



Much Ado About Margaret

Author: *Madeleine Roux*

Category: Historical

Description: Madeleine Roux's next season in Regency England follows a rebellious writer and the man who risks everything to publish her.

Margaret Arden yearns to live like the passionate and daring women in her novel. The idyllic life at Mosely Cottage with her two younger sisters and mother is fine, but Margaret wants more than the demure and dainty existence she's known. After a particularly brutal rejection from an annoyingly attractive publisher, Margaret fears being forced into marriage to protect her family if their financial situation doesn't improve—until her cousin's glamorous wedding masquerade brings her onto a collision course with scandal, notoriety, and even love.

Captain Bridger Darrow is starting over after fighting for his country. Now home, he is struggling to save his family from destitution and succeed in a new venture of passion: book publishing. It's all going rather poorly, until he stumbles upon loose pages of an astonishing novel while in attendance at his dearest friend's wedding. Bridger knows he must publish it. But upon meeting the author, Bridger is stunned to discover that he—she—is a woman, and he has already told her off in grand fashion.

While Bridger is keen to gain her trust and rescind the initial rejection, Margaret can't help but be skeptical of his intentions. Sparks fly between the two, just as the wedding of the season starts to descend into chaos when a masked dance leads to a case of mistaken identities.

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Page 1

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1

London

1817

I have a man's mind, but a woman's might.

Julius Caesar, Act 2, Scene 4

April

According to Margaret Arden's mother and aunts, the thing Margaret required most in life was a wealthy husband; according to Maggie herself, what she needed was to see her name embossed on the spine of a novel. Every person had a *raison d'être*, and Maggie had been aware of hers almost since the spark of consciousness. Her imaginative cup overfloweth, and so, naturally, she had begun telling stories to anyone who would listen (usually, her much-put-upon father) and later, when furnished with pen and ink, set these ideas down on paper. This obsession had culminated toward the middle of her twenty-second year, when she completed her third (and to date, best) novel, *The Killbride*. That same accomplishment, painstakingly copied in her best hand, was now improbably bundled in one of her sister Violet's shawls and tucked under her arm. It was heavy, the manuscript, and the room was very warm, and she worried increasingly that the book was going to be soaked in sweat by the time it was delivered to its destination.

Her younger sisters—Violet and Winny—were her coconspirators in everything.

They stood beside her at the edge of all the mingling in their aunt's salon. They were both aware of the plan, and, cursed by that knowledge, fidgeted. Winny was even sweatier than Maggie, her ivory skin drained of blood. Papa, God rest him, had always referred to Maggie as his summer, bold, golden, and warm. Violet was his winter, with her lush, dark hair and frosty blue eyes. And Winny, Mr. Arden's youngest, was a shy and delicate spring, sweet yet trepidatious. Maggie missed their father every minute and tried not to resent him for the precarious social climate his early passing had created.

If Maggie was being honest with herself, and she usually was, she needed a rich husband and she needed one now. There were several prospects present at this event, but to her they were vague blurs in the crowd. The girls were in town to pick out suitable attire for an upcoming stay at their cousin's country home and his wedding, and their aunt had been gracious enough to float them down Frith Street to a fashionable modiste, where Violet and Winny made themselves apoplectic over silks while Maggie fretted over ways to make their brief time in London productive. It had come to her attention that her aunt ran in the same social circle as one of the editors who had received a copy of Maggie's book in the post. He had never responded, which had to be a mistake, because *The Killbride* was exceptional stuff and the people cried out for it. It had only taken minimal nudging from Violet, who possessed the theatrical charms of Sarah Siddons and the oratory cunning of the prime minister, to convince their aunt that this editor should receive an invitation to her poetry salon that coming Sunday.

"No room should be this warm," said Violet, squishing around in her shoes beside Maggie. They had been barricaded by several ladies locked in conversation with the guest poet in the library, and though the fireplace was clear across the room, it was abnormally hot. "I think my hair is going to catch fire," she added. "Hurry up and humiliate yourself, Maggie, so we might go outside to relieve the heat."

"Yes, do hurry," added Winny, who looked equally miserable. Her golden-brown

ringlets were beginning to droop frightfully.

“You look ridiculous with that thing under your arm,” said Violet.

“It’s practical,” Maggie replied, but it was a weak defense. “How else am I to convince Mr. Darrow to publish my work? He has to see it to experience its excellence.”

“You’re not to do it at all,” Violet reminded her. “You’re to throw that sweaty kindling in the fire where it belongs and do as Mother wishes. You’re to go on Auntie’s arm to Mr. Gainswell or Mr. Terrington, make introductions, and bat your eyelashes until one of them loves you and then we can move out of the cottage and into a real house.”

“Impossible.” Maggie sighed. Violet was right, of course, but reality wasn’t about to get in the way of her dreams.

“I can smell Mr. Gainswell’s gouty feet from here,” said Winny, sensibly and in a whisper.

“See? Do you want to live in a stinky-foot house?” asked Maggie, glaring at Violet. Violet was somehow impervious to the damp heat in the room and looked perfect, as always, striking and pointed as a stuffed viper.

“If it’s grand enough,” Violet murmured.

“There is Aunt Eliza,” said Winny, pointing. “You should have her make introductions.”

“How are you going to explain that thing under your arm? She’s going to notice,” added Violet.

Maggie frowned. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Tell a story, sister, it’s what you do best.” Violet was not being encouraging. She didn’t understand the pressure of being the eldest, of having to save the family from ruin while casting aside all thought of her dreams. Maggie wanted impossible things—to write her books and share them with the world and marry well enough to drag her mother and sisters out of poverty. They were surviving on their aunt’s charity, for without a son, their father’s sudden death had been a devastating blow, emotionally and financially. She couldn’t decide what dear Papa wanted from her. As he lay dying, he had urged her to look to the family, and specifically to her sisters, to set an example, guide them, and help them find their way in a world unforgiving and unkind to the “wrong” sort of girl.

The sort of girl that spent more time worrying about her novels than her future.

The sort of girl who never bothered much with thinking about marriage prospects.

And yet Maggie’s life up to his death suggested he wanted more for her. She was born on April 23, just like Shakespeare. She had been loudly imaginative and theatrical until early adolescence, when such behavior was no longer considered charming or permissible. All of that bursting color lived inside her now, hidden, allowed to come out only in her work, which was something her father had understood. She remembered him finding her asleep at her writing desk, ink smudged across her cheek, the candles melted to puddles. Papa would scoop her up and carry her to bed and sing no lullabies but recall the lives of the poets and storytellers he admired.

Maggie watched their aunt threading her way through the guests toward them. She was a tall, slender woman with fine, birdlike features and graying blond hair. Their mother had married for love, their aunt had married for status, and it showed. Maggie didn’t think this with any nasty intent—their uncle was kind enough, but she could

see the void of emotionless ambivalence that grew day by day between him and Auntie. There was nothing but cold recognition when their eyes met across a room, and their aunt kept a full social schedule to avoid spending time with her husband, Mr. Burton. Maggie dreaded such a life, though she tried to console herself with the thought that it would at least allow for plenty of time to write.

