, scoundrel, seducer, bigamist. The lost Bartlett brother of Slopevale. Here. When he should most certainly not be.

Beatrice moved without thought, her brain a flailing, shrieking mess of quivery pudding. She shoved hard against Richard's chest, her gaze still locked on the shore as her body rocked backward. The boat rocked, too, oars slipping out of their notches, splashing into the water.

Richard cursed and wrenched his torso over the side of the boat, grabbing at the oar. The world tilted. Beatrice tilted. She lunged toward the opposite side of the boat to balance it out.

Too late. The boat reared up. Beatrice tumbled down. And the water greeted her with chilly arms, pulling her under.

Skirts trapping legs, she kicked, reaching for the surface. She'd not had time to draw in enough air before plunging under. Already her lungs screamed. She opened her eyes. Nothing but murky water, dim sunrays piercing the brown fog. Her lungs screamed when she could not. Her eyes burned. Her brain a spinning top of panic as she reached for the light.

Then manacles wrapped around her waist and yanked her upward. She gasped as her head popped above the water.

"Hold on to the boat," Richard barked near her ear. His arm like a chain at her waist, holding her up, saving her. He'd not abandoned her to a watery grave. She clung to his neck, sucked in air on gasps. He held her more tightly, his legs working hard under the surface to keep them both afloat. "Shh. I've got you, Bea. I've got you. Hold on to the boat, love. Shh. Right here." He unclenched one of her arms from around his neck and placed it on the bottom of the boat now turned up to the sky. "See how you can grasp right here?"

She nodded, shivering.

“Good. Now hold tight. I’m going to let you go.”

“No!” Water was so very vast, so final. A person could be lost there, never found. The water had always wanted to hide her body, to make her as unseen as she felt.

“No. Please, no.”

“Yes.” His voice so very calm. “But only to pull the boat—and you—toward the shore. Hold tight, and you’ll be fine. And if you accidentally let go, just yelp for me. I’ll come.”

Water streamed in rivulets down his face, his mouth a grim line. In his eyes, the truth—he would come if she yelped. He’d dive all the way to the bottom if she called his name. She trusted him. No matter anything else that had passed between them, she trusted him now. When it mattered most.

She grasped the boat, releasing him, and he swam away from her to the back of the boat, hooked an arm beneath it, and began to kick, the bottoms of his boots flashing upward.

His boots. If her skirts were bricks, his boots must be worse. But he kicked anyway, kept her afloat, pulled her toward safety. He could have swum to shore himself, saved his own hide, and let her drown. But he’d not abandoned her to that fate. He’d stayed by her side, refusing to let her slip into watery oblivion.

Holding tight to the side of the boat, she kicked, too, trying her best to guide it toward the shore, and when the capsized craft picked up speed, he looked over his shoulder at her, gave a grim nod.

Together, they maneuvered to the shore, then he was standing waist-deep in water, holding out a hand, and she was letting him pull her onto dry land. Then, together, they collapsed in a heap, side by side in the grass beneath the trees.

Above the branches, the clouds floated fluffy, unaffected. Beside her, a man panted. Inside her chest, her heart twisted and twisted. And from all sides, voices made themselves known.

“Beatrice, are you hurt?” Richard demanded softly, voice ragged.

“No. But I’m a pudding.” She inhaled deeply, coughed.

He rolled onto his side, the width of his body blocking her in, his face peering down, wrinkled and worried. “What happened?”

“I’m a blasted pudding in a crisis, aren’t I?”

“I shouldn’t have kissed you.”

She pushed upright, waving the concern away. Better to forget about the kiss. “I saw Daniel.”

“Daniel? Who are you talking about?”

“Your brother Daniel!”

His face paled. “You didn’t. He’s not even in England. He’s oceans away. He’s?—”

“Here. I saw him. He waved at me.” She looked about. “He’s gone now.”

“That’s not funny, Beatrice.” He jumped to his feet, tugged the tail of his shirt out of the band of his trousers and twisted it, wringing out the excess water.

She jumped to her feet, wringing out her skirts. “I’m not making a joke!”

He stomped off.

Beatrice stomped after him, skirts clinging to her legs. She was too angry to care. All the way to the stables, past them, to a cottage near the woods. He swung the door open and disappeared inside. Beatrice followed, catching the door before he slammed it shut and taking the privilege of that action herself. The door banged, shook the walls, and Beatrice stood firm.

“What are you doing?” he demanded, untying and ripping off his cravat. He dropped it to the dirt floor of what appeared to be a dim and dusty woodworker’s shop. She saw not much more than that, her gaze fixated on the strong length of his neck. He pointed toward the door. “Get out. You cannot be here”—he choked, eyes wide and scouring the length of her body—“like that.” He jerked his head back to stare at the ceiling.

She looked down to see what he avoided. Nipples hard beneath soaked muslin, the exact shape of her hips and legs outlined. Every inch of her revealed. She cursed, wrapping her arms across her breasts. “I am not wrong.” She might be? Because what was Daniel doing here? “Or joking. But... but outside of whatever I saw or didn’t see, you kissed me. Again . You cannot deny that , can you!”

With his head tilted back, she could clearly see the way his swallow worked the muscles of his throat. “You kissed me back. And you followed me here. Where we are alone. And secluded.”

“What are you saying?”

He lowered his face, wearing a wolfy grin. “You liked my kisses, Beatrice Bell. You want more of them.”

“Ha! Clearly you like kissing me . Or you would not have done it. Twice .”

“I will never do it again.” He inched closer.

“I would not welcome a third offense.” She inched closer, too, each step driven by anger and lust and the desire to beat him at this game, at every game.

“Oh, of course not.” He smirked. “You’d end it right away. Likely slap me, too.”

“Certainly. I should love to feel your cheek beneath my palm. Again.” Taut and stubbled, rough and warm. Her heart exploded into a rain patter of racing beats.

He forced a short exhale through his nose. “If I kissed you right now, you’d make it last .”

“You clearly wish to be slapped.”

They were toe-to-toe now, somehow having moved even closer as they traded verbal blows.

“Shall we test that theory?” he asked, his voice low and rumble. He cupped the back of her neck. His hands were so big, wrapping round the sides of her throat, holding her gently as his gaze homed in on her lips like a sailor’s on the North Star.

She grasped the front of his shirt just above his waistcoat and yanked him closer, their lips almost touching now, their rapid breaths sizzling a dangerously lean space between their bodies. “I cannot wait to prove you wrong.”

His lips slanted across hers before she’d even finished speaking. No gentle, lake-rocking kiss, this. An enraged inferno fanned by wild winds.

She would pull away. Now.

She clutched the sodden mass of his shirt more tightly, tugged him closer until their chests touched. Hard to soft but hearts beating to the same unsatisfied, needy rhythm.

Now she would release him. Prove him wrong. End the kiss and imprint her palm hard and fast across his cheek.

Hard and fast, she crashed her hips against him, needing those bits of herself still untouched by his fire... consumed.

She would end the kiss.

“Still kissing me, Bea,” he whispered against her lips.

“ You are still kissing me .”

His hands bracketing her head, her fingers tangled in his shirt, they stood nose to nose, gasping breath to gasping breath.

“You think I’ll stop first?” he rasped.

“It won’t be me who stops.” When had this become a challenge, a duel? Last man or woman left kissing won.

Lost?

Didn’t matter. He was rubbing his thumb gently along her lower lip, gaze hazy. When he kissed her this time, he parted her lips, slipped his tongue into her mouth. She could feel and taste and smell the man, every inch of him a heady, exhilarating challenge. She would not run from it. She tangled her tongue with his, imitating the stroking motion he’d done to her.

He moaned, and the sound made all that had been dark light. She'd been making this man scowl and snap for so long. What she'd really wanted to do all that time was make him moan.

She deepened the kiss and trailed her fingers down his chest. No longer holding him captive. But he didn't bolt away. He rocked closer, as if he wanted whatever bands she chose to put around him, and moaned once more when she flattened her palms against his hard abdomen.

Victory.

"Will you stop now?" she asked, afraid, so very terrified of what she wanted his answer to be.

"Never."

Relief flowed through her. "Stubborn man."

"As a damn mule, Beatrice. Will you stop, concede, retreat, surrender?"

"Ha!"

"That's my Beatrice." He smiled into the next kiss he took.

Or did she give this kiss, eagerly?

His fingers dug into her waist right above her hips. Hot. So hot across every inch of her skin. Her body would surely sizzle dry her wet clothing. She threw her head back, her breasts aching, and he licked a line down her throat, peppered that line with kisses.

His hand squeezed her arse.

“Oh!”

He chuckled. “Will you run now, Bea?”

“Never.” To prove she could not be cowed, she kissed him, a clash of teeth and curses and grasping for one another.

“Hell,” he hissed, lifting away from her. Not too far. Just enough to look down at her, to show her every violent emotion passing through him. His cheek twitched, and then his hand shot out, grasped her own hand, and moved it between their bodies. He placed her right where her belly pressed against him. He held her palm against his shaft.

Long and hard, and she knew what that meant. She had aroused him as he’d aroused her. Seemed hardly possible.

“Will you run now?” he ground out, eyes slamming closed as if the feel of her hand on him was near torture.

Good. She wanted to torture him. She squeezed. He cursed.

“No, Richard Clark,” she said, “I will not stop. I play to win.” She took his free hand. Placed it on her breast.

“Beatrice, you unknowable hellcat.” Each word rushed together as he dropped his face into the crook of her neck and bit her. Gently. A nip as his hand massaged her breast, as his thumb sought out her nipple and thrummed over it, circled it. “Give up, she-devil?”

“I’ll give up when you do.”

His lips wandered lower, and he scattered kisses along the bared tops of her breasts, still wet but drying quickly from the heat of their bodies. His lips wandered even lower, dragging across the soaked muslin. Then his teeth closed around her pebbled nipple, and he sucked. And she cried out, tangling her hands in his hair as the aching between her legs boiled to an exquisite crisis. She bucked her hips against his shaft and whispered his name.

He lifted his head, all challenge gone. Nothing in his gaze but... awe? Hungry need?
“You need release, hellcat. Are you close?”

She bit her lip, moaned.

“Are you close?” he repeated, sucking at her breast once more.

Another moan slipped through. No controlling them.

“You are.” He shifted, slipping his leg between hers. He rubbed his thigh into the aching center of her. It felt so damn good, and when his hand spread low across her belly, and his fingers raked into the layers covering her cunny, she almost cried from the painful pleasure of it. He’d found that small bit of her that pulsed the most and teased it. So good. So right.

“More?” he growled.

“More!” She ground her center against his hard thigh.

“More?” His whisper hot on the shell of her ear.

“Yes, please. Oh, yes.” The words barely audible.

“ Please ? From Beatrice Bell? Might be the most erotic thing I’ve ever heard. No need to beg, hellcat. I can’t say no.”

If please had turned him inside out, his words did the same to her.

I can’t say no.

Everyone had always been able to say no to her.

But not this man. Her nemesis. The bane of her existence. Her equal in anger and cutting cunning.

He, somehow, could not say no , and as he told her yes with kisses down her neck and clever fingers rubbing perfect pleasure between her legs, she broke into a million tiny pieces of light.

She held him tight as her body shook, wave after wave of indescribable sensation rocking through her.

His hand in her hair at her nape pulled her face away from his chest. His eyes ravaged her, devoured her. “Don’t look away.”

As if she would. Her final stand. Her final victory against him—to take this pleasure for her own without hesitation.

On a groan, he curved around her, lifting his knee hard against her quivering center. When she cried out, he said in a husky whisper near her ear, “I will never see a more exquisite sight than your body wrapped around mine, than your mouth slack from the pleasure I gave you. I will never witness a miracle more divine than you .”

Nonsense. She shook her head. As much as she could, her muscles barely capable of

functioning.

He caught her chin, kissing her hard as his hips bucked, grinding his shaft against her hand, slow at first then faster. She didn't dare move her hand, didn't want to, then he moaned her name and shuddered, eyes closing fast as he rolled against her hand a final time with a muttered curse. He held her body up, held both of them up. Or rather, they kept each other standing, leaning toward one another, the melting angles of their bodies their only foundation.

“Bloody hell,” he muttered. He kissed her gently, sipping from her, languid and lovely. “Can't remember the last time I lost control like that.” A huff of a laugh. “Of course it would be with you.”

She should take offense. She possessed no energy to do so. Better to be limp in his arms, head resting against his shoulder as her heart calmed and feeling returned to her legs.

Sometime later, his deep sigh ruffling the hair by her ear, he said, “It's time for you to leave. No shaking your head.”

Was she shaking her head? Oh, she was. She stopped.

“When we leave this cottage, I expect you'll go back to cutting barbs and eye rolls, and I'll return to annoying you as if it's my life's mission. But here”—his arm around her waist became a chain she had no wish to escape—“we are possible. So if you're looking for a lover, hellcat, a man to make you happy, my door is wide open. I'm yours for the taking.” He kissed the warmed, sensitive spot on her neck right below her ear. “Now...” He lowered his leg until she no longer rode his thigh, holding her shoulders to keep her from crumpling to the floor. When he was sure she could stand alone, he left her, returning with a blanket he draped around her shoulders. “It is time for you to leave.”

He opened the door and pushed her through. The last thing she saw before the door closed in her face was Richard Clark, body of a god and mouth of a sinner, mind of demon and... and the man she hated most—his lips swollen from her kisses, his jaw tight, and his eyes... somehow... sad.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 5:37 am

Seven

Much could happen in two days, even when nothing much happened at all.

Games, conversation, excellent food, Spanish wine provided by her father for the entire party, a gift for the couple he'd sent with Beatrice. After she'd asked him to. And after taking the price of it out of her allowance. The daily diversions blurred together without much incident. Perhaps the missing Richard Clark leant an air of lazy peace to the affair.

Missing why, though? Had their interaction in the cottage run him off? He'd not seemed particularly deterred that day. I'm yours for the taking.

Beatrice left her writing implements and opened the library window, hoping some fresh air would sweep through and cool her off. But it remained as absent as Mr. Clark. He'd disappeared, showing his face only to eat, toss some of the wine down his throat, then run off once more. She expected nothing less. He was a man, after all. Eternal disappointments, the lot of them.

Even Peterson, who could never be found when she wanted him and always showed up when she didn't. Alone in the garden—he was nowhere to be found. In a crowded room—he'd disappeared. While she was busy puzzling through a translation—right at her side. Breathing much too loudly.

Still, his continued attention was quite encouraging. He'd offered tiny touches, too. His fingers at her waist, pale compared to Richard's. His shoulder brushing hers, shorter, narrower than Richard's. His hand escorting her, not a single tingle

penetrated the layers of glove between them.

No matter. Beatrice would kiss the man. What better way to banish other kisses after all. Now, more than ever, she must take a lover, a man to show her Richard was not the only one who could make her shatter.

After this afternoon's work, though. The legal terms were particularly difficult to perfect at times. And they were the most important.

"Miss Bell?" The library door creaked open, and Peterson stepped inside. "Ah, there you are. Your cousin told me I'd find you here."

"Good morning. I'm busy at the moment. But after I finish this, perhaps we can walk in the garden?"

"Ah." His gaze dove toward the open window. "Yes, lovely. Do you mind if I remain with you until you are done?"

She tried to keep her eyebrows from collapsing toward one another. "That is..." Not fine. "Yes, you may."

If it had been Richard, she would have told him to jump out the window. She couldn't be as fierce with other men. As truthful.

Peterson sat nearby, sitting poker straight in a hard-back chair. He crossed one leg over the other. And began to shake his bottom leg up and down. Vibrating the entire bloody library.

She bit her tongue and turned back to her work, dipped her quill in ink and?—

"Miss Bell, what is it you are working on?"

“A contract.”

“Are you translating to or out of... What language?”

“Spanish. My father’s ships carry wine.”

“Ah.” He settled into the back of the chair.

And in the blessed silence that followed, Beatrice completed several sentences.

“Doesn’t your father have a man to do this for him?” Peterson asked just as she was chewing on the most accurate way of expressing a particularly difficult sentence.

Her quill hovered over the paper, frustration bunching her muscles. “Yes.” Hateful question. How many times had she been asked that? Never by Richard. But by other men? Constantly.

She must stop these useless comparisons. Despite their differences, only their one similarity mattered—they were men not worth trusting. “But I am better than them all.”

Peterson made a sound. Half grunt, stuck in his throat. She faced him, one brow raised high.

“Yes?” she asked.

“It is only...” He shifted, uncrossing his legs, then recrossing them in the other direction. “You have not had the same formal training in languages a man has. Have you?”

“I am mostly self-taught.” Not that it mattered. She was excellent at what she did.

Otherwise, her father would not trust her with his contracts. Her self-education was thorough, consisting of the linguistic and legal knowledge necessary for her task. Yet... She rolled her shoulders, trying to roll her doubt away. Her father did not pay her. Did not think it seemly to pay a woman, his daughter, for her services. So perhaps he trusted the funds she saved him more than he trusted her talent. A long-held fear.

Damn Peterson for pulling it out into the light.

If Peterson proved equally chatty in bed, taking him for a lover would be cause for mourning not celebration.

“Why not learn a more suitable language?” he asked.

“Such as?”

“French?”