No, it wouldn't, you silly goose, that sort of husband would discourage your passions and imagination at every turn.

"Girls! Look at you packed back here like tinned herrings; you look utterly stifled." Their aunt frowned and motioned them forward, dispersing the women and poet with a wave of her fan. "Violet, stop slouching. Winny, my dear, are you well? If you're going to faint, please do so over here, where there are sofas. Heavens, you are all so shiny, some blotting would not go awry."

"Your timing couldn't be more wonderful," said Maggie, shoved forward by Violet. "I thought we could take a turn, dear aunt, and you could introduce me to more of your fine guests. Some of the men, perhaps."

"Now, there is the spirit, my girl." At once, Maggie's aunt took her by the elbow and whisked her away, leaving Violet and Winny to melt or expire or whatever was least intrusive and most feminine. "Mr. Gainswell has just returned from the Indies with the most amusing stories. Have you been introduced?"

"We have," said Maggie.

"And? Your impressions?"

The Burtons' elegant townhouse in Mayfair was packed wall to wall, but on Auntie's arm, the crush was navigated with ease and grace. Less busy functions were perhaps more fashionable, but their aunt enjoyed showing off just how eager society was to

attend her music and poetry salons.

“He’s quite...” Maggie flailed for a word, not because she didn’t have any, but because any misstep would be reported to her mother. In fact, Maggie’s season had been recalled in moment-by-moment, excruciating detail to her mother in a letter that, in Maggie’s opinion, somewhat overused words like “disaster” and “catastrophe.”

The bachelors are put off by her scrutinizing opinions, which are far too much for a young lady desirous of matrimony. One suggested to me that Miss Margaret made him feel like “a caged lion at Vauxhall, helplessly observed.” Something must be done, sister, to curb her unruly appetite for expression. I remember you said she was serious and restrained, but that is not my experience so far. What changed in her?

It was not a flattering letter. She did ask who had contributed the lion at Vauxhall line, because she judged that promising and perceptive. Maybe all the eligible rich men in London were not dullards after all. Her aunt had declined to name names.

“He’s quite something,” Margaret finished. “I like his hair?”

“Really, niece, for such a lover of words, you reveal yourself.”

“He has an interesting odor.”

“With five thousand a year, he can provide you with any number of nosegays.”

“One is forced to wonder if he could also afford a physician.”

Aunt Eliza sighed, leading them through an archway to a black-and-white gallery exploding with plants and richly hung with portraits. It was less populated, and Maggie was grateful for the rush of cooler air. “One is also forced to wonder what it is you’re hiding under your arm, dear. Yes, I saw it. If you are going to make a scene

at my salon, I would appreciate forewarning.”

Maggie clutched the swaddled manuscript closer to her side. “It’s...” She tried to remember the warm, charitable feelings her aunt often inspired in her, and all the ways in which they owed this woman their continued comfort and safety. “It’s my book.”

“And why are you carrying it like a stolen infant through my house?”

“Because I would like to present it to Mr. Darrow, if you would introduce us.”

Aunt Eliza paused, swiveling to hold Maggie at arm’s length. The light in the hall was serene, beautiful, but now tinged with foreboding as a shadow flickered over her aunt’s face. “That would be the Mr. Bridger Darrow of publisher Dockarty and Company, who Violet so insistently pressured me to invite to this event?”

“The very same.” Maggie tried smiling but felt insane, and instead let her shoulders sag with frustration. “Please, you know how much this means to me.”

“Sometimes, my dear girl, I must do what is in your best interest, and right now that means refusing, even if it makes you angry.” She shook her head and touched Maggie’s chin lightly. “I should have intervened sooner and moved you here to be with me in town. Your parents were always too permissive, too fanciful.” Aunt Eliza pressed the fingertips of her right hand to her heart. “I was like you—faced with a difficult choice—yet I saw my position not as a burden but as an opportunity to make my family proud. I wasn’t the eldest daughter, but I had to act like one.”

“And I feel the same way,” Maggie replied. “I simply want to provide for them with my work.”

Aunt Eliza coughed with laughter. “No young woman of quality seeks employment,

dear.”

At that moment, a great commotion erupted from the way they had come. The words “girl” and “fainted” began reaching them. Whether it was Winny or Violet, and whether it was intentional or accidental, Maggie chose to see it as divine intervention. Their aunt scowled and hurried away, then remembered herself, turned, and pointed an accusatory finger at Maggie. “You. Stay. Right. There.”

This window of opportunity would not remain open long.

While the hall emptied out, guests rushing past to inspect the chaos in the adjoining room, it occurred to Maggie that she didn’t know what Mr. Darrow looked like. She needn’t have worried, for it quickly became obvious that there were precious few candidates left behind. Her attention shifted to two men at the far end of the corridor, their heads bent together in low conversation while they stood sandwiched between a pair of arcing ferns. Some sour-faced ancestors glowered down at the men from their portrait, as if disapproving of the overheard subject matter.

Maggie felt like her throat had filled with nettles. This was beyond impropriety, but she hadn’t lugged the manuscript around all night just to turn chicken now. Papa liked to read to her from Julius Caesar, even though her mother disapproved of the treachery and violence. Her father had been a navy man, and he always made the gory parts feel real and terrifying.

Cowards die many times before their deaths; the valiant never taste of death but once.

That was perhaps a bit dramatic, given she was just a writer facing down an awkward social interaction, not armed senators waiting to ambush her with knives, but the grandiosity spurred her on. What were we but the players in our own dramatizations, amusing an ever-shifting audience of family, friends, and strangers? Maggie charged forward, arriving just as the two men finished speaking. One had been whispering, a

short, round man with a friendly face and tiny spectacles perched on his nose. He had a scholarly appearance, and so Maggie dredged up her courage, Caesar-style, and shot out in front of him.

“Mr. Darrow?” she asked, voice bright with hope.

“Me? Oh, heavens, no,” the man said with a laugh, and as he went on his way, tapped the other fellow on the shoulder. “Darrow? There’s a lady here for you.”

That little tap seemed to pull Mr. Darrow back from worlds away. He spun toward her, hair mussed, intensely dark eyes snapping to her with alarm. One hand was tucked under his chin, and there was a faint smudge of ink on the bare flash of skin between glove and sleeve, not unlike the ink staining Maggie’s fingers beneath her gloves. Maggie’s nervousness vanished, a new, unfamiliar emotion replacing the last: desire.

She had desired things in her life before—a secure future for her family, longevity for her parents, to see her book in the hands of readers across England—but never had she wanted a specific person. The heroes she had imagined for her stories paled in comparison, for they were concocted of words and punctuation, and this man before her was real, warm. It radiated from him, an intoxicating heat, and those searching, powerful eyes of his fell on her with genuine curiosity. If she had felt hot in the other room, now she felt fit to explode.