“No, thank you.” She turned back to the table, snapping up her quill. “Spanish is my mother’s tongue.”

He seemed to recognize her response for what it was—a dismissal of the subject. He lapsed into silence, his leg shaking at such a speed, her chair might vibrate across the room. Paper. Ink. She focused on it, tried to narrow her world to it alone. Tried to write smoothly despite his shaking.

She’d been here before. In this very library, alone with a man. This time so different from that one. Years ago. Another man so different from this one...

Richard lay on the chaise lounge near the writing desk she’d commandeered in the library, one leg stretched out, the other bent, the sole of his boot flat on the rug. At the

end of his stretched-out leg, his foot swung back and forth lazily, like a lion's tail, as he stared at the ceiling. He was silent as the grave in his contemplation.

All the noise came from Beatrice, from her quill scratching across paper. Happy silence, happy scritch scratch. She found herself humming, too, the words of two languages pouring together more smoothly than they usually did. Happy companionship, perhaps, gave her confidence. Two pages of Don Quixote had transformed beneath her hand with ease. She was improving. Soon her father would not be able to deny her expertise, would agree to let her translate his agreements with his Spanish trade partners.

Yes, he'd missed the last three meetings she'd scheduled with his man of business, but... he could not put her off forever. She'd thought this week would provide ample opportunity to prove her value to him. He'd promised to escort her to Slopevale, to remain there for the length of the party.

He'd never showed, and she'd arrived in the country a day late from waiting.

A knot in her chest tightened, and she gently placed her quill on the table to press the heels of her hands into her stinging eyes. Shaking off the shadows, she faced Richard. Stretched out, lean and lazy, the softest grin beneath closed eyes, his dark hair sweeping back from his sun-bronzed face. That grin, so satisfied it turned a handsome man into a demigod. Her father might not be here, but Mr. Clark was, and his long, muscled form gave her an odd, electric sort of comfort.

"What are you thinking of?" she asked quietly.

"Nothing."

"Surely something."

“Hm. Perhaps, if I’m thinking of anything, it’s to wonder what you’re writing, to wish I could read it.”

“Why haven’t you asked?”

He shrugged. “We might argue. And I’m rather enjoying this feeling.”

“Which is?”

“I think... belonging.”

She pressed a hand to her cheek—hot, surely red.

He sat upright, leg still outstretched, boot still swinging at the end of it. “Cannot say for certain, though, never having felt it before.”

She laughed. This man not knowing how belonging feels? Yes, he was a bastard, but he’d been accepted by his father, loved by his brothers. He must mean, perhaps, belonging with a woman. With her. Cheeks hotter now, her heart thumping. She felt it, too, the belonging. Rightness rang in the silence. She’d never been able to work with anyone in the room with her before. But with Richard...

Dangerous, Bea. Beware.

She turned back to her work, trying to ignore the shuffles and squeaks behind her. Trying to ignore the warm weight settling at her shoulder. Dipping her quill in the ink pot, she said, “Yes?”

“Can you teach me?”

“I could. But could you learn?” Sharp. Like a needle, it popped the sweet silence

they'd been belonging in.

He chuckled, unbothered, building back up the sweetness if not the silence. "I would try, hellcat."

"Miss Bell."

Were those—she swallowed the rising lump in her throat—his bare knuckles on the back of her neck? Do not moan, do not lean into them, and do not sigh wistfully! She scooted her chair away from him, closer to the table's edge.

"Read it to me, then? The Spanish version first, then your translation."

"You do not want that. It will bore you."

"I've never found anything you've said the least bit boring." That was his hand settling on her shoulder. "Please, Beatrice?"

She melted right into the pages of Quixote, reading them aloud as if in a dream. A dangerous dream. Men were not to be trusted. Smooth, charming men should be avoided. But without knowing, he was giving her everything she'd ever ached for. A man who cared for her opinion, who admired her talents, whose very presence offered solace—an impossibility. Experience had taught her such men were rare. Nearly extinct. Yet Richard...

Finished reading the original and her translation, she peeked up at him, stopped breathing.

His hand still curled warmly on her shoulder, his eyes were pools of fired whisky, golden brown and burning. For her?

No man had ever wanted her. Not even the ones who were supposed to.

She should not trust this. Must be a trick.

Yet...

His hand skimmed up her neck and settled beneath her jaw, warm and welcome. “You’re a wonder, Beatrice Bell. How do you do it?”

“I-I... it is important to understand the entire meaning of a paragraph, a page, a chapter. The symbolic, the literal, the metaphorical. You cannot merely plod along one word at a time. Seeing the whole first... it’s necessary to create a proper—Apologies.” She turned from him, pulling away from his touch. “Now I am boring you.”

He eased around her, sat on the edge of the table, his large hand finding her chin again, lifting it. “Not bored a bit. Intrigued beyond measure. Will you teach me? I’ll do my best to understand the words as you do. I cannot promise proficiency, but ? —”

“Yes. I’ll teach you.” Mad decision, dangerous idea. But no other possible reaction, to his admiration, to his touch. Maybe she could trust this man. Maybe she could, with him, sink into soft silence without worry. She closed her eyes and leaned her cheek into his palm.

Beatrice cuffed her hand around her neck. Sobs were rising there, and she was not alone, in no place to reveal her weaknesses to the world.

She wanted Peterson in her bed, not her heart. No man had entrance there. Not since...

She squeezed a bit harder, closing her eyes. Then she dropped her hand and shook off the sadness, returned once more to her translations.

“Miss Bell.” Peterson stood behind her, but not close enough to feel his heat.

She spoke without looking up from her work, only dipping her quill into the ink pot.

“Yes, my lord?”

“Most everyone is gone.”

She rolled her eyes, set the nib to the paper. “I’m aware.” What was the correct translation for bore ?

He cleared his throat. “Two people, alone, may do as they please. With only the servants to see. And Prescott’s are a silent lot.”

“Mmm.”

“There’s an excellent view from my bedchamber. Of the lake.”

“Lovely for you.”

“Perhaps you might like to view it? Now. Seems as good a time as any.”

“I’m quite busy, my lord. Thank you, though.”

“Ah. Well?—”

She faced him with a slight sigh. “I do beg your pardon, but I find it difficult to concentrate, and I must finish this. You do understand, yes?” Leave.

If it were Richard, he would pull up a chair, sit next to her. That his only answer. Other than a cocky, challenging grin. Then he'd sew his lips shut and rebel in silence. And either she'd be able to concentrate more than before—his irritating presence somehow, contradictorily, soothing—or he'd tease her into what she really wanted.

A kiss.

That's what she'd wanted that day in this room with him seven years ago. She'd received only heartache instead. He'd prove her right. Men only wanted women for a while. They'd all eventually abandon her, disappoint her, break her. Just as her father had.

Just as Richard had when he'd hurt Selena.

Better to remember his betrayal than how beautifully they'd once fit together.

"Yes, ah. I do understand." Peterson bowed. "Good day, Miss Bell. Perhaps we'll speak at dinner."

She waved and he left, and finally alone, she could no better focus than before. She folded her hands in her lap with a scowl.

The view. From his bedchamber.

"Curses."

He'd been offering what she'd been angling for since they'd been introduced. And she'd rejected it. Rejected him.

And she did not seem to regret it.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 5:37 am

Eight

Three days after the most erotic moment of Richard's life, he stormed into the Slopevale breakfast room and stood like a soldier before the long table.

Everyone blinked up at him.

John raised a single brow, clearly questioning Richard's sanity.

Evelina offered a warm smile. "Join us, brother."

"Where's Miss Bell?" he asked. And where was Peterson?

"And where have you been?" John asked. "We have barely seen you lately."

"Busy." Searching for a brother who could not possibly be in England. He should tell John what Beatrice claimed to have seen, but it was likely nothing. No use worrying him during what should be a worry-free occasion. "Miss Bell?"

The woman had come against Richard's hand then disappeared, not once seeking him out despite his many and prolonged absences from the party. When he did join the group, she didn't even look at him.

Peterson, though... she'd looked her fill at him.

And Richard was a few breaths away from turning his brother's pre-wedding celebrations into a massacre. The only reason he'd not blackened the man's eye,

thrown Beatrice over his shoulder, and carted her off like the brute she called him was because John had already lost one brother to ungentlemanly actions. He should not lose another.

Daniel, oddly, was saving Richard from making a mistake. He was the only thing keeping Richard from using his father's sabre, an old family heirloom that hung on the wall in the foyer, to lop off Peterson's head. Or parts lower. Either would work, frankly. No time for mutilations, though, when combing the grounds and surrounding areas looking for his exiled younger brother.

Beatrice hadn't really seen Daniel. She couldn't have. But she wasn't flighty. She'd seen someone. And he'd discover who. Because if anyone had seen them kissing in the boat before they'd plunged into the lake, he needed to stop the rumors before they shackled her to a man she hated, a man her family would despise.

He'd found nothing but frustration and a rising unease. Perhaps she had imagined it. Could be that her return to Slopevale had caused an avalanche of memories that were superimposing themselves over the here and now. Only Daniel was not here and now, and searching for him was a useless pursuit.

Especially since he could be pushing Peterson off a roof (how to get him up there, though...) and taking Beatrice to a nice warm bed.

Her scent lingered in his memory, the feel of her breast still warmed his palm.

She hated him.

But not when he kissed her.

The corner of his lips tipped up.

Hell, his mere birth made him an outsider to good society, and he'd always tried to fit in anyway, never taking more than those around him were willing to give him. Beatrice's father would likely have an apoplexy if he thought his only child was about to marry a bastard. Society would turn up their noses, and she'd have to endure gossip she did not deserve.

Marriage. To Beatrice. It would never happen.

But lovers... Maybe he'd convinced her to give it a try.

If he could get rid of Peterson first.

"Can someone please tell me where Miss Bell is?" He was whining, that much clear from the titters rippling down the breakfast table.

Miss Selena Bell—sitting right next to Martin, it must be noted—said, "In the garden. She promised a walk to Lord Peterson this morning."

Baron Bloody Peterson. Hell.

He bowed to Miss Bell. "You have my eternal gratitude." He swept out of the room. Yes, they were all whispering about him now. No doubt he'd given rise to myriad rumors and speculations. He'd have to be more careful, not let frustration ride him so hard. But matters of Beatrice seemed to spiral out of his control before he could do anything about it. Always had. To meet her had been to admire her, and admiration had run a quick path to coveting. First her body, then her brain. Now he seemed to need them both as air and something else as well.

That he punched back, locked away. No use in inspecting what he couldn't have.

So he stepped into the garden, inhaling determination with the fresh morning air and

yelled, “Beatrice bloody Bell! Where are you?”

Cursing from beyond the rose bushes. There was a little walk there in a bower. He strode for it, found at its far end, two bodies, walking quickly, side by side on a path big enough only for two. Beatrice and Peterson. Their shoulders brushed. Her skirts flirted with his legs. Such intimacy in the composition, in how he walked slightly twisted toward her, hands clasped behind his back and neck bent to hear her better.

She glanced over her shoulder, saw Richard, cursed again, grabbed Peterson’s arm, and tugged him forward, clearly anxious to put space between them and Richard.

Absolutely not.

He quickened his pace to catch up. That pox-arsed baboon could not have her. When he reached them, he sliced into the small space between them and patted them both on the back before crossing his arms over his chest and jutting out his elbows. Distance. He must create distance.

“Good morning, Miss Bell,” he said. “Peterson.”

“Good morning,” Peterson drawled. “Is there something amiss at the house?”

“Not at all!”

“Then what brings you here?” Beatrice asked, each word a poison dart meant, clearly, to maim him.

“Exercise, naturally. Companionship. I thought you might like a little variety in company.” Richard elbowed Peterson in the ribs. Perhaps a bit too hard. “One such as you, Peterson, shouldn’t have to carry the weight of entertaining an intellectual such as Miss Bell.”

“The lady and I have spent many rousing hours in one another’s company,” Peterson said. “I am more than capable of keeping a bluestocking entertained.”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk,” Richard said at the same time Beatrice growled.

“Bluestocking? I am one I suppose, but your tone gives it an insulting sound I take offense to.”

“Now you’ve done it,” Richard said. Impossible to keep the cheer from his voice.

“I meant no insult.” Peterson looked properly bewildered. “I don’t think I’ve done a thing. It’s all you, Clark. Before you showed up, I was doing rather well with the lady.”

Richard whistled. “I’m not the one who disparaged bluestockings.” He turned to Beatrice. “Did you know he was doing well with you? What do you think that means? Sounds like he was trying to tame a horse.”

“Well, it’s a bit like that, isn’t?” Peterson ran a frustrated hand through his hair, forgetting he wore a hat. It toppled backward off his head, and he stopped, bent to pick it up.

Richard rushed Beatrice forward, abandoning the other man and relishing her gasp.

“A bit like taming a horse?” Pink flushed high in her cheeks, and he wanted to kiss those outrageous spots of color.

“Did you know he was such a prat?” Richard whispered near her ear.

She shivered but said, “I’m concerned you’ve manufactured this entire conversation. None of this is real.”

He shrugged.

And Peterson caught up with them. “I did not intend to offend, Miss Bell. I’ve been having a lovely time with you.”

And just how lovely did the man mean? Lovely in an entirely proper social sense? Lovely in terms of courtship? Lovely as in, I know the taste of your cunny and cannot live without it ?

Richard’s hands became fists.

“Yes,” Beatrice said, rounding Richard and hooking her arm through Peterson’s. “I have had an excellent time, as well. We should continue our walk. Alone.”

Richard strode after them, walked as close behind them as he could, ears wide open.

Beatrice peeked at him, then sighed. “Go away, Mr. Clark.”

“Can’t. I’m chaperoning.”

She froze, threw him an incredulous look as Peterson roared a laugh.

“Go find a bonnet or turban, then,” Peterson rumbled.

“Or some smelling salts,” Beatrice added. “Some accoutrements that will identify you as the aged chaperone you clearly are.”

Peterson chuckled. “He cannot be a day younger than fifty.”

“Oh, you’re too kind. I was thinking five and sixty.”

Richard narrowed his eyes, wavered a finger between them. “Stop that, Bea. Bantering is what we do together.”

“We do not do anything together.”

He pushed between them again. “You break my heart, Bea.”

Beatrice pulled Peterson more tightly to her side. “Go visit the cows. You prefer their company anyway. And it’s Miss Bell.”

“We’ve been friends for so long, surely we no longer let formalities chain us.”

“You can call me Ivan, Miss Bell,” Peterson said.

“No, she cannot.” Richard broke them apart, stuffing his entire body between them and keeping them at bay with his elbows.

“You may call me Beatrice,” she said.

Richard growled. “This entirely—shit!” He said the last bit face down in the gravel. Where the hell had that rock come from? What damn twig had jumped up to throw him face-first into humiliation?

Soft hands fluttered at his back as he pushed to his feet. “Are you hurt?” Beatrice asked, her voice softer than before.

“My pride is bruised beyond compare,” he grumbled.

“You deserve it.” Her voice was tart, but her eyes sparkled. She enjoyed it, every damn bit of it. Not just his embarrassment, but their exchange of barbs, his dogged pursuit, his bravado and insinuating claims to her attention. She barely suppressed a

smile, and it was all for him, not for the man standing nearby looking increasingly more irritated. She did not attempt to restrain her amusement.

“Bea.” He lowered his voice. “I have something to tell you . About a mutual acquaintance who you believed to be attending this gathering.”

“Who?” Peterson asked, hovering above them like a bird of prey.

“No one,” Beatrice and Richard said at the same time.

“Ah, my lord... Ivan...” Beatrice chose each word with extra caution. “I do need to speak with Mr. Clark. I’ll see you inside?”

The other man looked between Beatrice and Richard, clearly hesitant.

Beatrice waved to the house rising above them. “Many windows, Ivan. Many eyes. And as Mr. Clark has already pointed out, I am over thirty years old.”

He gave a stiff nod and strode toward the house.

“Thank God he’s gone.” Richard stood, brushing himself off. Beatrice was right; there were entirely too many windows. He took her hand and dragged her under the trees, their branches stretching out shade over the green grass. He leaned against the trunk. “I’ve been looking for Daniel.”

“Ah.” She drew a line in the grass with the toe of her little boot. “That’s where you’ve been.”

“Missed me?”

“No.”

“I’ve missed you.”

She sighed. “I swear I saw him. But...” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “That’s ridiculous, isn’t it. He could not be here. And yet... why would I have imagined him?” She avoided his gaze.

“We were just speaking of him that morning. You saw someone, but not clearly, and your mind supplied the details.”

“Yes, that’s possible.”

Silence seemed as heavy as the shadows beneath the branches.

Finally, Richard said, “Have you no reaction? To what I said about missing you.”

She waved his question away, crossed her arms over her chest.

“It’s true,” he said. “Have you thought any more about my offer?”

She bit her bottom lip.

“Has Peterson offered?”

“No!” Her arms flew to her sides, hands fisted in an instant.

“Good.” As her body tensed, his relaxed. “Quite excellent. I do not care to share you.”

She opened her mouth, and he poised to accept her barbs, to throw them back. But she snapped her lips closed and slumped against the tree a quarter turn away from him. She closed her eyes and rubbed them with the heels of her hands.

He rolled onto his shoulder and peered down at her. “Are you well? Not suffering any consequences of our dip in the lake?”

She shook her head.

“Why are you scared of water? Your father owns boats. I’m sure you’ve been on boats. You visited your mother’s family in Spain one winter, didn’t you?”

“Yes. And I was miserable the entire voyage. There and back. If I visit them again, I might not return. Simply to avoid the travel.”

Then don’t go. “Why?”

“I owe you no explanations.”

She didn’t. But he wanted one anyway.

“I suppose, though, I owe you something for saving me.”

He’d always save her. “Here, I’ll tell you something of myself, payment for your own story.” She was terrified of water and could not swim. Serious business. He’d have to offer a serious price. “I was five when my mother brought me to Slopevale. She was a seamstress in the village, and I looked exactly like my father, exactly like John, too. We could have been twins. The villagers were not blind, and they were quite aware of my father’s proclivities. I distinctly remember the vicar’s wife calling me Marquess’s Little Mistake several times, as if it were my name.”

Beatrice made a sound in her throat, her face screwing up with anger.

“Calm down, hellcat. It’s fine,” he said softly.

“You were a child! No one should treat a child that way.”

“Remember, you hate me.”

Another tiny noise.

He tapped her nose, and she swiped his hand away.

He shrugged his hands into his pockets. To keep from touching her more. “My mother grew tired of it. And she could not make money. No one wanted the marquess’s mistress sewing their clothes. So she carted me up to the big house, knocked on the door, and announced to the butler that the marquess could take care of his Little Mistake himself. Then she left.”

“Right then and there?”

He nodded.

“Richard, I’m... that’s...” She exhaled a deep breath. “It’s all rather familiar.”

Was it? “How?” He needed to know. Immediately. Needed whatever small thread connected them.

“My mother was illegitimate. I would have been had my uncle not discovered my mother’s situation, my father’s intent to leave her with child and unmarried. He forced my father’s hand. But for my uncle, I’d inhabit the position you do in society. I think I still do. Spinsters, you know. Most would rather forget entirely that we exist. No one likes to be reminded of failure. My uncle has told me many times, however, that men and women must chart their own paths, and the path they chart alone is what we should judge them by. Not where they started the journey. That is out of their control.”

How had he not known any of that? What had they talked about seven years ago? They'd been so young and intoxicated with life, origin stories had hardly seemed to matter. There had been no past or future. Only the heady now .

Age had corrected that perception. Perhaps age could correct them, too.

"I wish," Beatrice said, "your mother had been as astute as my uncle."

He wanted her to understand, but he didn't need her pity. "I had a home, food, a new brother who immediately took me as his own, a father who was rather proud to have sired me, oddly enough, and a new mother, too." He scratched the back of his neck. She was less welcoming. Not ready to talk about her yet. Or ever.

"Have you thought about living elsewhere? Some place they do not know you?"

"No. I am who I am. No amount of running changes it. And why would I run from my family? From John and Evie, from Lucy and the twins. Besides, I built a house in that direction"—he pointed north—"on some land I bought from John that wasn't entailed. It's my home now." Right next to everything he held dear.

"Oh... I didn't know." She fiddled with a ribbon at her sleeve as she shifted to her back and stared up into the branches. They cast shadowed striations across the curves of her face and darkened the green of her eyes. "I was eight when my mother died, and I remember leaving the house one morning to look for her. I knew she would never return, but it was a... compulsion. I had to look. My father had not been home for... I do not know how long. And I think I was afraid he'd died, too. I found out later he'd been gone for four days, had sent the staff home, too. He'd forgotten I even existed. Perhaps I left the house looking for food as well. I don't... I do not remember all the details. They are murky."

"God, Beatrice." He moved to her side of the tree, resting his forearm next to her

head and pressing his palm to the trunk on the other side of her body near her arm, close enough for his thumb to stroke her if he wished. If she needed it.

She hung her head, spoke to their feet. “My aunt is the one who realized something was wrong. She went to see me, found the door open, the house empty. Mm.” She was fiddling with the ribbon again, and he was just trying to block out the world, to let her know, feel in her bones, that here, with him, she was safe. “Mm. My father had recently moved us to a lodging house near the West Indies docks. Closer to his offices. Before my mother’s death, we’d lived in a little townhouse. I don’t know where in London. Closer to my uncle and aunt. I remember there was a lovely garden nearby, and I liked to watch the women walk by in beautiful dresses. But my father saw no use in, mm, what he called idle comforts. So, we moved to the lodging house. It was two rooms and loud and crowded, and there was no more garden or pretty dresses. But he could easily walk to the docks.”

She was silent so long Richard thought she might not finish the story. So he flicked his thumb out and stroked the few available inches of her arm. Soft. His skin stood out starkly against hers. They had always been a study in contrasts, their differences enticing, explosive. Their newfound similarities rocked him more deeply, made him want to curve around her and never give her up.

She swallowed and said, “A child could easily walk to the docks, as well. I did. I remember how crowded they were. And the smell.” Her nose wrinkled. “And I thought I saw my father on a boat. So I found this narrow little... plank... I was balancing on it, proud of myself, but a man on the boat... he didn’t see me. He stepped onto the plank. Shook it. I fell. I must have screamed, but I don’t remember anything but the water—cold and ugly tasting in my mouth.”

He rested his forehead against hers, hoping against all hope for a happy ending. Knowing no matter what she said next the happiest ending had already occurred—she’d survived.

“The man who’d made me fall—he saved me. He couldn’t find who I belonged to, and I couldn’t stop crying to tell him. And then I caught a fever. My aunt says my uncle found me. She’d told him I was missing, and my uncle asked about everywhere, including the docks, hoping my father had taken me with him, wherever he’d gone. I do not remember much. The fever broke when I was at my aunt’s. So I remember that—waking up in Selena’s bed.” She chuckled. “I do not recommend a dunk in the Thames. It’s not at all beneficial for your health.”

He chuckled her under her chin, saw in her newly raised eyes a barely hidden sadness he wanted to ease, to banish. He pulled her off the tree and into his arms, hugging her. Just hugging her. And for a moment, she let him, melting into the embrace, digging her face into his chest, causing his heart to explode and wrap itself around her.

Then she stepped away and onto the path. “I tell you all this so you know we are even. Your story for mine. I owe you nothing else. And while I will not deny enjoying our... interlude the other day, it cannot happen again.”

He followed her out of the shade of the tree but not into the sun. It had disappeared behind rolling gray clouds. A shiver of a wind whipped through the garden. “Beatrice?—”

“No.” She rocked back a step, holding her hand out, palm flat, a wall. “I mean it, Mr. Clark. My body may”—she swallowed, trembled a bit—“desire your attentions, but I cannot forget your treatment of my cousin, your role in separating her from Mr. Fisher. She has been my sister since the day I woke up in her bed, her mother my only mother, her father my only protector. Any harm done to them is”—she shook her head—“entirely unacceptable, unforgivable.” She ran off, down the path and into the house, and perhaps out of his life forever.

Better that way, yes?

No, worse.

Because now he knew she did not care about his birth, didn't care what her father thought, knew he had no say over who she wed or what she did with her life. She was the type of woman who could marry him, who would.

If she didn't hate him.

And she'd made very clear, she did.

Nine

Beatrice almost made it into the house before it started raining. And she almost bumped into Selena when she stepped onto the path right in front of her. Neither of those things happened, though, so when the skies opened up, she had to blink drops out of her eyes to see her cousin clearly.

She looked startled, pale and shaken.

“What’s wrong, Lena?” Beatrice put a hand on her shoulder.

Selena grasped her wrist and hauled her inside, slamming the door closed. She paced the room, shaking her hands from wrist to fingertip. Finally, she stopped and looked at Beatrice.

“What’s wrong? Is Uncle ill? Have you had a letter?”

Selena shook her head. “You were with Mr. Clark just now. I heard... much of what was said. I...” She sank into a nearby chair. “This is all my fault.”

Beatrice pulled a chair over to sit next to her. “I’m terribly confused. Nothing about Mr. Clark is your fault.”

“I need you to tell me the truth. What were you doing out of sight with Mr. Clark beneath the trees? The day you fell in the lake. And then after you climbed up onto the shore. You disappeared. As did he.”

Beatrice swallowed the lump in her throat. “Nothing.” Everything. But not everything because she wanted more. Hated herself for wanting it. He had taught her the meaning of pleasure, and she could not forget it. And today he’d given her compassion, shown her his cracks and soft spots, even though she was the one he should most protect them from. “Nothing,” she whispered again.

“You’re lying!” Selena jumped up from the chair. “I... I saw him pinning you against the tree. I saw how you looked up at him, how you buried your face in his chest.”

“It means nothing!”

Selena shook her head. “I must tell you what I’ve hidden from you all these years.”

Wariness prickled down Beatrice’s spine. “Hidden? You’ve hidden nothing from me. We tell each other everything.”

Selena looked out the window, chewing her bottom lip. The worried tingle along Beatrice’s backbone turned into a full scream. Something was wrong. Selena had hidden something from her.

Her stomach flipping, she said, “Tell me.”

Finally, Selena released her lip, shoulders slumping. She wouldn’t look Beatrice in the eye. “Mr. Fisher went away because of something I did. Mr. Clark witnessed it. He demanded I be honest with Martin. I didn’t want to. I knew what would happen. But also... I... I knew I’d done wrong. So, I made Mr. Clark swear not to tell you what I’d done. And I told Martin. And... you know the rest.”

“What did you do? I do not understand. You’ve never done anything wrong! You’re a paragon!”

“No. I’m not. Beatrice, I kissed Daniel.”

Daniel. Daniel .

He was popping up everywhere.

The name buzzed in Beatrice’s head, louder and louder. Daniel the scoundrel. Daniel the reprobate. Daniel the bigamist. John and Richard’s brother. “D-did he force you?”

“No!” Selena paced toward the window. “When we were last here, when Martin proposed, I was excited. I was in love with him. But I was—” She whirled around. “Beatrice, I was so very scared.”

“Of what? A happy future? Belonging somewhere? Living with someone who loves you, wants you?” A hole existed inside Beatrice where those things had never been, a deep, aching longing that she knew would never be sated. She’d thought she might appease it at one point. With Richard. But he’d proven himself a cad. He’d hurt Selena.

But... he hadn’t...

“I don’t understand,” Beatrice said, voice flat.

“I was young, and Daniel was exciting . So much more than Martin. He was a rake and Martin a scholar, and I did not value the life Martin was offering. It seemed too quiet, too tame. Oh, I wanted that. But not right away. Then he proposed and I said yes, and then... there was Daniel... alone with me one day in the garden. He’d had too much to drink the night before, and I was teasing him about his megrim.” She closed her eyes. “He was sitting on a bench, back against a tree, eyes closed, one leg stretched out. ‘Stop teasing, little bird, or I’ll kiss you,’ he said.” She covered her face with her hands, then dropped her arms to her sides. “And I said, ‘Please do.’ Then, he

opened his eyes and told me I wasn't brave enough. I proved it to him. I kissed him. A short, small thing first. He kept it rather chaste. Afraid, I think, of being caught by his mother or one of the guests. But I wanted more, and I kissed him back. Longer. Harder. And... Richard saw it all."

Richard saw it all.

A buzzing in Beatrice's ears almost blocked out her cousin's story. "I... I asked you what happened. You wouldn't tell me." She'd accepted it. Thought it best not to press her dear cousin on an issue so clearly painful to her. "And Richard refused to tell me."

"I made him swear not to. He promised me."

"He kept that promise." But at what cost? Sorrow hit like an angry ocean wave.

"I did not want you to think the worst of me. I did not want to disappoint you. You are a sister to me. I admire you. I am glad you know. I have long carried this guilt, and— Where are you going?"

Beatrice was standing, making her way to the door. "I need to walk." She'd thought him wrong, rejected him, loathed him.

But she'd been wrong the entire time.

Selena had known, had let her think...

Her hand on the door, she whipped back around. "Why are you telling me this now? After years of lying."

"Because I'm selfish. Because I've been ashamed. I knew I'd hurt Martin, but I did

not regret my kiss with Daniel. Why should women be denied the same experiences men have? It is dangerous, I know. Our bodies betray our experiences if we are not careful”—her hand fluttered briefly to her belly—“and the whole of society casts us out. Do you hate me?”

“No.” She understood. She was in search of a lover herself, an avenue to an experience she’d never otherwise have.

A shiver of relief rippled through Selena, and she said, “Mr. Clark is... he is a gentleman. And if Evie is correct, and he has... he has loved you”—tears made her voice tight and halting—“then my selfishness has cost you more than it has ever cost me.”

Yes. Yes. Possibly so.

She stood on a rocking plank above a choppy river, the world unsteady beneath her. She stood alone, the salt in her nose and the wind tangling her hair, stealing her little girl’s ribbons.

Nothing but boats and water and crowded buildings and people like ants, unfamiliar faces, as far as the eye could see.

No mother.

No father.

No cousin.

No one.

“I... I... I must go. I cannot breathe.” She could not think .

Selena came to her side. “We’ll walk in the garden and talk more, and?—”

“No. I wish to be alone.” She left the house, and Selena did not follow.

But Beatrice did not know where to go. No matter what direction she fled, she’d take her mind with her, take her doubts, and take her guilt. So when she finally looked up, she should not have been surprised where guilt had dragged her.

Right to Richard’s woodshop. She’d avoided every thought of it. Yet returned to it during sleep every night. She’d paid no attention to it the last time she’d entered, too angry with the man she pursued to notice any detail. It was a small stone cottage with a thatched roof and smoke curling out of the chimney. There was a single window on the same side as the door, and she stepped toward it, peeked through it. Where there was smoke, there was fire, and where there was fire, there might be a man.

Yes. She’d found Richard.

Shirtless.

Her mouth dried, and her knees turned into overly boiled potatoes—mushy and crumbling beneath her weight. They demanded she crumple, and she did, right down to the ground, twisting as she went until she sat, back pressed against the wall beneath the window, palm pressed against her chest. Her heart thumped like mad.

All that skin... all that muscle... too much for one woman’s gaze. She needed to wipe the image from her eyeballs or perish. It quite wiped everything else out of her head. No matter how hard she squeezed her eyes shut. No matter that she slapped her hands over her face, blocking out the gray light, the cold raindrops.

No matter.

He remained, shoulders and arms and neck and back, burned into her memory, reigniting the buzzing at the juncture of her legs she'd felt before. Something eager and anxious flipped near her heart.

Surely Richard did not truly look like that . Her memory tricked her. No man's shoulders that broad, waist that trim, muscles that well-defined. They shifted beneath smooth skin like rocks beneath water. She'd only seen his back, outlined by the fire he stood before. The fire had magnified his appearance. It had been a quick glance only. And, yes, she'd touched him the other day, felt hard, corded muscle, felt how easily he'd held her upright as he'd pleased her, but...

He could not look like that. She'd been wrong.

She'd have to take another look. To be sure she'd made a mistake.

Slowly, she twisted and lifted until only her eyes were above the window edge.

Mouth dry again, legs back to being boiled potatoes.

Oh my. She should have known she made no mistake. She'd never possessed much of an imagination. That man, however, possessed a back like a mountain range, plane upon plane of rock-hard muscle. He stood, still, before a small fire, one arm outstretched toward the mantel, his entire body leaning into it as he stared at the crackling flames in the grate.

Then the marble muscles rippled, and he turned.

She ducked down once more, but not before she saw his chest.

And she forgot how to breathe. Just as muscled on the front—great swaths of the stuff at his chest, all of it peppered in hair that gathered near his sternum and traveled

down toward his navel, bisecting an abdomen grooved with muscle. That hair continued lower, disappeared past the waistband of his trousers. What happened in obscurity there? Seemed almost unfair to see this much of him but not the rest.

She peeked back through the window again. He'd picked up some tool—flat and flexible, rather like a stiff cloth—and was rubbing along a corner of... what? Rectangular, thin... a frame. Empty, intricately carved. Each movement he made rippled those impossible back muscles beneath skin that would be smooth and warm and?—

She wiped a dribble of drool off her chin. No. She looked up. Not drool. Rain. A steady patter of raindrops beat her shoulders and hair. She should return to the house, abandon Richard Clark, he of the muscles and sharp rejoinders. And most excellent kisses.

She could not leave, no matter how hard the rain beat against her back, because... because... What had brought her here to begin with? She'd almost grasped it, but then he'd begun to move again, shifting about the space with confidence and ease, reaching for a pointy tool as he put away the stiff paper, tilting his head to inspect his work, digging the pointy thing into the wood.

Woodworking was fascinating.

So was seeing the usually uptight and upright Richard Clark undressed and delicious in this space made only for him. Only for him? Or did he bring a mistress here? Her father kept a woman in a small apartment. He did not hide it well, and she'd heard him speak of it to his man of business. Did this cottage serve a dual purpose for Richard? There was no bed for him to tumble a woman into. Only a chair in the corner, a blanket tossed over its back. All that dust... those wood shavings. Tools strewn across every surface. No woman would willingly disrobe here... would they? Only that chair to lounge in, and surely it was not possible there .

Oh, but why look at the chair, when he was holding up the frame, his forearms flexing beneath the weight. They were bronzed, as if he often revealed them to the sun, and dark hair ranged from wrist to elbow. Thick muscle and popping veins. Sinewy and strong like the rest of him.