He smelled incredible, musky somehow, but not unpleasant, like a powerful, wild animal mixed with the fresh blast of the outdoors after rain. It was enough to banish the reek of Mr. Gainswell’s unwashed stockings from her memory forever.

“Yes?” He cocked his head to the side. He was tall, well-built, with the strength of a person who rode and looked after their exercise. “Do we know each other?”

He sounded, well, annoyed, but he looked at her with enough inquisitiveness to light a flame of hope in her chest. Did he find her beautiful? Something in his gaze told her it might be so. His eyes were stormy blue, boundlessly dark to the point that they were nearly black. Even so, there was delight there or curiosity. The other hand, the one at his side, impatiently opened and closed around nothing. Whatever conversation she had interrupted, it didn't seem to be a happy one.

"I'm afraid we haven't been introduced," said Maggie, dropping into a polite curtsy as she remembered her long-lost manners. "Miss Margaret Arden. We might be acquainted, sir, but it would only be through the post. Some months ago, I sent you my manuscript, *The Killbride* ." And here, she hastened to take the bundled pages out from under her arm and its protective shawl covering. She felt stupider by the second as she unwound the fabric, realizing that she must seem to him an absolute lunatic. "And because you never responded, I thought perhaps the pages were lost, or for some unfortunate reason you never received them."

The shawl removed, Maggie held up the fat stack of paper between them.

It was her turn to feel like a lion in a cage as Mr. Darrow slid closer, staring down at the manuscript with one arched brow. "Your only conclusion was misadventure?"

Maggie nodded. "That was my opinion, yes."

"This is rather unusual, Miss Arden, and unforgivably rude."

Bad start.

"I know it's unorthodox, and I do apologize for any offense given, sir, but this novel is not just a passion for me, it's my life and I—"

Mr. Darrow plucked a few pages off the stack, perusing them. "Is that so? If it were

as important as all that, then I would think you would take more care in how you present your life.”

Maggie’s mouth opened slightly, the air squeezing out of her.

It didn’t take him long to add, “I regret to inform you, Miss Arden, that I did receive your letter.”

“You...you did?” Her heart sank.

“Indeed, I did. These pages are familiar to me, yes, I begin to recall them despite my best efforts. I’m interested in publishing a novel of substance, you see, not an overwrought examination of whose misplaced giggle at the ball made Mamma beside herself or some similar nonsense.” His nose wrinkled as if the papers stank. They might, she thought, given where they had spent the last few hours.

Maggie refused to believe things were as he stated. “Oh, but...but that’s really just the beginning, and it’s completely intentional, for not long after, the heroine—”

“The heroine could sprout wings and fly to America, for all I care, and it would still not interest me,” he said with a sigh, dropping the pages back down to their mates. Maggie felt small and naïve, wishing she could shrink behind the ferns. “The most I can say for your work is that it demonstrates a confident control of language, and there’s clarity to the prose. I suppose your penmanship is to be commended also. Thank you, Miss Arden, for making an already unpleasant event that much more disagreeable. Good evening, and good luck with your”—he waved his hand dismissively—“with your life.”

Stunned, she watched him stalk away. Never had her opinion of someone changed so rapidly. A moment ago, she would have carved him onto her dance card permanently, now she hoped never to see him again. His enviably handsome face be damned, it

was skinned over an empty soul. The coldness. The audacity.

Winny was rushing toward her down the corridor, face awash with concern. Violet was probably still pretending to be collapsed by the fireplace. Maggie turned, facing the ferns, hateful of the tears that gathered in her eyes and began to spill down her cheeks. This was her life, and whatever Mr. Darrow said about it, she knew it was worth pursuing. It was just one in a long line of unkind responses. Written responses from other publishers had remarked that a young lady ought to concern herself with more high-minded things. Additionally, we find it troubling that a person of your gentle sex should put their pen to describing scenes of violence, passion, and general indelicacy, wrote one mean little grump from the lofty heights of his Paternoster Row office.

Maggie wiped her face dry and pulled back her shoulders. “I suppose good evening to you, too, Mr. Darrow,” she murmured, covering the manuscript pages with the damp shawl. “I will tirelessly endeavor to prove you wrong.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:17 am

2

The instruments of darkness tell us truths.

Macbeth, Act 1, Scene 3

June

Bridger's childhood home, Fletcher Estate, sat on a low hill overlooking the village of Tetherly, just west of Southam. The spring carpet of marsh marigold and mayflowers had given way to even brighter larkspur and early hydrangea. Fletcher Estate itself had always reminded Bridger of a Christmas pudding—brown, low, and bulging, with a single painted tower on top like a decorative sugared fruit. He wanted to love it, to feel the fondness everyone ought to feel for the rooms and halls of their youth, but the love never quite manifested.

And sitting then in his father's ground-floor study, he felt not only loveless, but choked.

Bridger's father sat hunched at his desk. He looked just like a feverish baby, his reddened face and bald head barely visible above a cocoon of blankets. Mr. Darrow was always cold now, summer or winter. His nurse was away in the village acquiring more tonics. Some of those empty bottles sat in a row in front of Mr. Darrow. The names on them were gibberish to Bridger, who was not often at Fletcher Estate and was ignorant of the ins and outs of his father's decline.

No, this unfortunate position was meant to be Pimm's.

“She shouldn’t bring all that lavender into the front hall,” barked Mr. Darrow. “It makes me sneeze. Damned fool woman.” He turned with some trouble in his chair and glowered at the closed door. “Mrs. Darrow! That’s enough of the lavender!”

Bridger stood, tugging the bottom of his waistcoat as he went to the window. His father was shouting at ghosts again. Mrs. Darrow, Bridger’s mother, had been gone for many years. He had never in his entire life heard his father refer to her as anything but Mrs. Darrow. A charitable reading was that the couple were not loving or close; a less charitable one was that Mr. Darrow had put his wife into an early grave, straining her gentle heart with criticism, contempt, and neglect. It was hard to tell when exactly his father had begun to decline, for he had always been a mean, reclusive person, but it had certainly accelerated over the last year. The physicians had called it a kind of mania brought on by advancing age.

“I will tell the housekeeper no more of those flowers,” said Bridger. It was another new housekeeper; none of them ever stayed long, for dealing with Mr. Darrow was overwhelming. Bridger never knew what to do when he witnessed one of his father’s episodes. They were frequent enough to be chained together, and it seemed his father was living in another world none of them could see. Time was fluid for Mr. Darrow, and he jumped between historical points with no warning. Bridger had seen men in the war take leave of their senses for different reasons, but this was something else.