Perhaps with such a man, chairs were possible where mistresses were concerned. Perhaps with such a man, mistresses were willing to overlook a bit of dust and chaos.

With Richard... Beatrice would not mind.

And he'd offered. He'd extended an invitation. No, a demand: If you're looking for a lover, hellcat, a man to make you happy, my door is wide open. I'm yours for the taking.

If he touched her with the same delicacy he did the frame... if he kissed her with such gentle passion as he had in the boat... if he riled her with such cunning as he did every time they spoke... she would gladly undo her tapes and let her gown pool round her feet, grow dusty in the woodchips. She would gladly sit on the chair or in his lap and let him whisper naughty things into her ear, tug her earlobe between his teeth, and nibble on her neck. She would gladly put his hand between her legs where she often touched herself at night.

Be honest, Beatrice.

She touched herself at night thinking of Richard .

And had before he'd made her orgasm. Now she merely had the sensory information to make her vague musings much more real, much more arousing. Dangerous.

He set the frame down and crossed the room, viewing it from a distance, hands on hips. And then he dropped into the chair, draping his body into it, muscle and bone as

fluid as that blanket.

His eyes closed, and his lips pressed thin, and the vital strength that had burned each of his movements drained out of him. He seemed to break, a fragile, porcelain man, and she cracked open wide, too. Hairline fractures had appeared days ago at the same time as the truth. Now they were wide open and weeping, crumbling like cliffs during a storm.

What if everything between them had been different? What if she'd been here to see this cottage built and to watch the children come to Slopevale one by one? What if she had added children of her own, Lucy's age, the twins' age? What if a meeting to learn Spanish in a library had led not to separation and anger but to kisses and more, more and marriage, marriage and children, and...

Love.

It could have been. It need not have led to loneliness and wanting. So much aching wanting.

He could have told her, no matter what he'd promised Selena. But he'd kept his promise. He'd honored the person Beatrice loved most in her life, protected her.

Beatrice had always known there would be no better way to win her heart than that.

She ran, the rain blurring her vision. She splashed through newly formed puddles, her stockings soaking through from the feet up and her skirts clinging to her legs. No idea where she ran to, only for some shelter away from prying eyes. All eyes. Richard's eyes, brown and glowing like whisky in crystal held before a leaping fire. When she could no longer breathe, she walked, aimless, realizing she was a fool for not going inside. But she welcomed the rain, welcomed it right into her very bones. It could wash away the past, the anger, the hate. It could leave her fresh and new. Ready.

Her foot hit something. Her skirts shackled her legs. She hit the ground with her shoulder and a cry and lay huddled there for a moment loud with the rumble of rain. With a groan, she rolled onto her back and closed her eyes, cataloging her limbs for injury. She was fine.

Except for her pride.

She should stand and find her way back to the house.

Or lie here. And let the rain wash her away.

Ten

Richard strode through the halls of Slopevale for the second time that day, looking for the same woman. He found every other guest, spread across the rooms, engaged in cards or reading or flirting, but not Beatrice. Nor even John and Evelina.

He did however find, upon entering the library, three people who might be able to help him. He ignored the one with cheroot fingers and approached her cousin and Martin instead. “Miss Bell, have you seen Beatrice?”

Her gaze flew to Peterson. “You’re not the first to look for her.” Her gold brows pinched together. She looked pale.

Martin’s hand covered hers. “She’s fine, I’m sure,” he said. “Do not worry, Lena.”

Selena tried to nod, but it came out choppy, uncertain. She gestured to a seat next to her, and when Richard sat, she said, “I told her.” She paused, searching his face.

“Told her about...?”

“What happened seven years ago. What I did.” Her voice so low Richard almost could not hear, her gaze heavy on Peterson across the room, sitting near an open window, book in one hand, cheroot in the other. Idiot. He could burn the entire place down.

Richard marched over, plucked the cheroot from his hand, and tossed it out the window.

The man's indignant yelp was music to his ears. "You can't do that!"

"I have done that. Do not smoke in the library, please."

"It's not your library to give orders over."

A punch to the gut, that. None of this his, even if it all felt familiar, felt like home.

"As the estate manager, I can and do give orders. Go somewhere else to smoke."

"Barbaric."

"I am, aren't I? So, you'll believe me when I say that if you prepare another cheroot in this room, I'll toss you out the window next." Richard sneered, taking his seat beside Selena once more.

The man snorted but remained seated. He had the determined look of a stubborn child who knew they were doing wrong but refused to do anything else. Let him remain if he wished.

Richard scooted closer to Selena, focusing in on a very, very good thing. If what she said was true—and why wouldn't it be—he was free. "You told her about you and... my brother?" He studied Martin for a moment, but the man seemed cool, at ease, his hand still resting lightly on top of Selena's.

She nodded.

And Richard released a breath he'd been holding for too damn long. "How did she respond?"

Selena shook her head, eyes glistening with unshed tears.

“Damn. That bad. Where is she now?”

Flipping her hand palm up on the table, Selena threaded her fingers with Martin’s as if for strength. “I do not know. She left the house.”

“In the rain?”

She nodded. “And she has not returned. I’m worried.”

Martin squeezed her hand. “Miss Bell is an intelligent woman. She can care for herself.”

“Yes,” Richard grumbled, pushing to his feet, “but she shouldn’t have to.”

“Curses,” Peterson said from across the room. He’d jumped to his feet as well, his arms bent behind his back, his face red.

“My lord, are you unwell?” Selena asked.

“Something’s stung me, I think.” His hands clawed at his back. “Zeus, it itches!”

Richard did not have time for this, but he swung toward the man and spun him around. “No bees. No insects at all. You’re likely allergic to the country air. I suggest you return to London immediately.”

Peterson scowled, still scratching his back, mostly the back of his neck, like mad. There, peeking out from between the hair at his nape and the snowy white folds of his cravat—a bit of greenery.

Richard snagged it, dropped it immediately. “Martin, come here. You’re wearing gloves. Could you pick that up?”

Martin did so, throwing it outside the window. “What is it?”

“A plant that grows on the south side of the lake. Makes your skin itch like the devil. Have you been rolling in the grass, Peterson?”

“No! I’ve been nowhere near the lake today!”

Richard made for the door. No time for hijinks this afternoon. Beatrice knew the truth, and he needed to find her. “I suggest a bath. And no grass rolling. And telling the truth, Peterson. No lady will have you otherwise.” And then he was sweeping down the hall and out the door into the driving rain.

Where in hell had she gone? He checked the dry places—stables, boathouse, his cottage. No Beatrice. He checked the wet ones—forest, lake, and gardens. No Beatrice.

“Bloody hell.”

He was soaked through, and the rain was not letting up. He should return to the house.

But he kept going.

Until he saw a swath of blue like a wound against the green grass at the bottom of a hill, partway between Slopevale and his own home.

“Beatrice!” He ran. When wind and rain swallowed his cry, he screamed her name again, still running, the slash of a blue wound taking shape. When he hit his knees beside her, he didn’t touch her. His hands hovered, uncertain. “Beatrice?”

Her eyes were open, staring into the rain. Then she blinked and turned her head, and

her chest rose and fell as if seeing him gave her breath.

Now he could touch her, now that there was a spark of life, a glimmer of recognition, and something else in her sad eyes. Sad?

Good God, no. Not Beatrice. A crime.

He brushed the hair away from her forehead, stroked his knuckles down her temple, inspected her neck and shoulders for wounds, found her hands to check her pulse at her wrist. “Are you hurt?”

“My pride is fatally wounded.” She closed her eyes.

He chuckled. Relief was a sweet thing, a spoonful of sugar to ease his worry. Thunder rumbled in the distance, but he sat beside her, the wet grass soaking through his trousers and smalls immediately. “Why am I constantly saving you from drowning, Beatrice Bell?”

“That’s only happened once.”

“It is about to happen again.”

“You cannot drown in the rain.” But each word was garbled by the torrent pouring straight into her mouth.

He chuckled again, tilted her head away from the sky and toward him. Better. “Oh, I’ve no doubt you can do anything you set your mind to. And it looks like you set your bloody mind to lying down, opening your mouth, and taking the time to die a rather prolonged death, raindrop by bloody raindrop.”

She sat upright, pulled her knees to her chest. “It’s your fault.”

“I’m sure it is.” He studied her from the top of her head to her toes and everywhere in between. “Are you sure you’re uninjured?”

She winced. “Perhaps a bit bruised. I fell.”

“What are you doing out here?”

“Being terribly silly, I’m afraid. More than a little melodramatic as well. But sometimes a lady needs to act a fool. On her own. Just for a little while.” When he didn’t contradict her, she said, quietly, her voice so very still and careful, “Selena told me.”

Ah. There it was. What happened next?

“I-I know,” she said, emotion clogging her voice. “And I-I was wrong.” A sob ripped from her, as if old wounds had cracked open and were wailing ancient sounds imprisoned long ago.

He gathered her into his lap. “Shh. Shh.”

“I’m so very sorry. I did not know. I did not know .” Her shoulders heaved, and she hid her face in his chest, cried into his warm, wet skin as he stroked a large hand up and down her back. “I hate being wrong. And I was mean .” The last word a wail.

“Shh. Shh.” His body wrapped around her, giving her everything it possessed—warmth, protection, comfort.

“I thought I had a right to be mean, but... but—” Another wail, this one muffled by her face pressed against his chest. She wrenched out of his hold and stumbled to her feet. When he surged after her, she held out a palm. “No. No. I just... I need to think.”

“Can we think somewhere else?”

Lightning flashed across her face. Anger howled there like a ripping wind. “How could you not tell me! Seven years, Richard Clark! Seven! I could have fallen in love with you! I was falling in love with you! You could have told me about Selena and Daniel, and we could have avoided... And this”—she flung her arms out wide, then brought them together, palms up, between them, nearly crossing the distance between their bodies—“could have been different.”

He hung his head, slicing his hands through his hair, and droplets flung everywhere. When he looked up at her, she ensnared him, her green eyes holding him tight, passing on her rage. “Do you think I didn’t want to? Do you think I enjoyed watching you hate me? It was not my secret to tell, but hers. And in the end... Hell, Beatrice, in the end, it’s better you hate me than I abuse the trust of the cousin you love so completely.” He turned from her. Couldn’t take seeing her pretty face contorted in anger—at him—one moment longer. “That was my solace. Knowing that if you knew, you would not hate me at all.”

“Richard...”

He waited for more. Was disappointed. “I thought only of two things. Getting Selena away from my scoundrel brother as quickly as possible and getting Martin away from a woman who was so unsure about her feelings for him, she was willing to kiss another man. It sounds so logical now. So reasonable when spoken aloud. It did not feel that way back then. It felt red and raw. Like a sacrifice of the body.” He swallowed, said quietly, “And the soul.” It had felt like grief clawing out his heart.

He turned around. She was holding herself, shivering, her face a graveyard.

“Bloody hell. You cannot stay out here longer.” He scooped her up into his arms.

“Where are we going? The house is that way.”

“ My house is this way.”

“Your—” Her voice a squeak that broke off as he hitched her higher, more securely in his hold, and she wrapped her arms around his neck.

“It’s closer. You may berate me all the way there if you like. Have at it, hellcat. I can take it. But this is the direction you’re going as long as you’re in my arms.”

She went very still. And then her heart, nestled so close to his own, began to race. She controlled it with several measured breaths, then laid her head on his shoulder, and closed her eyes.

He carried her, ignoring the eventual burn in his arms, the sting of rain in his eyes, all the way to his small cottage. He stopped only once they were dripping on the floorboards of the entryway and set her on her feet.

Somehow, her arms remained around his neck. Small miracle. A welcome one.

“You can stay here until it stops raining,” he said. “I’ll start a fire in the?—”

Parlor. He’d meant to say parlor. But when she stretched up on tiptoe and kissed him, every word he’d ever known spiraled out of reach. She tasted of rain and something essentially Beatrice. The sweetest taste. It could become an addiction. As could the small of her back where his hands fit perfectly.

Rain could wash away so much that muddied the world.

So could truth.

He pulled away just enough to break the kiss. “What are you doing?”

“We wasted seven years. I’m not wasting another seven seconds.” Her lips not only tasted like perfection, they spoke sense. “You offered to be my lover...”

“Are you accepting?”

“I want you to kiss me, Richard Clark. And yes, I want much more than that, too. From you.”

His eyes closed for a heated moment of hesitation. “You hate me.” He could still feel every word she’d given him like a laceration across his back. But every word he’d given her stung sharper, dug deeper. He hated himself.

She kissed the tip of his nose. “No te odio, Richard Clark. And I begin to suspect there’s not much you could do to change that.”

Right. Yes. “Fire.”

“Pardon?” Her hold on him went slack.

He pulled out of it, tripped up the stairs. “Fire. In the bedchamber. If I’m going to get you naked, Beatrice Bell, I refuse to let you freeze.” He tumbled back down the stairs and set his palm atop her head, pinning her in place. “Wait. Right. There.”

She nodded, grinned.

And upstairs, he brought a fire to roaring life more quickly than he ever had before. When he reached the entry hall once more, she was gone.

“Bloody—Beatrice!” He yelled her name. “Where are you?”

“Here!” Her voice soft from a room down the hall.

He followed it to the study he never used. Set at the back of the house, it looked out into the garden, or rather, a small boxed-in section of the garden crowded with flowers newly blooming.

Beatrice stood at the small desk beside the chair that faced the window, the garden. Just as he’d always imagined her.

“This is”—she exhaled softly, then swung around to face him, hands clutched together at her heart—“lovely.”

“Do you recognize it?”

She shook her head. “Of course not. This house was not here when I last was.”

“Hm.” He stood next to her, her shoulder brushing against his arm.

“You must get much work done here.”

“None. I use John’s study at Slopevale. His estates. His study.”

“But then why make this?”

He shrugged, running a flat palm along the large yet elegant desk that looked out into the garden.

“You know,” she said, “I always imagined having a little study just like this. Books everywhere, the desk facing the window instead of away from it. I’d like to look up from my translations to see how the world?—”

“Is changing outside the window.”

“Yes.” She peered at him, a question in her gaze. “But only a small bit of the world. The garden out there is more of a little corner, secluded. A source of variety as the seasons change but not too much distraction. You could take a desk out there and work if the day is nice.”

“There’s a portable one in the corner for just such use. And a chair and a little rug to go beneath.”

“My... you’ve thought of everything.”

“No, you’ve thought of everything. And you’re dripping, sweetheart. Let’s undress you. I’ve a fire upstairs.” He tugged her toward the door.

She stopped him, her gaze slowly skimming every surface of the room. “It’s as if you peered inside my head and brought it all to life.”

He leaned a shoulder against the wall. “Didn’t have to. You told me what you wanted. Before everything happened, when you weren’t enraged with me yet. I remember the look on your face when you were describing the exact room you’d want for yourself. To work in. If you ever convinced your father to trust you. I always knew you’d convince him. Never doubted you.”

Before, she would have scoffed. Now, she turned with hard determination in her eyes, shoulders pushed back. “Here. I want you here, Richard Clark. In this room you made for me.”

His throat was dry like a biscuit baked too long. “I didn’t... it simply happened... Here? There’s no fire. You’ll get cold.”

“You’ll be my fire.”

And that was enough. It snapped him into action. He picked her up by the waist, delighting in the little squeal she gave when her feet left the ground. He plopped her down in the desk chair—a large, winged thing designed for comfort—and twisted it around to face him. He wouldn’t let himself undress her here. No matter how many flames his body produced, a natural reaction to touching her, she would still be too cold for comfort. He’d wait for himself. For the pleasures of her body unguarded beneath his own. But he could still give her what she wanted. What he wanted, too. A pleasure for them both.

He hit his knees before her. Curiosity and excitement flared in her green eyes, and he rucked her skirts up, revealing her soaked stockings, the limp ribbons holding them up, the creamy pink skin of her lush thighs. He kissed one, dragged his teeth along the other.

She shivered, and he gave her a little push. She teetered off-balance so easily, falling into the chairback, her hands clawing around the arms for balance, security. And he scratched his nails up her thighs, held her gaze tight and forever as his hand snuck under the sodden folds of her skirt and chemise. He found her crisp curls and began a circular search for—ah. He’d found it, and it produced immediate results. She threw her head back, moaning, stirring his blood and his cock.

He dragged his lips along her warm inner thigh. “So soft. So lovely. And so very much mine.”

Her hands tangled in his hair. “Kiss me.” Her voice breathy and low.

“Oh, I will, hellcat. Don’t you worry about that.” He kissed her as high on her inner thigh as he could, the scruff on his cheek grazing her sex. She must have been sensitive already because her breath hitched, and her body quivered.

“You... you cannot... not from... down there.”

He looked up, fingers splayed across the top of her perfect thighs. “Have you taken a lover before?”

“N-no. I tried. I was...” A blush, fierce and fast. “Concerned about the ramifications.”

Of course. Smart. A shame. But also good . That meant she was his. Only his. What did she call him? Que bruto? Yes, he felt like a brute. “I’ll take care of you. No ramifications. If you’re mine, I won’t let a damn thing happen to you that you don’t want. Do you understand?”