It frustrated and terrified Bridger in equal measure. He had fought insurmountable battles, but in this case, he couldn’t identify the enemy or the problem that needed fixing. His father was sliding away, and he couldn’t make it stop. Relations between Bridger and his father had been strained, to say the very least, since Captain Bridger Darrow had sold his commission and left the light dragoons before making major. After selling out his commission to the next in line, he took the money and rented a modest place in London, insisting that no one call him Captain ever after. He wanted that all behind him for good.

A fussy little muscle tightened in his jaw.

“Flowers,” Mr. Darrow muttered, and turned back toward the bottles on his desk. He began to rearrange them.

There was a short knock on the study door, and then a tall, older man with a smooth bald head and an eye-catching orange cravat stepped inside. Bridger breathed out a sigh of relief. His father’s solicitor, Harris, was who he had been waiting to see. Well, they had both been waiting, but he couldn’t say whether his father remembered Harris was coming or not.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen,” Harris greeted, breezing over to where his father sat huddled like a sickly child. “How are you today, Mr. Darrow?”

Harris was, from Bridger’s observation, his father’s sole friend. Friend was perhaps generous. Mr. Darrow had never met a person he couldn’t dress down, insult, and alienate. Harris just had the intestinal fortitude for it, and, of course, being a solicitor, he was paid to endure.

“Eh,” Mr. Darrow grunted, shrugging.

“His nurse is in the village,” said Bridger. “But he should be returning shortly. I’ll stay to dinner, my brother will be joining us, and then I’m afraid I must be on to Pressmore in the morning. I trust that’s enough time for us to discuss the current situation.”

Harris rested his hand on the back of Mr. Darrow’s chair and pivoted, frowning. “Your brother left in a hurry this morning. He claimed to have urgent business exactly there, at Pressmore.”

A crust of frost hardened around Bridger’s heart. “Did he, indeed?”

“A wedding, he said, and a negotiation with a friend, Lane Richmond.”

“I see.” Bridger tried not to sneer. “And did my brother at least have the courtesy to provide his ledgers for us to look over?”

“He did not.”

That block of ice in his chest melted, replaced by an inferno. Bridger had come from London to their home for the express purpose of having a meeting between him, his brother, and their father’s solicitor. Bridger sank back down into the chair near the window. “And how bad is it? Don’t spare my feelings.”

Harris turned a bleak, sad-eyed expression toward the back of his father’s head. He went to the desk and, reaching beyond the mess of empty medicine bottles, pulled a worn, brown leather book from the heaped shelf. Cracking open the ledger, he placed it on the desk, spinning it toward Bridger.

Mr. Darrow grumbled and retreated into the swaddle of blankets. “No reading, not today, your books are too fanciful, son. Full of nonsense.”

Harris cleared his throat softly. “To start, I would suggest dismissing half of the staff. The priority is keeping your father in good health for as long as possible, but I must be plain, Bridger, and admit that I fear what will happen when the estate’s management falls to your brother. He has already taken certain liberties with your father’s accounts, and I understand there are several debtors eager to collect.”

“Christ,” Bridger swore, closing his eyes. It was worse than he thought. He knew Pimm was out of control, but he thought he could at least handle staying at Fletcher, looking after their father, and keeping out of trouble. A child could manage it, but apparently not the Darrow heir, Paul, called Pimm since childhood. The figures washed over Bridger like a black tide, the pitiful income from the estate tenants

nowhere near enough to patch the hemorrhage caused by Pimm's wild spending.

I should have saved more of my own money. I should have returned sooner.

It would only get worse when their father was gone.

That black tide of ink changed to one of regret.

"This is my fault," Bridger murmured, pinching the bridge of his nose, his other hand curling into a tight fist. Just a week earlier, at an overcrowded poetry salon in the West End, a friend had been kind enough to inform him of a rumor flying about town. His brother, Pimm, had gotten a young unmarried woman from Bath with child. When he had been in Bath—and for what reason, only God knew, but he had gone—he acted like an animal, and the woman's family had been furious. Threats-of-bodily-harm furious. But it was patched up now, his friend told him; some kind benefactor had interceded, paid the family a generous sum, and allowed Pimm to live and philander another day.

There had been relief, of course, but part of him wished Pimm had received the full brunt of the consequences, been forced to marry and settle down. He never did, and if Bridger swooped in now to save the estate, he never would. Bridger's gaze traveled to his father, who was whispering to himself.

"Steps from disaster, then," Bridger said, shaking his head.

"That's about the long and short of it, yes," Harris replied, not without a sympathetic tone. Harris had been around for so long he was practically an uncle. Bridger trusted him, but what was one solicitor's diligence pitted against a man hell-bent on self-destruction? Pimm was going to drag them all down if Bridger didn't put a stop to it.

"There isn't any mysterious fortune I should know about, is there?" Harris laughed.

“Certainly not.”

“A wealthy young lady in your very near future?”

“No, nothing like that, either.” Indeed, that delicate ship was blown clear across the ocean after his last bungling attempt at courtship. He would be lucky if the Applethwaite girl even acknowledged him the next time they were in proximity. Maybe he should not have been so quick to dismiss the young woman who approached him at the poetry salon. What was her name? Martha? Mary? Bridger had to admire her courage, for he, too, was a person who sometimes threw caution and propriety to the wind to pursue his desires. He also had to admire her beauty; he had never before seen a woman with such raw intelligence sparkling in her eyes. Ah well, such thoughts were a distraction; that audacious young woman was certainly not wealthy enough to tempt him into a hasty marriage. For if she had a fortune, she would have used it to publish her terrible novel.

It was best to stay the course and move forward with his current plan. Bridger managed a dry chuckle. “I suppose, like a real fool, I’m betting it all on a book.”

Fanciful nonsense, his father would call it.

Harris cocked a brow. “Oh? Then the business in London is going well?”

“It will be,” Bridger assured him. “I’ve just acquired a promising manuscript, something very forthright, modern, and I’m convinced it will be popular. The writer is new, which is a risk, but a young talent well cultivated is always worth pursuing. It isn’t a mysterious fortune falling out of the sky, but I won’t let my family’s future slip away without a fight.”

He glanced at his father, who was unmoving and silent. Bridger felt the ghost of his mother lingering about them, her sweetness haunting the halls of Fletcher like a

whisper of fading ladies' perfume. She had been so good to them, gentle and indulgent, which exacerbated his father's wrath—boys were carved into men with strict standards and beatings, or so Mr. Darrow believed.

Harris took a few steps toward him and clapped Bridger on the shoulder. "That is encouraging to hear, very encouraging. I should tell you, before your father became ill, he made certain sentimental statements. Sentimental for him, anyway. He had regrets about the way things were with you boys, and I know for certain he wished he had taken a firmer hand."

Bridger stared at his father. A firmer hand? What other kind did Mr. Darrow have? He had never been permissive nor understanding. He had never expressed pride in either of his sons, not when Bridger went to fight in France, not when he returned, alive but rattled to his core, not when he took over his mentor's publishing business. And still, Bridger was here, and he would save them all while his brother swaggered off to beg for money he didn't deserve to cover debts that were entirely unnecessary.

That reminded him: Lane Richmond. His brother wasn't away trying to swindle money from just anyone, but from the kindest man in England. Lane was, and Bridger thought this with all due fondness for his best friend, a hopelessly soft man. Newborn puppies had harder edges.

"I agree, Harris, that we should keep a smaller staff," said Bridger, tugging on the bottom of his waistcoat once more, threatening to unravel the threads there, a spike of panic rising in his chest. He had to reach Pressmore before Pimm did more damage to the family's reputation. And Lane! Sweet, naïve Lane...he had to be protected, always, but specifically now as he stepped into married life. "I trust you will make the appropriate changes but do keep me apprised. If all goes well, my brother will return here within a fortnight and stay where he is told to stay while I get our affairs in order."

Harris looked down at the floor and sighed as if Bridger had just recalled a meandering but rather pleasant dream.

“And what about you, Harris?” asked Bridger. “When was the last time you were compensated?”

The solicitor shrugged his narrow shoulders, looking at Mr. Darrow and smiling as if to share a private joke. “I’m a man of my word. I promised your father I would look after things when his health started to decline, and I intend to do just that. I won’t abandon him now.”

Then perhaps you are a better man than I.

Harris drew in a long breath. “It will get worse before it gets better.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” Bridger replied, going to the door. Again, that same sad smile from Harris, not patronizing but almost.

“It’s a pity you have to face this all alone,” said Harris. “The steady companionship of a wife would make it all easier to endure. My own Mrs. Harris is such a comfort to me when life takes a plunge.”

Bridger paused at the door, impatient and slightly bothered. “My family stands at the brink, Harris, and you want me to worry about love?”

“Forgive me—being here, being with your father, it sends me into a maudlin state, yet it can’t be helped.” Harris shrugged and patted Mr. Darrow on the shoulder. Bridger’s father jumped, startled, and looked at Harris as if he hadn’t noticed him before. “Seeing his condition, it makes me think of all the regrets, large and small, that can haunt a man if he isn’t mindful of time passing him by.”

“I didn’t take you for a poet, Harris,” said Bridger. The two men by the desk looked suddenly small, distant, and his chest ached with vague longing. He didn’t understand it. He hated being around his father but leaving him was still difficult. It was fear, not premonition, he told himself, that insisted this would be the last time he saw the man alive. “I wish such notions were worth a farthing, and maybe they should be. If so, we might sell them, and put my anxieties to rest. As it stands, action is required. Do what you can for my father and leave Pimm to me.”

Harris didn’t stop him or argue, just bid him good day and gazed out the window.

In a dark mood, Bridger fended off the housekeeper’s pleas to stay; Fletcher Estate felt like it was collapsing in on him, threatening to trap him forever if he didn’t saddle up and leave. His departed mother’s sad eyes watched him from every vacant corner. If he lingered, he would say something he didn’t mean to someone who was only trying to be hospitable. In the war, Bridger had learned to master his outbursts; the Darrow men were cursed with short tempers, something his father considered a strength but Bridger knew in his heart to be a weakness. He had arrived from London tired, and he was tired as he started down the road once more. It didn’t matter; his best and only friend in the world was getting married, and Pimm was the exact sort of rascal that could single-handedly ruin an otherwise joyous event.

Bridger slammed his hat down on his head, lowered his chin, and drove his horse hard. Pebbles flew. The wind whistled and tore. The trees along the lane became a verdant blur. It didn’t escape his notice that it all felt a little too much like trying to escape—maybe Harris was right. Maybe he did need more than one friend, more than just his business; maybe he should have someone to love lest he end up like his father, alone and avoided, shut up in a house that slowly went dark, room by empty room.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:17 am

3

Crowns in my purse I have, and goods at home,

And so am come abroad to see the world.

The Taming of the Shrew, Act 1, Scene 2

The journey to Pressmore for Cousin Lane's wedding had been bumpy and arduous, a test of endurance for both Maggie's backside and her spirit. She had traveled with her aunt Eliza (Mrs. Burton), as well as Violet and Winny, who chatted genially about the countryside, the wedding, and Cousin Lane's enchanting bride in between painful spells of Aunt Eliza glaring a hole into the side of Maggie's cheek.

Her aunt had been understandably scandalized by Maggie's behavior at the salon. Mr. Darrow must have complained to someone, who passed it along to someone else, who gossiped to Aunt Eliza's favorite sewing companion, who of course told Eliza herself about Maggie's ill-fated literary ambush of Mr. Bridger Darrow. And during the tense carriage ride, while Aunt Eliza lectured about propriety, good sense, composure, and meekness, Maggie was busy formulating her next book.

It was about the satisfying downfall of a handsome yet irritating man in publishing who came to ruin over the glamorous and intelligent female writer he spurned. Whether Mr. Darrow knew it or not, he had made a powerful nemesis in Maggie, who refused to admit her behavior had been rude and out of line. It was just one conversation about a book, why all the fuss? Anyway. When they at last reached Pressmore, Aunt Eliza made sure to pull Maggie aside before she could disappear

into the far-spreading gardens of the estate.

Aunt Eliza wasn't the only one who had married well; in fact, it was just their mother that had chosen with her heart and not her "sensible" mind. Their father had been a navy man, not rich, not poor, but certainly no one of stature beside Aunt Eliza's husband, or the venerable gentleman that owned Pressmore. Eliza noticed her niece drinking in the scenery and breathing deeply of the luxurious gardens and found another chance to make her point.

"My sister did well for herself when she won Mr. Richmond, for he was even richer than my Mr. Burton," said Aunt Eliza, head high. "If you're going to expose yourself to public ridicule, at least do it in pursuit of a man richer than Mr. Bridger Darrow."

Maggie pursed her lips. "I was not pursuing him, not for marriage!"

"Mm." Her aunt's attention drifted to the house, as if she were only half listening. "Though he does possess a stately bearing. Some say the elder Darrow male is the more attractive of the two, but there is a refinement about the younger that I find pleasing. No matter, such considerations are not your concern. It is better to be seduced by the promise of security, not mere countenance."

Yes, I should content myself with the Mr. Gainswells of the world with their putrid feet.

Aunt Eliza smiled over her head at the house. "Would you not enjoy being mistress of such a wonderful place?"

I am, thought Maggie. I'm mistress of any expansive estate I want when I write it into being. She knew not to say as much.

"I will admit the gardens are most inspiring," she replied.

“Let them inspire you toward the sort of husband that might provide just such a home.” Aunt Eliza caught Maggie’s hand before she could run off. Winny and Violet waited off to the side while the Pressmore staff unloaded their luggage and carried it to the main house, which loomed like a confection dressed in sugared flowers. “Do not disappoint me again, Margaret. Your mother might not be here, but I am as good as her eyes and ears. I expect you to carry yourself like the refined young lady I am certain you can be. I don’t want to hear your name attached to even a whiff of scandal. If there are introductions to be made— if —I will inform you. Do we understand each other?”