She swallowed, nodded, seemed almost passive and gentle for a moment. Then her fire returned, and she pushed his head back a bit with those fingers tangled in his hair. The force enflamed him, drove his desire higher.

Matching desire flashed in her eyes. “You are mine, too. I accept nothing less. No other lovers for you.”

“Never.”

“Or for me.”

“Better not.”

“As long as this lasts.”

Forever. It must last forever. “Do you trust me?”

She laughed, a real thing composed of sunlight and joy. “God help me, I do. I trust, I

think, no one more than you.”

“Then release me, hellcat,” he growled, “and let me kiss you.”

She did, and he returned his mouth to her inner thigh, worshipping for but a moment before he gave her what he’d promised—a kiss.

There went her hands in his hair again as she gave a little shriek, her hips rolling as her muscles contracted. He swept a tongue across her, groaning. “You are wet and ready, and my cock is too.” He kissed her again, and again, and again, loving each little squeak and moan that seemed to tether them more tightly together. Her noises and her wiggles a spool of twine being unwound around them, winding them up instead. No escape from this.

Didn’t want that anyway. He wanted her plentiful flesh in his hands and the taste of her arousal on his tongue. He wanted to know that each sound and move she made meant she didn’t hate him. Needed to show her he didn’t hate her. Never had. Never would. He could feast on her forever, but she was losing control, gulping for air and clawing at him, and hell, he was hard and aching. But when she cried his name, shattering, clenching around the fingers he’d slipped inside her, he hardened further.

She went limp, and he dragged her into his arms, carried her up the stairs, each step painful, and set her limp body on the floor of his bedchamber, the fire still roaring nearby. She blinked at him, and he chuckled. She seemed to get this way after her climax—all docile and sweet, from hellcat to pussycat because of him. Adorable in either state.

He’d adore her more naked.

He trailed his fingertips up her arms, skimming across the gooseflesh that ranged over her skin, up the sodden sleeve of her gown, her collarbone, her neck, to cuff her

throat just below her chin and tip her face up.

“I... I’m throbbing,” she whispered. “Down there .”

“I’m in a similar state, sweetheart.” He kissed her. He drew from her lips long and slow, taking with his leisurely taste an inhalation, too. Rain soaked, she smelled fresh and wild, like she’d arrived with the storm, dropped from the clouds right into his lap. She shivered.

He ripped away, and she gasped, wobbling a bit, eyes glassy. Anger built on her brow as her gaze cleared. “Do not stop now.”

“I’m not. Off with the gown, Beatrice.”

“Take it from me.”

Ah, the hellcat had returned. “Gladly. But... I would prefer that you surrender it. You can ask a man to ravish you, to be your lover, but you cannot undress before him? Hm.” He tipped her chin up. “Scared?”

Fire snapped her head back, ranging all over her body and coalescing in her eyes. “Scared? Me? Ha!” Her arms contorted, elbows flying out to the sides as her hands disappeared behind her back. She held his gaze, steadfast, not at all afraid. And when her arms dropped to the side, the neck of her gown loosened, slipped. There—her stays framing her breasts, her shift... soaked, the deep red roses of her areolas peeping through, her nipples pebbled.

Damn him. He shifted to keep the buttons on his fall from popping under the pressure of his arousal.

Her gown hit the floor with a sodden thunk , and she pulled at the little bow at the

front of her shift, untied it, then twisted her arms behind her again. This time, her lips contorted, too, in concentration. She cursed under her breath, and her little wiggles as she tried to work her stays free drove him over a cliff. He spun her around and ripped the ribbons holding her together. Gone like his control. The stays and shift gone, too, leaving only her rosy skin made molten by the light of the leaping flames.

“Brave Beatrice,” he said, shrugging off his jacket and waistcoat, grunting out of his boots, and pulling his shirt off to soak the floor beneath their feet. He backed her toward the bed. Her arms covered her breasts, but she’d lifted her chin, unafraid. “Get on the bed.”

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Eleven

Who was Beatrice to deny the man who looked at her like she was everything he'd ever dreamed of? She sat on the edge of the bed, and he immediately placed a knee beside her. She fell backward onto the mattress, and he blocked her in with palms on either side of her body. He was poised above her, all those muscles she'd admired earlier in the woodshop taut and ready.

To ravish her.

Finally . Thank God.

She scooted farther onto the bed, and he followed, eyes locked on her as his other knee made it onto the mattress. Such intent in his gaze. Such control in his body.

She'd thought his ministrations in the study had eked every bit of arousal out of her body, leaving her drained and sated.

She'd been wrong. Her body buzzed back to life, needy and focused entirely on him.

As he was on her.

She lifted her arms to trace the line of his collarbone, to stroke the muscled mound of his shoulder, to explore the valley at the bottom of his bicep. A short flight to his chest where she flattened her palm and felt his heart beating fast. So fast, like the patter of rain on the roof, one beat almost indistinguishable from another. She surged up to kiss the plane of muscle over that beating organ.

And then he growled and stole her lips, his body falling on top of her, rolling to the side and gathering her close as he kissed her thoroughly. Her heart like his now—patter, patter, patterpatterpatter.

Nothing to distinguish the beats from one another, his from hers.

His hand on her breast, kneading, his face between them, kissing the soft, sensitive flesh.

“These,” he murmured against her skin, “are astounding.”

“They are ordinary breasts.”

“You’re wrong.” He laved her nipple.

“Richard!”

He nipped her neck, sucked the little stinging bite.

She moaned his name this time.

“Keep saying it, sweetheart. I want to hear my name from your lips in every tone you possess. Angry, happy, amused, frustrated. Aroused. Needy. For me and only me.”

“Richard,” she sighed.

“Just. Like. That.”

He flattened his palm between her breasts and dragged it down over her belly, lower, over the curls at her center. He cupped her sex, and she bit her lip. He was so proprietary. So confident. So gentle. He was everything she needed in a lover.

Everything she admired.

But she urged his hand away.

His head shot up. “You do not like this? I could have sworn you did.”

“I do. I do.” She cupped his cheek. “But I want this right now.” She slipped her hand between their bodies.

And pressed her palm against the bulge straining the buttons of his fall.

He cursed, then groaned. His shaft throbbed.

“I want this inside me, Richard. I want to know what it feels like.”

“Have you imagined it?”

She closed her eyes, nodded. “Please.”

“Not yet. I want to watch you shatter one more time.”

“Another time. This now.” She squeezed.

He cursed and moved so quickly her eyes leapt open. He was on his knees, his hands at her waist. He flipped her, swatted her bottom, the slap of skin against skin an echo that tingled throughout her entire body. She yelped, and he pressed down on top of her, his chest against her back, his trouser-chained erection nudging against her bottom. His lips were warm against her ear, whispering, “Will you fight me even here? Even now?”

“It appears so.” Difficult to speak while breathless. Her skin still sparked where he’d

swatted her. She bit her lip, trying to keep back the request, but in the end, it escaped, sounding more like a plea. “Do it again.”

“Do what?”

She reached around behind her, found his hand, placed it on the curve of her bottom where he’d swatted her.

“Ah.” His chuckle shot straight between her legs. Then so did the smack of his hand against the side of her bottom. “Like that?”

No words. She might melt. She had melted.

“What about this?” The heat of his body disappeared for a moment, and then she felt the perfect softness of his lips, the slight stubble of his chin on one globe of her backside. A kiss. Then a bite, sharp yet gentle and stealing her ability to breathe.

Her body became an ocean wave, rolling toward that explosive place only he could take her. She used the power to flip back around and roll her hips against him, to pull him up for a crashing kiss.

“Do it. Please.” Begging now, certainly. Pride thrown to the wind. All that mattered was him inside her now.

“I want it,” he said against her lips. “But I want you wild and begging first.”

“Is this revenge?”

“Maybe. You’ll love it.”

She kissed him hard, destroying his promise, raking her hands down the ridges of his

abdomen.

“Vixen.”

“Donkey.”

He laughed. “Donkey?”

His laughter left her floating, a wave of happiness snapping tears into her eyes. “A like-minded animal for you.”

“I see.” His chuckle this time was softer as he nuzzled his nose into her neck just behind her ear. “You and I cannot woo peaceably.”

“What fun would that be? You like the fight. Admit it.” She snuck her hand around the back of his neck, and she squeezed, scoring fingernails into his skin.

He hissed. His shaft throbbed between them. “God, yes, Beatrice. I do like it. I like you .”

“Never say so, Mr. Clark. I shall never believe it.”

“Shall I show you, then? Prove it to you?”

She exhaled, an overly dramatic sigh. “ Finally .”

He grasped one of her legs and lifted it, hooked her knee over his shoulder. Then he undid a button of his fall. Another. And another. The strained fabric gave way, released his shaft.

Que bruto. What a beautiful beast. She supposed the size of the man correlated to the

size of his manhood, but she'd not been prepared. Perhaps because she'd never truly thought she'd see it.

He was falling back onto her, kicking his trousers to the floor so that not a single stitch of anything came between them. "You look shy suddenly, hellcat. Tell me."

The size of him... But no. Not that truly. More what he could do with it were they not careful. "Do... do you have a letter ? I brought one with me, but I... I did not intend to use it today. Here. It is at Slopevale."

His brows pulled together. "A letter? Oh! No, Bea. I do not. I do not make a habit of bringing women into my home or lovers into my bed."

"You... go to your lovers', then?" She felt a pang of jealousy, and she shoved it down. He may have had other lovers, but he was hers now. She'd demanded it. He'd promised. Yet she pressed her palm into the mattress to keep from rubbing at that little scoop in her chest that suddenly felt rather hollow.

"I have, yes. There have not been many. One woman in London I've visited from time to time. I haven't had need of one in months. If I'd known you were coming, I might have secured one, hopeless though I would have considered it."

She bit her lip, a bit disappointed. Yet somehow more aroused than before. The way he spoke with her, frankly and sensibly, not shying away from details but trusting her to understand. This man treated her like an equal. Always had. In his barbs and now in his bed.

"I'll not spend inside you, sweetheart," he said. "I will not risk a pregnancy."

Of course he wouldn't. She nodded, opened her arms to him.

And he jumped off the bed.

“Richard!” She propped herself up on her elbows.

“One second!” He threw open a drawer on a nearby wardrobe and rummaged around, then grabbed something and slammed the drawer shut. “Found it.” He returned to her, straddling her, taking her leg like he owned it and slinging it over his shoulder again as if it belonged there.

It might. She should feel mortified by the position, by how open and vulnerable it left her. It only made her a bit shy. And a lot excited. “What have you found?”

He shook a small glass bottle at her, then undid the cork stopper. “Oil. Hold out your hand.” Not even an inch of space in the command for disobedience.

She raised an eyebrow but did so. She’d promised to trust him.

He poured a thin line of the oil into her hand, then stoppered the bottle and tossed it aside. “Now rub it on my cock, love.”

Her eyes must be saucers. Her jaw most certainly slack. He laughed and guided her hand to the appendage hard and long between them.

She shook off his help and did the rest herself, wrapping her hand around his length, spreading the oil all over him, rubbing her thumb over the silken head of his shaft as he hissed and moaned. “Brazen Beatrice. Christ.”

When he was well covered, she asked, “Why?”

He dropped to his palms so their foreheads almost touched. “You’re wet for me, sweetheart, but I don’t want this to hurt you. It might. But the oil will help.”

It might hurt. She'd heard that before. Oil would help. A new bit of information. She'd better test it out. "Not so dull after all, are you, Mr. Clark? In fact, you are quite beautifully cunning."

He winked. "At your service, Miss Bell. In every way you can imagine." His voice, growly and rough, ripped shivers down her spine.

Gripping her courage to her heart, she used the leg still slung over his shoulder to squeeze him closer.

He paused one full moment of heavy breaths as his gaze roamed all over her, wide-eyed and wondering, and then he broke through and was everywhere all at once—lips on lips and neck and breasts, hands kneading and cupping and squeezing, sliding up her thigh, then down it to swat her bottom again as he rolled his hips against her. Each touch drove her pleasure higher, drove every thought but for him and more and mine out of her mind.

He slipped a finger inside her, then another, curling and stroking until she was squirming again.

Still not what she wanted. Not everything she wanted.

So she took it, wrapping her hand around his length and positioning him at her entrance.

"Slow," he warned.

She nodded, ceding control to him as she flattened her palms on his back. Skin felt this way—smooth fire stretched over marble, a jubilation of sensation for her fingertips to explore as he entered her, stretched her. Heart beating wildly, her entire being panicked. But ready. An odd contradiction.

“Shh.” He kissed her softly as he inched into her, sliding smoothly but testing her limits. “Tell me if you don’t want it. Damn me to hell if you need to.”

Holding her breath, she shook her head, held him more tightly.

Still kissing her, still softly, he inched into her, filling her, stretching her. She focused on the kissing as she’d focused on hating him these past years, with every determined bone in her body. She memorized with her fingertips the rough silk of his hair and the outline of each muscle as she’d previously memorized his every taunt and tease. And there, between this moment and those, between loving and hate, she slipped quietly past hesitation and discomfort, and back into the pool of pleasure. Her hips rolled against him, and with her body’s surge forward, not his, she welcomed him fully into her.

“Christ,” he groaned, sounding gutted, sounding something else. No time to wonder what because he was moving now. No hesitation from him either, and she was scoring his back with her nails as he rocked in and out of her, building waves inside her. She was lit tinder ready to ignite.

And then he pressed a flame to her, rubbing his thumb over that pulsing button at her center. Pleasure drowned her, took her under. What a lovely way to die. He thrust one more time into her, hard and fast, and then pulled out and spent upon the bed, his face pressed between her breasts. She’d become sensation. She’d become thoughtless.

She was quite terrified she’d become his.

Hearts racing, arms clutching, he pulled her to the head of the bed and shuffled her under the covers. She tried a bit to brush his gentle hands away but found herself covered to the chin anyway, his large body curved protectively around her from behind. His face was in her neck, and he pressed little kisses along the entire length and curve of it.

“Mine.” Kiss. “Mine.” Kiss. “Mine mine mine .” Kiss kiss kiss .

She laughed. It tickled. She swatted him away, but he’d become something of a wet shift, clinging to her everywhere.

“Speak to me in Spanish.”

“No.”

“Thank you. Well done.”

She laughed.

He nipped her ear. “It’s the only word I know. Except for que bruto. That’s me. Your brute.”

He sounded so happy, and that emotion curled up in her chest, purring like a cat. “My brute would be mi bruto.”

“Good.” He yawned against her neck. “Now say Peterson is an arse?”

“Richard!” She rolled in his arms, pinned him with a glare.

“Arse. He’s an arse.”

Was he jealous? Worried? The confident man she’d always known? But perhaps she did not know him. Not as well as she could. With more reluctance than she should feel, she left his arms and left the bed.

“Beatrice!” Her name a whine. “Come back.” That a demand.

“No. I’m going to look around.” She wanted to discover more about him. She yanked the top blanket off the bed and wrapped it round her body, then walked a circle round the room. Walls mostly bare but for generic paintings. She pulled curtains back on one wall to find large windows looking down into a garden. A wardrobe, a small desk, the rug beneath her toes thick and new. Then she was back at the bed, on the other side, standing before a small bedside table and the book laid carelessly atop it. An old book, faded and... familiar?

Richard had pushed up to lean against the headboard and folded his hands behind his head. He watched her quietly, his dark hair a heavenly mess.

Almost trembling, she picked up the book, turned it over to read the spine. Quixote . Her Quixote . She recognized it now, and when she opened it, there—her name in her own hand. Now she was trembling.

“Come here, sweetheart.” He held out a hand.

She took it, sat on the edge of the bed, and let him lay his head in her lap. She stroked those messy locks out of his eyes. “Why do you have my book?”

“Because I never hated you.”

She wished she could say the same, but she could not. She had hated him, been furious with him. For so terribly long. But perhaps only because she’d liked him so much before that.

And as she set the book aside to stroke the line of his nose and kiss him softly, sweetly, she realized how very easy it was to like him, how very easy it would be to feel more than that.

“We should return,” she said. “The others will begin to wonder. Selena will worry.”

He groaned but left the bed, picking up her ruined clothing and handing them to her. Then he whipped open his wardrobe and rummaged around for clean clothes of his own. Lucky man.

She wrinkled her nose at her gown and shift. It would be unpleasant to put them on, but no other choice. Taking a lover would be a challenging enterprise. “Oh.”

He looked up from buttoning his fall. “Something wrong?”

“You... we... are we lovers now?”

He barked a laugh and had his arm hooked around her waist in two steps. “If you have questions about that, I haven’t done my job.”

She rested her chin against his chest, feeling quite satisfied. “Lovers then. Until the party ends.”

He scowled. “No. Not until the party ends. Longer.”

“I don’t see how?—”

“I’ll figure it out.” He returned to his fall, his shirt, his waistcoat, his jacket, and cravat. “Or you will. We will. But we are a we now. No arguments, hellcat.”

Oddly, she couldn’t think of a single one.

She stepped into her shift and did up her stays as best she could. Richard was tying her tapes when a loud banging made them both jump.

“What the hell?” he stepped into the hallway.

Beatrice followed. “They’re probably looking for me.”

More banging.

“Stay here.” Richard started down the stairs.