Maggie swallowed hard. “We do, Aunt Eliza.”

Winny and Violet had gotten bored waiting for her and had disappeared by the time her aunt marched away with her slow, stately steps. Other coaches were arriving, filling the manicured drive, sending up goutts of dust. Maggie wandered a few steps toward the front door but changed her mind, taking the path leading right that circled the property. The gardens of Pressmore spread out around Maggie like a great patchwork skirt, a comely tangle of cow parsley and wild garlic flowers seamlessly blended into a more deliberate diamond grid of rosebushes and squared hedges. One could easily imagine Titania and Oberon striding through the ivy-covered arches, a retinue of fairies dancing behind them. In those same gardens, many summers ago, Violet had recited one of Puck’s speeches from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, fireflies twinkling around her like a starlight cloak, while her sisters and cousins lay about on blankets. *My mistress with a monster is in love*, it began. Maggie would never forget that night; she still recalled most of the lines.

She yearned for those times, when dreams felt catchable, and nobody spoke of husbands or fortunes or the bleak specter of spinsterhood.

While she walked, Maggie loosened the ribbons on her bonnet and let her shawl slide down to her elbows. While her eyes roamed over the hedges and flowers, her head

was in the clouds, performing loops around the high expectations Aunt Eliza had set for her, fixating instead on what to call this villain in her new novel. What would she name him? Nothing even rhymed with Bridger. Another black mark next to his idiotic name. It was a pity he was so good-looking. A true waste! Yet a handsome wastrel was a better villain than an ugly one; the twist of the knife was meaner with an Angelo or Iago type thought to be devilishly desirable.

Her sister Winny's sweet voice flooded her head: You mustn't let a silly grudge overtake you like this. Pressmore has all the light and grace of heaven itself!

And Winny was right, of course, but Maggie couldn't stop reliving her exchange with Mr. Darrow. She had received innumerable literary rejections already, but his reaction stung the worst. That she couldn't put her finger on why made the whole interaction more provoking. Bridger Darrow was stuck in her teeth like a piece of food; if only she could spit him out. But it was a good thing she didn't try to literally, for a figure appeared at the end of the path, moving swiftly toward her. She recognized her cousin Lane Richmond with his gorgeous head of coppery hair, boyish face, and the left sleeve of his coat pinned up to his shoulder. He had lost his arm in the war, though it hadn't changed anything about his optimistic demeanor.

As he came toward her, his forehead was wrinkled as if he were puzzling over something serious.

"Lane?" she called, not wanting to disturb him. He was a man on the cusp of marriage, and no doubt there were many details and arrangements cluttering up his thoughts. But as soon as he saw her, his frown vanished.

"Margaret! I was hoping you might have arrived. Come here to me!"

"I'm sure I look rumpled beyond recognition." Maggie laughed.

“No, no, cousin, you are as angelic as ever. Even the pitted roads couldn’t diminish your halo.” Lane took her by the hand, giving her an exuberant twirl. “Oh, but it has been too long.”

“Hardly six months,” she said, for they had spent Christmas together. Lane had been a balm for them all, for her father’s passing was still fresh then.

“I am hearing all sorts of naughty rumors about you,” he said, laughing and looping his arm through hers. “And yet I know you to be polite and restrained, which makes this gossip rather hard to believe. You must tell me the truth, and then I will be your staunch defender.”

“Is that why you looked troubled just now? Gossip? I hope not, I would never want to imperil your happiness.”

Lane paused, gazing off toward the west, where a trickle of carriages arrived. Pressmore could house some twenty-two or so guests, and would, with more attendees arriving the next day for the wedding itself and the evening masquerade. Those closest to Lane’s family would have the honor of staying at the estate for several days. “No, no,” he muttered, distracted. “That was business between gentlemen. Messy stuff, I’m afraid, but you have cleverly sidestepped my question, cousin. That will not do, you know. I must have your answer.”

Maggie’s brows shot up. “And what have you heard?”

“That you have forfeited your manners all over a ridiculous novel.”

“Have you ever known my stories to be ridiculous?” She gasped and drew back a step.

Lane hurried to correct himself, turning red. “Imaginative and adventurous, but not

ridiculous, no. But I have a certain image in my mind, conjured there since a tender age, of you in a corner, scribbling and pondering and getting ink all over yourself. And I remember your father would always come up with the best little tales and riddles to make us smile when someone skinned a knee or suffered an insult. If any of you ladies were to draw the eye of gossips, I assumed it would be Violet.”

That was a more than sensible assumption. They paused under a thick archway over the path winding around the house. There was much commotion and chaos from the carriages and arrivals, but Maggie ignored it, clutching Lane’s hands. “Everything you say is true. But the gossips are right—I have behaved quite badly. I don’t know how to explain it, but I haven’t been myself since Papa died. I put so much of him into this book, so many of his memories and experiences, that I can’t help but vigorously defend it, cherish it, want all the world to read it. It feels...it feels...” Maggie sighed and lowered her head, realizing she was more exhausted from the trip than she had thought. Her eyes filled with tears, but she pushed them back. “It feels like I can keep him alive this way.”

“And here I have gone and called you ridiculous,” said Lane softly. “It’s clear I’ve heard but a part of the story. And it also sounds as if you were not at all interested in causing a scene with my friend Mr. Darrow, but rather were moved in a moment of passion.”

Maggie’s sadness vanished. “I beg your pardon, your friend ?”

Confusion flitted across Lane’s face as he chuckled at her reaction. “Why, yes, my greatest friend in the world. Have I never mentioned him? We fought together in France; the man saved my life more than once. I’m sure I’ve talked about Bridger before.”

“Maybe you have, and maybe his name never piqued my interest, but now it absolutely does.” Maggie groaned. This was impossible! “Say right now that he is not

attending the wedding.”

Lane’s smile crumpled. “Margaret...”

“Lane.”

“Do not force me to lie.”

“Aunt Eliza has just made me swear to be good, made me promise to behave myself, and now I will be face-to-face with the rudest man in London again.”

Lane snorted. “That seems like somewhat of an exaggeration—”

“And everyone will be talking about us, which is all the more agitating! And Aunt Eliza will be watching me every moment, expecting me to tolerate it with perfect grace.”

“Or it could be a chance for reconciliation, even greater understanding. Bridger Darrow is usually quite sober in his judgments, a clear thinker, and not unreasonable—”

Maggie stumbled away, gripping her bonnet. “Lane, he called my book ‘overwrought.’ Not only that, but I’m also convinced he never even read past the opening chapter! That does not demonstrate reason or good judgment.”

“For certain, that is unkind, but it’s possible your style is simply not to his taste, or he was busy, distracted, if you prefer. He is often overrun trying to keep his brother in check,” said Lane. He reached for her, tugging her back into the shade beneath the arch. She could tell he was struggling to keep a straight face amidst her outburst. Perhaps she was being a touch dramatic. “And you couldn’t know this, but he has a history of, well, not handling women with the kind of delicacy they deserve. His

mother died when he was quite young, and with no sisters or feminine influence in his life, then the war, he has lacked a woman's perspective. Indeed, he's had several ill-fated courtships, one in particular went spectacularly awry."

"Courtships? You aren't trying to imply that he and I would—"

"No!" Lane barked with laughter, swiftly waving the thought away with his hand.

"No, God, no, simply saying—"

"Because that would be more ridiculous than anything I did at the salon, or any book I could devise—"

"No, Margaret, and in fact, I will do my best to see that you two are not seated near each other at any of our events, or rather, Ann will, because I don't have a mind for these things," said Lane. That did somewhat calm her. "And speaking of Ann, she is bound to attract far more gossip and scrutiny. Sadly, it seems to follow us wherever we go." Ann was his wife-to-be, a woman of style and intelligence that Maggie had liked the moment they met. Lane's eyes flitted to the drive, to the carriages, and for a moment he was far away, almost sad. Then he sniffed and shook off whatever troubling thought had descended. "Ann will be vexed to hear that you are under Aunt Eliza's watchful eye. She and Emilia have been desperate to see you for weeks now. Ann speaks of nothing else."

"Then, I will have my hands full trying to please both Aunt Eliza and Ann." She truly was glad to be at Pressmore and to be with her dear cousin. "I wish Papa could be here to witness your happiness and to lend his blessing to the match, but I will not dwell on it, or on my book, or anything that might make me sink lower in Aunt Eliza's estimations."

Briefly, Lane nodded along with her, but once more his eye snagged on the stretch of road behind her and the steady clouds of dirt that rose there. His gaze lingered there

so long, and his expression became so unreadable, that Maggie turned to see for herself. A rider had come charging up to the house, thrown his reins to a groom, and started across the lawn directly toward them. It took her a moment to recognize the man.

“That might prove difficult,” Lane murmured. “Unless you intend to hide in the wisteria.”

Maggie didn’t even have a moment to collect her wits before Mr. Bridger Darrow was upon them. Even sunburned and covered in road dust he cut a fine figure; Maggie wouldn’t allow herself to see it. He moved decisively, striding toward them with perfect confidence. She moved to Lane’s side just as Bridger Darrow dipped under the archway, noticed her presence, recoiled as if stumbling upon a nest of snakes, and bowed.

“Bridger!” Lane greeted him warmly, then glanced in Maggie’s direction. “I believe you’ve recently been acquainted with my cousin Miss Margaret Arden.”

With satisfaction, she watched the word “cousin” hit him like a slap. To his credit, he recovered neatly, schooling his face into a neutral, wooden expression before biting out a “Oh, I see, indeed. How do you do?”

“How do you do?” Maggie curtsied, offering nothing.

He tossed his head a little, ruffling his dark brown hair, as if that were an answer, then turned fully to Lane. “I did want to speak with you, Lane, about a matter of great urgency.” Darrow’s eyes flicked to her impatiently. “In private, madam, if that’s at all possible.”

“I’ll leave you, gentlemen,” Maggie said smoothly, coolly, before Lane could stammer out something else. She backed away, knowing the house well and hoping to

enter by the veranda door to avoid all the guests milling about in the foyer while valets guided them this way and that. If she could turn into a spider and climb up to the windows, she would do that instead, anything to leave Darrow's chilly aura. "It's a fine day to sit in the sunshine and write another overwrought book."

The little twitch in Darrow's jaw pleased her very much.

His old friend Lane Richmond was visibly satisfied with himself.

"You deserved that," said Lane, chuckling and touching Bridger lightly on the shoulder. "She is a sensitive creature, you know, even if she tries to hide it, and particularly protective of her work. I would scold you further for insulting my cousin to her face, but you already look like you're suffering enough."

Bridger brushed aside the desire to defend himself. There would be time for that later. What mattered now was making certain his brother, Pimm, hadn't coaxed money out of Lane to cover his many shameful debts. He had ridden his horse half to death to make good time, and he allowed himself to consider that he had even beat his brother to Pressmore. When was the last time he had even seen Pimm Darrow in person? Christmas, maybe, when their paths had crossed briefly in London. Pimm kept to himself, or rather, kept to the gambling hells and brothels that still tolerated his presence, and emerged out of the city's iniquitous shadows when he needed something from their father or, rarely, Bridger.

"Pimm was here," said Lane, crushing Bridger's hopes. He turned toward the back of the estate, going the way Miss Arden had fled. By and by, as they walked, they entered the eye of the storm. Pavilions were going up on the back lawn, strategically placed to give the best view of the pond, farther down the sweeping hill. Staff buzzed and conferred, carrying linens, chairs, lanterns, and all sorts to every corner of the estate. Typically, Lane wouldn't indulge in such things, but it was extremely like him to indulge his pretty wife-to-be. Her tastes were extravagant and specific, and the

staff would see them carried out to the letter.

“I was afraid of that.” Bridger squeezed both temples with one hand. “Whatever he asked of you, whatever he wanted, tell me you refused him.”

Lane hesitated, glancing at his feet and then at the sky. Darkness and depression glanced off of Lane like the wind-scattered leaves dancing down the tented pavilions. It never stuck. But here, now, just before his wedding, an unusual, serious wrinkle dented his friend’s forehead.

“I did refuse him,” said Lane, at last. “With difficulty. I...forgive me. I enjoy helping where I can, Bridger, and it isn’t a matter of the money itself, we could afford it, but, well, I just thought it best to let Pimm resolve the matter himself. Is that terribly selfish?”

“No, my friend, you did the right thing,” Bridger replied, gratified. “I didn’t endanger my horse getting here over nothing. I wanted to counsel you toward just such a decision.”

“Jolly good, then. Blazes, I felt awful about it, but he didn’t seem too angry at me. Or I’ve seen him angrier. He mentioned another plan to shore things up financially, and I wished him well on it.”

Another plan? Bridger didn’t like the sound of that. “Whatever the problem is this time, I’ll handle it.”

Lane’s frown eased as his fiancée floated out of the French doors attached to the back of the main house. She was like a beacon flashing across the sea, singularly beautiful, with full black hair and a poised, dancier posture that many women coveted but few cultivated naturally. And Lane’s eyes followed her, clung to her, his chest rising and falling faster just at the sight of Ann.

With great effort, Lane switched his attention back to their discussion. “I’m surprised to hear you say that. He said the family ledgers were, are—”

“—under control,” Bridger finished for him decisively. He knew Lane too well, certain that if he gave him the full picture of their ruined finances, Lane would step in and be the hero. He couldn’t let his friend do that. Lane had saved him too many times, lost his arm doing it in France, and there was only so much one man should owe another. It would shatter Bridger’s heart to feel yet more indebted. Things had gotten out of hand while Bridger was in France and worsened when he returned and settled in London, and while he should have been able to rely on his brother to behave sensibly while he was gone, that wasn’t reality. No, this was his mess to clean up. Starting with...“Pimm has endangered our legacy with his recklessness, but Father’s solicitor is confident we have time to avoid disaster. Now I just need to keep my brother on a tight leash.” Bridger grumbled under his breath. “If I can even find the hot-blooded hound to slip on the lead...”