No arguments there either. She peeked around a corner and over a banister, though, where she could only just see the door.

It flew open as Richard reached the entry hall. A man stood wobbling in the doorway, a lightning strike behind him casting his features in shadow. And then he fell into the house.

Richard caught him, froze, cursed.

Beatrice rushed down the stairs, slamming to a stop when she saw... “Daniel,” she breathed.

“It seems you were right after all,” Richard said. “The prodigal son has returned.”

Daniel’s face was ashen, his dark hair plastered to his forehead, his body limp. But his eyes fluttered, then opened. His lips parted for a shaky breath before he said, “Home. And shot. Careful, brother, or I’ll get blood all over your waistcoat.”

Richard pulled an arm out from under his brother’s body. His white sleeve now red and glistening.

Twelve

A bell rang upstairs, and Richard ignored it. It rang again, and he growled. The third time the bell rang he was already half up the stairs. By the time it was done peeling, he'd thrown open the bedchamber door. "What in God's name is it this time?"

Daniel reclined against a pile of pillows at the head of a bed, legs crossed at the ankles. He wore Richard's banyan and, it appeared, nothing else. By the fingertips of an outstretched arm, he clutched the handle of a small bell. "Unfeeling brute, talking to an injured man like that. I was shot, Richard. You should be weeping over my mostly dead carcass."

Richard leaned against the doorframe, pinching the bridge of his nose. "You were scratched by a stray bullet, you nodcock."

Daniel shrugged, winced, pretended to cry. When Richard did not care, he shrugged again—this time no wince—and stopped pretending. "I require sustenance."

"Feed yourself."

"Can't. I'm more comfortable than I have been in years. My slice of mattress is the perfect temperature. The pillows at the perfect angle. I refuse to ruin this moment. Being exiled is not as luxurious as you might think. And all you're doing is waiting for the harpy to arrive so you can fuck her."

"I will toss you out on your arse, baby brother."

“You wouldn’t. You love me too well.” He dropped the bell to the bed and grinned.

“I wouldn’t test him, cretin.”

Richard turned and found Beatrice in the doorway, foot tapping, gaze narrowed on Daniel.

“Good morning, shrew!” Daniel waved.

“Thank God you’re here.” Richard reached out just enough to drag the pad of his finger down the outside of her wrist, just above the lace gloves he wanted to tease from her body using only his teeth. She would have no patience for Daniel’s nonsense. And now he had an excuse to leave Daniel to his own annoying devices.

“As long as you’re here,” Daniel said, drawing Beatrice farther into the room, “tell the man you’re fucking that he should not have let the servants go. There’s no one here to do a damn thing!”

“I wasn’t supposed to be here,” Richard said, “for an entire fortnight. Of course I let them go.” He was glad he had an abandoned place to bring Beatrice, though. They had rooms at Slopevale, but this was better. He had abundant excuses to be missing from the party—various estate business. And she had so far used her translation work to beg off the celebratory activities. The last week had proved conducting an affair to be quite easy.

Except for the presence of his brother.

“I see no flaws in Richard’s logic,” Beatrice said.

Daniel rolled his eyes. “Of course not. You would like to keep riding his?—”

“Daniel,” Richard snapped.

“You do not understand the dynamic between the shrew and I.” Daniel crossed his arms over his chest, winced, and rubbed at his shoulder. He did have a wound high on his back that cut deep across the outside of the shoulder. He’d been lucky that it had not been worse and that it had not become infected. “We nag one another, don’t we, shrew? You don’t mind.”

“I do not mind,” Beatrice said, “because not a single word you utter holds any relevance or weight.”

Daniel flung an arm toward her. “See! Now, one of you please bring me something to eat. I’m famished.”

“What food is most likely to cause you distress?” Beatrice asked.

Daniel gasped. “Murderess. Very well, to preserve my life, I’ll fend for myself, but if you cannot find me, look for me in the larder. I’ll be on the floor having swooned from unnecessary exertion.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Richard grasped Beatrice’s wrist and tugged her out of the room toward the stairs.

“Wait!” Daniel called. “Richard! Rick! Dicky! Damn bastard!”

Richard moved more quickly.

“Shrew!”

Beatrice nearly ran.

They ran together, down the stairs and almost out the door. Richard stopped her there.

“Do you have work today? Or can I distract you?”

Her face shattered a little bit, then put itself together admirably. “No. I’ve been working on something, but... it’s not important.”

“That’s not true.” He tugged her outside just enough to shut the door and block out Daniel’s increasingly pitiful cries. He tugged her little green cap sleeve down. “Of course it’s important.”

She shook her head, staring at the toes of her slippers peeking out beneath her skirts. “I was supposed to be translating an affreightment contract, but... just before Lena and I left to come here, Papa sent it off to someone else.”

“Why?” The word came out hard, sounding like a fist slamming into bone.

She shrugged. “He does that. Sometimes it feels like... punishment. Or... as if he merely forgets me.”

He gathered her up in his arms. “The man’s a mutton brain.” He wanted to brighten her eyes, so he took her hand and pulled her away from the house. “But you are working on something?”

She nodded. “It’s a personal project of no import.”

“Tell me about it?”

“A Spanish poet, Maria Rosa de Gálvez. I adore her.”

“Which do you prefer translating? Contracts or poems?”

She grinned, the smallest thing. But sure, too. “Poems. ‘Despedida al Real Sitio de Aranjuez.’”

“What is that?”

“The name of the poem. In English, ‘Farewell to the Royal Gardens at Aranjuez.’”

“I like the way you say it. Even if I do not understand it. When you’re done, may I read your translation?”

“You would not want to.”

He bumped her shoulder with his own. “Of course I do.”

She inhaled shakily, her smile blooming brighter. “Yes, yes, I think you may. Where are you taking me?” Beatrice asked between puffing breaths.

Richard pulled her around the side of the house and through the garden. “I’ve something planned. You’ll like it. Unless you’d prefer to go back inside and work...”

She shook her head. “I adore surprises. Have you decided yet what to do about your brother?”

His steps slowed. “No. I never should have answered his letter. John didn’t. John told me not to. Told me to wash my hands of the villain. But...”

She looped her arm through his and rested her head on his shoulder. “He’s your family. Even if he is vile.”

“He’s not... evil. I don’t think. He’s simply... thoughtless. More interested in his own diversion than in others’ well-being. I should not have told him about the

wedding.”

“He might have come even without that information. He has children here.”

“Does he seem to care about Lucy and the boys?”

She squeezed his arm. Answer enough in the silence that followed. No. Daniel didn’t care.

Her lips thinned. Had he resurfaced memories of her own father walking away from her, leaving her with nothing, no one? He tightened his arm, a silent promise never to abandon her.

“You should not do this alone,” she said. “John and Evelina must know Daniel is here.”

“It would ruin their party. They deserve to celebrate without the shadows Daniel tows along behind him. Besides, it’s my fault he’s here. I’ll take care of him, keep him out of the way, and see him off as soon as can be.” Hopefully before the wedding in two days. “No, I cannot tell John. He’ll want to send the children away. He won’t want them near Daniel. But that means he won’t have them near for the wedding, and that would hurt him too much.”

“You could let John decide that for himself. He’s their legal guardian. It’s not your worry to?—”

“It is my worry, Bea. It always has been. Keeping the peace, pleasing everyone. An unwanted bastard learns early to ingratiate himself or suffer the consequences.”

“What consequences?” Her voice small and tight.

He stroked her hip. “Nothing serious, sweetheart. The marchioness, my father’s wife, found me a bit... inconvenient at times, preferred to pretend I didn’t exist when there were guests. I don’t blame her. Consider her position. Having another woman’s babe foisted onto her, proof of her husband’s perfidy. I don’t have a bit of my mother in me. Look just like John and Daniel. Like our father. No hiding my origins.”

“You were a child. It wasn’t your fault. What do you mean she pretended you didn’t exist?”

His shoulders stiffened, the pity in her voice putting him on edge. “I stayed in my room for small periods of time. When there were guests.”

“You never left it?”

He shook his head, feeling the walls closing in on him, hearing the locks hit home.

“For how long at a time?”

He shrugged, released her and slipped his hands into his pockets, shrugging forward. “A week or two.” Christ, he knew how bad that sounded. “She felt guilty afterward, and by the time I was fifteen, I’d proven an indispensable tool in keeping peace about the place. Between her and father, between John and Daniel. She didn’t lock me up after that.”

“I hate her.”

He stopped. “You... you don’t have to. You shouldn’t. She was welcoming to every other soul.” Not a detail that had ever made her dislike of him easier to live with. Made it harder, actually.

“I do have to. I cannot help but hate her for treating you that way.” Something of a

stamped foot in her voice.

He hugged her to his side once more. She'd abandoned the pity. Nothing left in her voice but fire now, and it was more of a balm than the other. It meant she cared. For him. Passionately.

Kissing the top of her head, he said, "Forget it. I'll keep the peace now, too. It's what I'm good at. Daniel will be out of the county before John and Evie say I do."

She settled into his side, but as they approached the back of the house, she pulled away from him with a laugh. "Archery!"

"Yes," he said, catching up to her. "I know they're competing at Slopevale today, and I know, as well, how much you enjoy a bit of competition. I hate to deprive you. We could have played with the others today, but then"—he hooked an arm around her waist, pulled her snug against him—"I couldn't touch you like this."

She curled her fingers into his jacket and tugged him down for a kiss. "I'd rather this than arrows. But now I can have both. That is empirically better. Thank you."

He was dizzy. From her easy affection, from his success in making her happy, from her . What would he do when this was over? How could he keep it from ending? He didn't want to have to hide the tentative we they had created. He wanted to tug her right in front of Peterson and kiss her soundly, show the baron and all else that she was his. For good.

But maybe not for good. Hearts hidden couldn't thrive, and she had no desire to bare theirs to the sunlight.

She left him to choose her bow and attached the arm brace and three-fingered glove. He took the remaining one and stepped back to watch her line up with the target in

the distance.

“You are about to lose, Richard Clark. You may not know this, but I belong to the London Amazonian Society.”

“Can’t say I find that surprising at all.” He leaned over her, dropped a kiss on her neck where she smelled of soap and honey. “You are the amazon-iest of all Amazons.”

“Flattery will not save you, Clark.”

“Never does, sweetheart. Don’t want to be saved.” He stepped back. “Go on, then. Take your shot.”

She did. And got damn near close to the bull’s-eye. “Your turn.” She was gloating. Didn’t even try to hide it.

He stepped up to the target, aimed, hit it. But not well. Not nearly as well as her. Nowhere near the bull’s-eye.

“I win!” She threw her arms around his neck.

He kissed her, then said, “Again?”

“Mm.” She took another shot, and her arrow landed a little farther from the center.

He hit the center. When he faced her, she was scowling, fists on her hips. “You don’t like to lose, Bea?” He knew she didn’t.

“I do not like being tricked. You hit the center easy.”

He shrugged. “I’m no Amazonian. But I’m not without skill. I simply needed a warm-up shot. Now, what boon will you give me for my win?”

“You never said the winner would receive a prize. I won the first round. You’re too sly.”

He caught her round the waist, dropping the bow to hold her close with both arms. He needed all the muscle he possessed to keep a woman like her—all passion and hunger and sharp wit.

“What are you doing?” she demanded, palms pushing slightly at his chest.

“Claiming my prize.” Another kiss. This one deeper.

“Another round,” she said, pulling away breathless.

“As my lady wishes.” But she wasn’t his yet. Not really. Never would be. Be happy to get what’s given you. Don’t make the mistake of hoping for more. His constant self-advice. Necessary for survival but often difficult to swallow.

She won the next round, even though he didn’t hold back this time, and she took for her prize another kiss. Christ, they were sweeter when she gave them with no prompting. His heart expanded when her lips touched his. He wanted to lead her back upstairs, but Daniel would hear them and start yelling. What use an empty house when it wasn’t empty? Soon it would be.

Instead of lining up another round, Richard led Beatrice into the woods, to a swing he’d hung from a stout branch for Lucy and the boys.

She settled into it and clutched the ropes, and he sent her skyward. Her laugh was sunlight. Her skirts whooshed through the air like ribbons, green and lace and

springtime embodied in the bright body of the perfect woman.

After a while, he set her on a slower, lower, steadier rhythm. “You like to swing.”

“I do. You are an excellent uncle.” A pause. “You will be an excellent father.”

He wouldn’t be a father. “Thank you.” Despite the beautiful day, shadows encroached. He searched for something happy to cling to. “Oh, you’ll be interested to hear that my man of business has discovered a few residences to rent in London.”

Her spine stiffened. “For us... to use?”

“Yes.”

No response. Did she not want him anymore? Had a week satisfied her? It would never satisfy him. A house in London would not satisfy him. Not if it was mostly empty, rarely used, a symbol of their furtive pairing when he wanted something lasting, when he wanted every single day with her.

“Having second thoughts?” he asked.

“It’s just... a house in London seems so very... serious. Permanent. But... well...” He stopped swinging her, and she stared at her skirts as the swing rocked slowly into stillness. “I will be in London all the time. And you will be here most of the time. You are bound to forget me. To move on to more... convenient women.”

“I will not.”

She shrugged. “All men think they will not, but men know nothing of loyalty.”

Rage rocked through him, and he choked it down. “You fear permanence. Fear the

disappearance of it. I do not. I welcome it. If you would allow it, I'd marry you now."

Still, she stared at her skirts.

"Right." He was a bastard. He must never forget. No one else would. "I'm aware that is not a possibility. Your uncle is a good man. He would not welcome me into his family. And you are a good niece. You would not wish to burden him with questionable connections."

She hopped off the swing, chin swinging high, eyes bright and brutally angry. "You've never met my uncle. This has nothing to do with him."

He stepped closer, saying the only words he could take hold of. Was he tossing a challenge at her feet or pleading?

"Marry me, Beatrice."

A sound caught in her throat.

He pulled her more tightly against him until their legs and bellies and chests pressed hot against each other, until their hearts raced side by side. "Marry me, and I promise to adore you every day for the rest of our lives. I'll protect you in boats and on land. I'll push our children on swings. I'll build gardens and studies for you. I'll take you to our bed and worship you. I'll argue with you and kiss you and?—"

"Richard, stop."

"I'll make you the happiest woman in England. It will be my sole delight, my one true purpose."

She pulled out of his embrace, whispered, "Richard."

“Please, Beatrice.” He held his palms to the sky, featherlight from how damn empty they were. “Marry me.”

“What we have is good. It is safe. No one gets hurt when... when it ends.”

“I don’t want it to end.”

“In a few months or even days?—”

“Never.”

“You’ll tire of me, of this, of the inconvenience of having a lover in London while you’re here.”

“No. I’ll have a house. We’ll have a house.”

“Please.” She was hanging her head now, and he could not see her expression, could only see her hands, stiff and picking at her skirts. “I do not want to lose you?—”

He took a step forward, heart surging. “I don’t want to lose you either.”

“—as a lover.”

There. As good as a no, that. He rocked away from her, planted his feet on hard, solid ground where a bastard should always remember to stay planted. “Yes. Of course.”

“You’re not angry?” She didn’t even peek up at him. Who was this Beatrice, hesitant and shy? Not his Beatrice at all.

“No. But... I’ve things to do. To prepare Daniel for departure. And they require secrecy. You understand.”

She stepped backward, opening the growing gulf between them. “Yes, of course. It’s a matter of some delicacy. Tomorrow... shall we meet here again?”

“I’ll let you know.” Each word sounded like a feral snap. “I will likely be busy.”

After a curt nod, she walked slowly away from him. He seemed to watch her back for years, the gentle sway of her hips. It took decades for her to shrink into the distance, to disappear around the side of the house. And it would take centuries for him to understand why he didn’t run after her and give her everything she asked for. Lovers and nothing else for as long as it lasted. He should be begging her for it.

He wanted her.

But... he wanted to be wanted, too.

“Bollocks,” he hissed, stomping out of the woods.

“You mucked that up right nice, didn’t you?” Daniel’s voice accompanied the loud crunch of grass and twigs beneath a boot.

Richard jumped. “Damn you, Daniel! Where did you come from?”

Daniel blinked, pointed to the house. “There. Where else? But where are you letting her go to? Or rather whom ? Because some man will be waiting to offer her solace, and you’ll lose your bedmate. You and I do not see eye to eye on much, but you’re still my brother. I’d rather you get beneath her skirts than some other man. If that’s what you want.”

“Go away, Daniel.”

“Always being exiled.” Daniel sighed. “It’s not sporting.”

“You’re exhausting.” Richard sat on the garden wall.

Daniel sat beside him, rubbing his palms over his face. “I’m exhausted .” And he looked it, upon closer inspection—pale and gaunt and hollow-eyed. “Should I put more of that plant down Peterson’s jacket?”

“Pardon me?” His brother had always been full up with nonsense, but what was this?

“You know, that plant we accidentally rolled in. On the south side of the lake. When we were kids? All purple and shaped like a cock?—”

“It is not. Looks nothing like.”

“And it makes you itch like the devil. Peterson was sitting near the window, and I sprinkled some down his jacket and cravat. Got in his ears and everything. The wind helped quite a bit in the process of dispersal. Couldn’t have asked for a better day for it.”

Oh God. Richard did remember Peterson sitting at the window in the library, scratching his neck like he wanted to rip off the skin entirely. “Do not do that again.”

“Wouldn’t you like to thank me? Him being the competition and all.”

“No.”

“You’re as little fun as John these days. And now you want to marry, too.” Daniel sighed. “I’ll be the lone bachelor.”

“You are married. You tried to take a second wife.”

“Oh yes. I forget about them. They seem like”—he fluttered his hands in the

air—"dreams. Make believe."

"You deserve every moment of your exile."

"Probably." He nudged his elbow into Richard's ribs. "How are we sneaking me into the church for the wedding? It's only a few days away now. We need to make a plan."

"You're not going to the wedding. You're going away. For good. Tomorrow."

"I came back to see our brother married."

"You should not have."

"I thought..." Daniel ruffled his hair, a sure sign of his frustration. "You wrote to me."

"To inform you, not invite you." Richard stood. "I need to go to Slopevale."

"To chase after the shrew."

"Do not call her that."

"You love her. You loved her back then, and you love her still."

"And she thinks all men lying, disloyal, and careless. I can't blame her for that." Not when he considered her father. And his father. Not when he considered Daniel.

"So, you'll let the woman you love lead you around on a leash, drop you like a hat pin when she tires of you, leaving you bleeding and brokenhearted for, knowing you, likely the rest of your life? Sounds like she's the one who's disloyal and careless. I

would know.” Daniel pushed past him and made for the house. Before entering a back door, he yelled, “I’m attending the wedding!”

The hell he was.

Richard needed to follow Beatrice, find some way to fix this, find some way to make his heart okay with an affair instead of marriage. He’d always been able to sacrifice what he wanted for others’ needs. He could do it again.

Thirteen

Beatrice stopped writing, her quill hovering over the paper. “My lord, are you sure you’re well?”

Lord Peterson sat nearby in a small armchair, one ankle crossed over the other knee. A book lay open on his lap, but he had turned perhaps two pages in the last half hour. He’d been too busy scratching to read much. His hands roamed frantically every which way over his shoulders and neck, every bit of available skin.

He’d not asked her again to join him in his bedchamber, and he’d mostly stopped his attentions since the day Richard had interrupted their walk in the garden. A good thing. She would have had to reject him in clearer terms.

Even if Richard was being a big-hearted, stubborn donkey, he was still her donkey. For now. And the Petersons of the world held no interest anymore.

Beatrice set her quill down on the blotting paper. “You have seemed quite uncomfortable since sitting down, my lord.”

“I’m fine,” he grumbled. He reached for his teacup and took a sip, then rested it back on the saucer.

“Very well.” She returned to the contract she’d been translating.

“I do hope I’m not distracting you.”

He was, of course. He couldn't seem to help it. Something about her busy at work made him wish to interrupt it. And usually with some disparaging remark. Did he think he was courting her with his warnings about work and women? She offered a noncommittal smile. Let him interpret it how he would.

He gave a tight laugh. "I think I'm allergic to something here in the country."

"You'll be more comfortable once you return to London."

"Yes. Quite right. And when will you be making the journey?"

Returning to London. She'd not thought much about it until Richard had said he was looking for a house there. She'd waited for a thrill to zip through her. Something like disappointment had settled in her stomach instead. She'd no more wander the rooms Richard had designed, no more look out into the garden he'd planted with her in mind. He belonged in the country with the children and the boats and his woodshop and his brother. He was as comfortable as a king here, and she could not imagine him being so cozy in the loud, crowded streets of London.

She wished she was not so comfortable at Slopevale. She'd walked through morning mist the past two days to work on her contracts in his study. Richard had sat nearby, his silent companionship filling her with a soft sort of joy.

She didn't want to leave him. And that tilted her world off-center, knocked the air out of her. She could not stay and leave behind Selena and her aunt and uncle. She could not stay and abandon the contracts she translated for her father. Impossible. Besides, men were flighty creatures, even Richard.

Hated her one moment, adored her the next? Unlikely. Or rather, very likely and very likely to end badly when he shifted back toward hate. She'd be left alone again. Best to keep things lighthearted. Nothing too deep, nothing too permanent.

A line of a song floated to her, the words coming haltingly to her lips. “Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more. Men were deceivers ever. One foot on land and one on shore, to one thing constant never.”

True. Men were terribly inconstant. Deceivers. And yet she squirmed. The description did not fit Richard. He had never deceived her. Never pretended to like her when he didn’t. His struggle not to like her had been clearly evident the whole time as well. The kiss at Edmund’s funeral. His apologies in the gazebo. And even when he had refused to tell her what had happened between Selena and Martin, he had kept his promise to her cousin. He had told Beatrice that her cousin could provide the answer. He’d remained constant and truthful, even when abrasive. The copy of Quixote ... his study... and what had he said?

I never hated you.

She might be sick. Her stomach roiled. Her head pounded.

“Are you unwell, Miss Bell?” Peterson asked, scratching the back of his neck and then opening his palm to scratch the inside of it.

“I’m afraid so.” Quite queasy. She would return to London after the wedding tomorrow.

The door flew open. “There you are, Beatrice,” Richard hissed. His hair stood straight up, and he heaved each breath as if he’d only just stopped running. He waved her closer when she shot to her feet.

“Excuse me, my lord,” Beatrice said, rounding the table and abandoning her papers. Peterson didn’t seem to care that she was abandoning him. Too busy scratching behind his ears like a dog.

And Richard... He'd come for her. She'd hurt him, and still he'd come.

But standing in the hallway, every muscle stiff, he had not come for reconciliation.

She stepped into the hallway and whispered, "Is something amiss?" She'd missed him last night in her bed. Had wanted nothing more than him curled around her, sprinkling kisses on her nape.

"It's him ," Richard whispered, leaning close to share the secret. " He's disappeared."

Daniel. "Any chance he's fleeing the country?"

"He'd never do anything so considerate."

"What should we do?"

"I think it's time to tell John." His gaze flicked down the hall, toward the door that led to his brother's study. "I was hoping perhaps you might..." He scratched the back of his neck, but the movement had nothing to do with itchiness. "I think I need your help. Evie and John might panic, and I need someone to keep them calm. John is going to be quite, quite angry with me. Perhaps he'll reconsider decapitating me if you are there." He was already moving up the stairs and up another flight of stairs and all the way down the hall.

She followed. "Where are we going?"

"To check on the children. I do not think Daniel would hurt them, but if I can reassure John the children are safe before telling him the news, perhaps he'll spare me." He stopped before a door and swung it open. Beatrice ducked, to see under his arm.

“Oh my,” she said at the same time he said, “Bloody hell.”

“Uncle Richard!” Lucy bounced to her feet and ran to him. She grabbed his arms and dragged him toward the middle of the nursery where Daniel sat on a rug, one small boy on either side of him. Daniel wore a nursemaid’s bonnet perched atop his head, an apron tied haphazardly around his waist, and he held the tiniest teacup Beatrice had ever seen in one hand, pinky raised.

He lifted the cup to Beatrice. “You’re just in time for tea.” He mouthed the word shrew, hiding half his lips from the children with his teacup.

Beatrice walked carefully into the room behind Richard, whose forced and frozen smile seemed more fatal wound. Better than a scowl and a roar. At least this way he would not scare the children.

“Where are Miss Bishop and Miss Pope?” he asked.

Daniel sighed. “Well, you know, I brought them a little bit of tea earlier. They enjoyed it. Must have had something in it to make them awfully tired though. They’re asleep through there.” He nodded toward a door where the children’s beds likely lay.

“You drugged the nursemaids.” Richard did not appear to be asking a question. “John is going to kill you, and I am going to help him.”

“Who am I going to kill?” John asked.

Beatrice’s heart stopped. Peeking over her shoulder, she saw the marquess. His affable wide smile had frozen on his face, and his eyes were draining of their cheerfulness. Rage, hot and white, took its place. “Richard... I must be hallucinating.” His hand shot out to grip the door frame. “Tell me, is our brother sitting in the middle of the nursery floor wearing a maid uniform? It appears he is,

but... it cannot be so.”

Richard flailed to find words, his mouth opening and closing but producing no explanation.

Beatrice snuck into his side, trying to give him some of her strength.

“I’m quite real!” Daniel waved the teacup. “Lovely seeing you, too, John. Congratulations on the happy news. I look forward to seeing you shackle yourself to one woman for the rest of your life. Tomorrow will be a happy day, I believe.” He sipped from the teacup.

“Oh, God.” Beatrice poked Richard in the side. “The children are drinking the tea. Do you think he’s?—”

“Hell.” Richard swept into the room and gathered up all the teacups, snapping away the one that Daniel wielded with a flourish. He inspected them. “Empty, and they do not appear as if they’ve had anything in them at all.”

“Of course not,” Daniel said. “It’s pretend tea. What else would it be?”

That is when John transformed entirely. He barreled toward Daniel, a grumbling, yowling bear, and slammed his younger brother into the ground. “Get the children and run,” he bellowed.

Richard gathered the children under his wing. The boys were wide-eyed and trembling, and Lucy tucked herself into his side like a little bird seeking shelter. He shuffled them into Beatrice’s hold. “Please find Evie. Bring the children to her, or her mother if she’s about. I have to keep them from killing each other.”

The smack of bone on flesh. John had thrown the first punch.

Beatrice scrambled out of the room with the children. She found both Evie and her mother, Mrs. Hardy, downstairs and whispered to them both what was happening above stairs.

Mrs. Hardy immediately guided Lucy and the twins toward open garden doors. “Outside, dears. We’ll find something fun to do.”

And Beatrice and Evie raced upstairs. When they entered the nursery, it was only to witness a three-man brawl. They seemed a massive, grunting monster, six limbs tangled up with one another, three heads of dark hair, and big bodies. Only their clothing told them apart. But Richard was stronger and faster than the others. He worked every day in the sun, walking the fields, building things with his own hands, and he knew how to use his muscles. The marquess had rage on his side and honor, and he swerved to miss Richard as much as he flung out to hit Daniel.

Daniel seemed to be laughing through it all, as if he enjoyed the tussle. Richard tried to keep them away from one another, but as soon as he separated them, they’d surge back again, crashing together like animals brawling for dominance.

“Stop!” Evie yelled. “Stop right now!”

John lifted his head, his attention divided now between Daniel’s bleeding nose and his wife’s enraged voice. Richard poked his head up, too, immediately sighting Beatrice. His entire body sagged. His eyes seemed to say, Thank God you’re here finally . He might have rushed to her side, but she shot a finger out.

“Get him!” she cried.

John was lurching toward Daniel again, dove, grabbed him around the shins, sending him crashing to the ground.

Richard back into the fray.

Evie shot into the middle of it, too. She threw her arms out wide. “Stop now , I say.”

The three men froze. John still hugged Daniel’s legs. Daniel palmed the top of John’s head, keeping him at arm’s distance. Richard had a hold of John’s ankles, trying to drag him off Daniel. It could have been a great work of art, a tableau captured in marble and titled, Three Men Act Like Children .

“John,” Evie snapped.

He released his brother’s legs, and that released the tension in Richard’s thighs. Richard cried out as he toppled backward, crashing into the floor with a string of curses. He’d be bruised tomorrow. And on that magnificent arse. A shame.

John jumped to his feet, and Daniel tipped his head back, pinching his bloodied nose.

“Here, John.” Evie stabbed the floor next to her, and her groom made his way to her side. “Richard, stay just as you are.” He stretched his legs out in front of him with a wince. “And you.” Evie’s gaze fell on Daniel. “Do not move.”

“Not even to wiggle my feet?” Daniel asked.

Evie growled. “What were you doing with my children?”

“I believe they are my children,” Daniel said. “Or they were at one point. And even now.” He cleared his throat. “Strictly speaking.”

“You gave up any right you have to them,” John said. “I’m their father now.”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “You always were a self-righteous prig.”

“And you were always a selfish prick,” John said. “Oh, apologies... A selfish criminal .”

Daniel shrugged, inspected his torn and bloody knuckles. “At least I’ve had a bit of fun. How many years did you pine for little Evie without ever getting into her bed?”

John growled, pounced, and Evie latched almost her entire body onto his arm to keep him from jumping atop his brother.

“You should have stayed at the house,” Richard groaned, taking Beatrice’s proffered hand to stand.

“House?” John’s gaze swung like a scythe through wheat to Richard. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve been Ricky’s houseguest the past few days. I suffered an almost fatal injury. He, at least, knows something of hospitality and brotherly love.”

Richard rolled his eyes. “It was a flesh wound. And you forced your way into my home.”

“You invited him to stay with you?” John’s hands were fists again, this time aimed at Richard.

“No! Of course not! But...” Richard swallowed. “I did answer that letter he wrote to you last year. And I have been keeping up correspondence with him since. I did not think any harm would come of it. He’s a scoundrel, but... he’s still our brother.”

In his voice, Beatrice heard the little boy who never had a family or a place where he belonged. Did John hear it?

“You have put my family in danger,” John said.

“Come off it, you prat. No one’s in danger.” Daniel climbed to his feet, wiping his nose on the back of his sleeve. “Except me.”

Richard seemed to have bolted his jaw shut. He would say nothing in his own defense.

Head hung but voice firm, John said, “Get out of my house.”

“Me?” Daniel pointed to himself then to Richard. “Or him?”

“Both!”

“John,” Evie warned.

But her groom did not listen. He made for the door, busted hands bleeding inside of his pockets.

Daniel trudged behind him still wearing the apron, though the bonnet had fallen off in the fray. Beatrice followed Richard toward his house, keeping her distance. Her mind was too jumbled to talk, yet she could not let him out of her sight. He might need her, and she needed to know he was well. Daniel went in the direction of the village, forking off the road that led to Richard’s home.

She paused. Should someone stop him? Lock him up? What was to be done with an exiled lord who caused trouble as often as he breathed?

Richard had pulled out of sight before she could make up her mind, so she scrambled after him, lifting her skirts to run and catch up.

At the door of his house, Richard froze, hand on the doorknob, back curled. “You can go back to Slopevale, Beatrice. Evie might want you.”

“But you might need me.”

“I don’t need anyone. And you do not need me.”

“Nonsense.” She pushed past him and into the house, grabbed his wrist and pulled him into the kitchen. After a bit of bumbling through drawers and cupboards, she found some brandy and a clean cloth. “Sit.”

He did, but he wouldn’t look at her. She knelt by him and took his right hand in her own, splashed some brandy on the cloth, and began to clean his wounds.

He hissed. “I can do this myself.”

“You donkey.”

That earned a chuckle, and her heart smiled. She could do this. She had the power to make it right for him. She unfurled his hand and flipped it and placed a kiss in his palm.

That banished all his mirth, and he sank deeper into the seat, eyes closed. “I messed everything up. I have one job in life, and I failed at it.”

Carefully, she asked, “What do you think that one job is?”

“To keep the peace, to make sure everything moves smoothly. No ripples, no waves. No capsized boats.”

“None at all? For anyone? That seems an impossible task.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Very well, then.” She wanted to make him laugh again, to make his rugged face once more glow with the joy of living. “Can you tell me what you’re making in your woodshop? I spied on you one day, and I saw you working on something. It looks like a picture frame.”

“Naughty girl,” he mumbled.

“You know me well.” She kissed his temple.

He winced. “It is a picture frame. I made it for John and Evie and the children. John is going to have a portrait made after the wedding. All five of them together. And I think he wants to have individuals made as well. And one of him and Evie. I’m making frames for all of them.”

“What about you? Will you not be in any of the portraits?”

“Of course not.”

“But you’re part of the family.”

He shrugged. And that small lift and fall of his shoulder sliced through her like a blade.

She moved on to his other hand, ministered to the knuckles there. With his other hand—now clean though still bruised and battered—he traced the pads of his fingers down her cheek.

“Beatrice.” Her name a soft, warm whisper edged with some emotion she did not like a bit. “I’m sorry for fighting you. We will do as you wish. The house in London. I’ll

travel there as often as I can manage. Perhaps once a month. I cannot lie... I want to fall asleep with you teasing me and wake wrapped around you every damn day. I want to watch you weave connections between men and countries with a flick of your quill across parchment and wait patiently until you stretch and yawn, to pick you up and carry you to our bed. I want to see you in that little garden beyond the study at dawn, noon, and midnight, winter, spring, and autumn. I want you for more than a moment... With snow in your hair and sun on your face. But if a moment is all you can give, I will take it with both hands and protect it. Be happy for it. I just want to make you happy.”

Finished cleaning his wounds, she kissed him lightly on the lips. “I must return. I’ll see you tomorrow. For the wedding.”

He nodded. She kissed his cheek, and then she left, her mind too full of so many things she wanted to say that she couldn’t say a single one. She’d have to sort through them tonight and, just as she did with her contracts, find the perfect words. This time for translating the feelings of her heart.

He just wanted somewhere to belong, someone to belong to, who would be proud of him instead of hide him, who would trust him. And she had denied him that. Why?

It was not that she scorned marriage. No.

She was afraid that if she loved someone enough to marry them, they would leave her. Afraid she would give everything, and find he no longer wanted it. Not even her father had loved her enough to stay. How could any other man?

But Richard wasn’t any other man. Certainly nothing like her father.

And as she clenched her hands to better keep the feel of his imprint on her palms and fingertips, she decided not to be scared anymore.

Fourteen

Richard never knocked on John's study door. Usually he walked right in, as secure in his place there as he was in... not much else. But today he knocked. John had gone in earlier, but he was due at the church in less than an hour. He'd leave soon, and he was alone now, and that was just how Richard needed him. Richard knocked again.

This time, John said, "Come in."

Richard did, shutting the door softly behind him. He locked eyes with his brother.

"I was wrong," they said at the same time.

Something coiled too tight in Richard relaxed, and he fell into the low settee by the fireplace. John joined him, slumping into a seat and stretching his legs out long. "Need a drink?"

"No. You?"

John shook his head. "Do you know where he is?"

"No. Apologies. Again. I should have made sure he returned to Bell House with me."

"Bell House?" John raised a brow.

Blast. Not meant to say that. It felt right, though.

“You know,” John said, “when you were building... Bell House, you seemed... driven. Like you were following a vision, working toward something... for someone .”

He had been. Beatrice’s vision. For her. Every wall and stroke of paint, he’d built it for her. He nodded. No point hiding it now.

“At the time, I thought you were thinking of your future, a family perhaps.” John nudged Richard’s boot with the toe of his own. “I did not know you had a particular person in mind.”

“I didn’t think about it too hard, either.” It would have been too painful to look up from the work and realize he was doing it for a woman who would never live there.

“Does she... feel the same?”

Richard couldn’t answer that. Throat too tight. He croaked out instead, “Daniel.”

John sighed. “Yes. Daniel. I suppose we should turn our attention to that particular topic.”

Richard told him, John listening in silence until all was done, and then he said, “What do we do?”

“Turn him in to the constable. Send him away.”

“It’s different... doing it ourselves. He’s a horrible person, but... Watching him carted off to a hulk versus...”

“Doing it ourselves...”

“Precisely. Do you believe him? That he just wants to be at the wedding?”

Richard shifted. Daniel was so damn difficult to understand. “I do not know. He’s selfish fifty-nine minutes of every hour, then will surprise you at minute sixty. Every word that comes out of his mouth is impossible.”

John picked at a loose thread on the chair arm. “You should have told me you were going to write to him.”

“Probably. But your entire life had been interrupted by the children, Daniel’s children. I wanted to keep the avenues of communication open with him, but I did not want to put more on your shoulders.”

“Thank you. But he’s my responsibility, too. More so than he is yours.”

Because they shared the same mother, because Richard didn’t really belong. “How’s that?” The question almost caught in Richard’s throat.

“Because I’m the marquess.”

Such a simple answer. Not the one Richard had expected. Relief sailed through him like a calm breeze.

“But I should rely on you more. There’s no man as dependable as you, Richard. I’m damn lucky to have you as my brother.”

Richard had always known John loved him, had always known John accepted him perhaps as no one else did. But it was... good to hear him say it. “You are.” Said gruffly. “And I am too.”

They cleared their throats and looked away, then John gave a nervous laugh that

Richard caught up, too. It spilled easiness between them. Renewed and welcome.

“You look a bloody mess,” Richard said. “Daniel gave as good as he got. You are going to stand up and take Evie as your wife with a cut lip, bruised jaw, and black eye.”

“He looks worse,” John grumbled.

“Naturally. But he’s not getting married today.”

John seemed to chew on something, then said, “Evie thinks you should take a wife. But... I don’t want you to leave. You’re the only brother I have left. I like working with you and seeing you every day and— Bloody hell, this is difficult to say.” He pushed a hand through his hair. “What I mean to say is thank you. And... whatever you need to do, I support you. What I want doesn’t matter. It’s not your fate to take care of Slopevale and me for the rest of your days.”

“I don’t want to leave.” Truth. He loved his home, his family. But he would. Because he loved Beatrice, too, wanted her to be his family. And he would do what he must to have any little piece of her she was willing to give. “I’ll remain as long as you’ll have me. I... I didn’t mean to endanger the children. You know I would never?—”

“I know. I know. And I do not think Daniel is a danger to them.”

They sat in companionable silence until there was knock on the door.

“John?” Evie said from the other side, “It’s time for us to walk to the church.”

Richard and John pushed to standing at the same time, groaning.

“My muscles feel like they’ve been in a meat grinder,” Richard said.

“Mine too.”

Richard knocked his elbow into his brother’s ribs. “Not ideal for a wedding night.”

Laughing, they joined Evelina in the hallway, and Richard sank to the back of the large group bursting out of the house and down the drive.

Near the front of it, to Evie’s side, walked Beatrice and Selena, their arms looped round one another’s waists. Martin strolled nearby, smiling at Selena. Perhaps his future would also hold a parade to a chapel soon enough.

No matter how well Richard knew Beatrice or how many times he visited a house in London with her, they would never be able to walk next to one another in public like that, sharing small smiles and whispered words.

Selena leaned over and whispered something in Beatrice’s ear, and Beatrice looked over her shoulder, searching the crowd behind her until she found him. When their eyes caught, she turned around and weaved her way through the oncoming crowd until she stood beside him, then she set her steps to his. He shortened his stride to fit her smaller one.

“You should be up front with your brother,” she said.

He shook his head. “I do not wish to spoil the merriment. I’m in a dour mood today.”

“It’s my fault.” She didn’t lower her chin but faced her culpability head high.

“No, sweetheart,” he whispered.

She worried her bottom lip between her teeth.

“Mark my words,” a voice, high and loud, called out from the crowd, “there will be another wedding at Slopevale in three weeks’ time.”

Everyone looked around for the speaker, but no one could find her.

“Who?” a second voice queried.

“Why, Mr. Clark and Miss Bell, of course,” said another.

Still, everyone looked about, failing to find the speakers.

“Damn Daniel,” Richard growled.

“Where is he?” Beatrice hissed, her cheeks roses as everyone parading before them spun around to inspect them for signs of matrimonial intent.

“There. Behind Peterson,” Richard whispered.

Daniel waggled his fingers, then pulled his hat low. “They’re in love!” he cried out, that fake voice rising high and loud. “Miss Bell and the old marquess’s bastard.”

Peterson scowled, gaze flashing to Beatrice.

“Oh God.” Richard surged toward Daniel. Had to remove the man before any more harm was done.

Beatrice hid her face behind her palms.

Before Richard could reach Daniel, John pushed his way to the back of the crowd. “Is that true?” His gentlemanly instinct rode him hard, would demand honor if anything was even the least bit untoward.

Disaster. Richard had to save Beatrice from a permanent entanglement she didn't want. "Miss Bell?" He laughed. "And me? In love? It's absurd. Isn't it?" He threw the question at Beatrice. He'd dug the hole, now she could throw the body of these romantic accusations inside its grave, bury it deep.

After a moment of shaky silence, she lifted her gaze to him, threw her shoulders back in that position he knew so well. It said she had no doubts. It said confidence steeled every inch of her perfect soul. She stepped closer to him, her smile so mischievous he wanted to kiss it, right there in front of everyone.

"Will you marry me, Mr. Clark?" she asked.

His heart stopped. The world went silent. Might have stopped spinning. But all the blood rushing to his head and places more southern, apparently intrigued by a brazen woman proposing marriage in front of an audience, threw him off-balance. Glued feet to the ground. Steady. Steady. Then... "Pardon me, Miss Bell. I'm not sure I heard you correctly."

Her eyes narrowed, and she hissed, "Richard, you heard me."

"I'm not entirely sure I did." He couldn't have heard her right.

Her mouth snapped into a smooth, stubborn line.

He draped an arm around her shoulder and turned her away from the crowd. "What are you playing at?"

"I'm not playing anymore. I would like to marry you very much. If your offer still stands, and if you'll still have me."

He looked over his shoulder where a few dozen people watched the unfolding

conversation like a Drury Lane production. They seemed to hold their breath and lean even closer.

A poke in his ribs returned his attention to brazen Beatrice, scowly browed and hands on hips. "Your hesitation is somewhat humiliating ."

"Humiliating? Humph. Well then, I suppose I shall take you since no one else will."

She squealed and bounced a little bit on her toes, and then she calmed herself to say, "No one will have me? It's the other way around, Mr. Clark. No one will have you . I myself take you on only out of pity."

"God, you she-devil," he said around a grin, swooping an arm around her waist and yanking her close.

"Donkey." She grabbed his lapels and pulled up on tiptoe.

"Hellcat."

And then he was kissing her to the roar of cheers and applause.

And when the crowd grew tired of the kissing, still Richard clung to her, giving her everything he could through every touch and taste. And taking, too, her bravery, her passion, her wit.

John's hand slapped onto Richard's back as he cleared his throat, breaking them apart. "Congratulations, brother. But did you have to be so dramatic about it?"

"That was quite bold of you." Evie hugged Beatrice. "Proposing marriage to a man in front of everyone."

“Richard is the most loyal man I know.” Beatrice squeezed Evie’s hands. “And I am not at all afraid to let absolutely everyone know that he belongs to me.” She grinned up at him. “Shall you dislike having me as a neighbor, Evie?”

“I’m delighted!” Evie gave Beatrice another hug. And then Selena was there, wrapping the two of them in her arms, and Martin was slapping Richard’s back.

Richard, grinning wider than he’d ever grinned in his life, shrugged off their attentions. “Let’s get you married, John.” And then he walked arm in arm with his betrothed all the way to the church.

He settled into a pew beside Beatrice, a polite distance between them. But her skirt touched his trousers soon, and once the ceremony began, he would be able to slide over so that their thighs rubbed along one another, and people would think it in bad taste but would smile and say it was a love match.

And it was.

And this woman, more than anyone else he’d ever known, had chosen him and come to him and told everyone in the world that for her, he was it.

He’d not known how desperately he needed that until she’d done it.

He leaned over and whispered in her ear, “You are a wonder, Beatrice Bell, and I love you.”

Her words were so low, he could barely hear them. “I love you, too.” Then she bobbed her head toward a stained-glass window at the back of the church.

There, peeping in through a clear square—Daniel.

“Go,” Beatrice whispered.

So Richard did, out the door and around the corner to where Daniel peeked through the window. Daniel glanced up at the first crunch of Richard’s boot.

“Come here,” he said, pointing through the window and barely suppressing a laugh. “Look at Peterson.”

Sitting in a pew near the front, Peterson continuously and furiously scratched at his neck. His hair, too. He’d almost knocked off his hat. Everyone near him scooted as far from him as they could.

“Did you do that?” Richard demanded.

Daniel winked and jabbed Richard’s ribs with his elbow. “You’re welcome.”

“You are a devil.” He took one step away from his brother, paused. “You’re not coming inside?”

Daniel shrugged. “Me? Inside of a church? I don’t mind admitting I’m more than a little hesitant to enter one of those.”

“If anyone was going to be smote upon entering, it would be you.”

“You understand. I’m going to stay right here. Look through the window.” He clung to the wall, peeping through, his eyes riveted on the activity inside. “My progenies seem healthy. And happy.”

“No thanks to you,” Richard grumbled.

“Or all thanks to me if you look at it a certain way.”

“You mean blindfolded?”

“I could not have made them happy. But John does. You do. My leaving was for the best.”

“You’ve always been a genius at turning your vices into virtue.”

“I’m a multitalented man. Now, I’ll be leaving here soon, but I want you to promise me something.”

“Ha. I’m not promising you anything.”

“Promise me you’ll come to terms with what you are.” Daniel repositioned himself at his clear square, focus on the front of the church where John and Evie stood.

“I’ve no idea what you mean.”

“A good man. A worthy one. A fighting one, too. But you wouldn’t know it. You run around putting out fires even when it means you neglect your own desires. Don’t do that with Beatrice. Fight for her. For the both of you.”

“I’m not like you. I do not stomp about taking for mine whatever catches my eye. Women are not toys, Daniel. They have desires and ambitions and needs. Men should not collect them like books or boots.”

“Some men are collectors.” Daniel placed a palm on his chest. “You are not. Build your own family with the shrew and protect it. Don’t let the demands of Slopevale master your time and attention.”

He knew what Daniel meant. “I will not.”

“And tend to what you want now and then. Yes?”

“Yes.” No harm in it. Much good.

“Now go inside and enjoy your woman. Your family.”

Daniel his family, too. In the end. “Where are you going?”

“Russia, I think? Or somewhere else. Anywhere else.”

“Will you return for my wedding?” Richard asked.

“Do you want me to?”

Richard snorted, not sure how to answer. “Wherever you go, don’t collect anymore brides.”

“I promise nothing.” Daniel winked again. “Now go. The family awaits.” His voice hollow, flat. Family. Said as if it weren’t also his own. Daniel was a full-blooded son of their father’s line, but he did not belong here, did not wish to be here with his family. Richard was more brother to John, more son of Slopevale than Daniel would ever want to be.

It was not blood that made family. It was need, desire, love. The kind of love and loyalty John showed Richard and that Richard would show Beatrice every day of their lives.

Richard slapped his brother on the back, and Daniel swung around, wrapping him in a tight hug.

“Find your peace, brother,” Richard said in Daniel’s ear. “But no more wives.”

Daniel pushed away, laughing through some stronger emotion before shoving Richard toward the front of the church.

Richard quietly rejoined Beatrice, grasped her hand, and squeezed.

“Is all well?” she asked.

He kissed her knuckles. “As well as it can be, sweetheart.”

As John and Evie signed their names in the registry, Beatrice sighed, his hellcat melting into a lovely puddle in the face of a little bit of love.

“Sigh no more, Beatrice,” he whispered in her ear, “I will love you forever.”

April 1823

Beatrice rose and stretched, shaking out the stiffness of a body long curved over satisfying work. Outside the study window, chaos reigned, and she needed to join it. Abandoning her work, she found her way into the garden and leaned against Bell House, her heart full.

Richard chased Lucy, who chased the twins, who were running off with a cat. Two cats. One for each boy. The cats yowled. The twins yowled. Lucy cried, “Unfair!” and Richard’s laughter rose to the heavens for a glorious moment before he swallowed it whole.

“Shh!” he commanded. “The little bird is sleeping.”

Indeed, she was. Beatrice knelt at the wicker basket near the study door and pushed the blanket away from Rosalie’s cheek. Six months old and sweet as a purring kitten when sleeping. As irate as cat in a bag when awake. Richard would want to keep her sleeping.

But even now, she wiggled, little fists fighting the light blanket spread over her in the soft spring wind, her face scrunching as a wail built inside. Beatrice picked her up, sighed when the little bird buried her face in her neck.

Richard jogged back down the path toward her, a train of children and kittens following at a distance. He was so achingly beautiful with that roguish grin and those soft, brown eyes. More than their color, their emotion made her breathless. Oceans of adoration.

The only ocean she wished to set sail upon.

He kissed her cheek, then Rosalie's head. "Done for the day?"

"Mm." Beatrice stole a kiss from Richard's lips until she felt the heat of three pairs of eyes boring into her.

Lucy and the twins watched them, eyes unblinking, faces blank.

"Uncle John and Aunt Evie do that, too," Lucy said. Her nose wrinkled. "But I don't think another person would taste very good."

Richard cleared his throat. "Yes, well." He scratched the back of his neck. "Why don't you lot go down to the swing. I believe Aunt Lena and Uncle Martin are there."

The children ran off, cats bounding after them, and Richard groaned. Then grinned at his daughter. "Are you going to say things I'd rather not respond to one day, little bird?"

Rosalie babbled, sitting up in Beatrice's arms and reaching for her papa. He took her and bounced her, and she laughed.

"Did I leave you for a moment, little bird?" he cooed. "I'm back now. I'll never be gone long."

She grabbed his nose, and with a yelp, he pried her hand away, let her wrap her small fist around a finger instead. She would never have to worry about Richard forgetting her, leaving her, not wanting her.

And neither would Beatrice.

He hefted Rosalie onto one hip and wrapped his free arm around Beatrice, steering

her toward the woods, the swing, and the sounds of glee echoing from that direction.
“How is the translation coming today?”

“Quite well. I finished another poem.” Five more to go before she finished her first collection of translated works. “Gálvez is kind to me today.” She’d begun working on her English translation of the Spanish poet’s work shortly after they’d married when she’d finally realized she could no longer chase after her father’s affection. He’d barely noticed. And neither had she.

“Everyone is going to love Mama’s work, aren’t they, little bird?”

Rosalie babbled.

“I must find a publisher first,” Beatrice said. Then, “You spoil her.” He did not. She loved it. She loved him.

“You say that as if it’s a bad thing, hellcat.”

Beatrice arched a brow. “Hellcat is for when we’re alone.”

“And what will you call me when others are not around?”

“Mine.”

His sweet grin took a feral turn. The glow in his eyes blossomed into lust. “Well enough. And what will you call me when we are in public?”

Beatrice tapped her chin. “There are so many options. Mi bruto. Mr. Clark the nodcock.”

He swung in front of her and silenced her with a kiss, his hand cupping the back of her neck, his lips warm and firm and demanding.

Happy to give—oh so happy—to him.

Rosalie gurgled and smacked them apart.

“She’s a fighter,” Richard said with a laugh. “Like her mother.”

Beatrice snagged his cravat and pulled him down the path. “You like it.”

“You know I do, sweetheart.”

Hand in hand, they followed the sound of laughter into the woods.

* * *