“Try the Sapphire Library, it has the best brandy,” said Lane. “In all seriousness, it’s good to hear you have things managed.” He was gazing at Ann again, a subtle blush creeping up his neck. Bridger wondered if he had ever seemed this way to someone else, utterly besotted, so passionate for a woman that it was impossible to hide it. No, there had been fleeting feelings, maybe a genuine attraction, but never this sort of consuming attachment. It looked good on Lane, being lost in love, so much so it almost made Bridger want the same thing.

“Not just managed,” Bridger assured him, with confidence he didn’t entirely feel. They continued toward the veranda and Ann, who was bent at the waist, an unrolled schematic held up for her by a valet. He had to admit, it was a bewitching aspect for her, for any woman, to be displaying such competence and control. Lane deserved to get lost in this moment. Bridger had to sell him on the fitness of the Darrow finances; it wouldn’t do to have his friend overtaken by worries during his wedding. “I’ve acquired a promising manuscript; one I think even John would appreciate.”

John Dockarty had been his mentor in publishing. Their friendship began a decade earlier, when a then-seventeen-year-old Bridger had written to Dockarty in London, praising a collection of stories he had edited and published. Their correspondence continued, with John always pushing for Bridger to leave behind the regiment and pursue his true passion, publishing. He didn't need to push much harder after Bridger returned from France, worn and desperate for a change. It was John who urged him to sell his commission and use the money to start anew, and John who, childless and unmarried, left Dockarty & Co. to Bridger when a fever took him suddenly.

John had been an exacting man, precise and prickly, and Bridger had always published under his intense guidance. Now that John was gone, he felt immense pressure to uphold the standards of Dockarty & Co., and to make his old mentor proud.

"Would I know the writer?" asked Lane.

"No," Bridger laughed. "You hate to read."

"Well!"

"You do. I don't begrudge you for it, though your cousin might," said Bridger, needling.

"I like her stories," said Lane. "You would, too, if you had any sense."

"Ha! There we are destined to disagree. This is a new writer," said Bridger, keen to steer the conversation back to his plans. He needed Lane to trust that the Darrow future was secure in his hands. It would be just like Pimm to keep begging and bothering Lane until the softhearted man relented. "G. R. Neeve is his name, and I'm telling you, Lane, I knew within pages that it would be something special, something sensational."

“You really believe in this,” Lane remarked, studying him. Maybe, thought Bridger, when he talked about this work, he took on that same glow as Lane when he beheld his wife-to-be. “How did you come into possession of the work?”

“Quite out of the clear blue,” said Bridger. Ann had caught sight of them and paused her work to gift them with a bright smile before excusing herself to hurry in their direction. He could practically hear his friend’s heart beating faster. “It arrived on my desk not long after we buried John. I needed it, you know, that little burst of hope.”

“Yes, Ann and I were worried about you.”

“Not unwarranted. My father is in his decline and after losing John...” Bridger blew out a hard breath. He didn’t like to remember that span of months. He was better now, more solid, but it felt like those waves of panic and despair could reappear with any new failure. “I wasn’t myself. And then, like magic, that book arrives, like a miracle worked at the perfect time.”

Lane’s forehead was as wrinkled as a bloodhound’s as he grunted and pouted at Bridger. “First John and now your father. Are you certain you don’t need my help?”

“I’m sure.”

His friend sighed and turned back toward his fiancée.

Ann was motioning at something. Her gaze had been pulled higher, toward the upper levels of the house, and she shaded her eyes against the sun. Then, she pointed, and again, as if at individual birds in a passing flock. Some of the staff stopped their business to watch, gasping and giggling. Lane and Bridger took a few quick strides away from the arches, mimicking Ann’s pose. Against the harsh glare of the sun, it took Bridger a moment to realize that the faded white wings fluttering down from the house were, in fact, pages. Dozens of them. Hundreds. They were soaring out of an

unseen window, caught by the breeze and carried this way and that across the property. One, however, floated down toward Bridger, landing in his outstretched hand with what felt like divine purpose.

Like a miracle worked at the perfect time.

Chap. 4, it read, and then:

Honor and horror walking arm in arm, boots sliding through salt water and blood. Fallon's mind conjured Nelson and Wellesley, Duncan and Howe and Jervis, all the undeniably great men. They loomed and lingered. They watched and judged. By God, were they acting as great men now? With Howard's arm hanging in pale shreds, with the life pouring out of him, with the bit going into his mouth and the surgeon hefting the steel, was this fit to remember? Fit to paint?

When all of this was washed away and he was home again and safe, how would he recount it? Fallon imagined his life as a library, and this volume of feckless gore nestled among the rest, a blood-red binding, a gaping sore. It was not a book he would choose to read, and yet here it was, his life.

And poor Howard. Poor, poor Howard. Fallon forced himself to look, look and remember, as the surgeon's blade came down, bringing with it the neat crunch of bone and yet another spurt of hot blood.

Bridger lowered the crinkled page, realizing he had been holding in a breath. Where did this come from? he wondered, and then: I must have more.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:17 am

4

What fates impose, that men must needs abide;

It boots not to resist both wind and tide.

Henry VI, Part 3, Act 4, Scene 3

Maggie watched her life's work fly out the window in mute horror.

"Don't just stand there!" Violet was shouting, climbing over the desk in front of the window with her skirts held in one fist. "Help me catch the blighters!"

"Get down from there at once, Violet." Aunt Eliza stood apart from the girls, rigid as a statue. She stammered her next words, perhaps betraying her indifferent nature, perhaps hinting that she did feel guilty for what was transpiring. "If you tumble out of that window, your mother will never forgive me! Violet! I demand you get down from there; someone could see you!"

"Oh, but it is hopeless!" Winny hopped up and down near the table, then reached over and yanked Violet's hem. "We should hurry to the garden, I think—it looks like most of the pages have fallen there."

"Got one!" cried Violet, shutting the window, and victoriously crawling back inside, holding up exactly one of the hundreds of escapees.

Winny made a soft, sad sound, tucking her knuckles under her chin. With her bonnet

removed, her tumble of dark ginger curls sat heavily around her neck. “It’s...Well, it’s a start.”

Violet glanced between Eliza and Maggie, then cried, “To the gardens!”

Her sisters erupted into playful giggles, chasing each other out the grand, tall door and into the corridor. Aunt Eliza swiveled toward them, lifting a graceful hand, but then decided against following. She had not given up on molding Maggie into an elegant lady, but apparently Violet and Winny were a problem for another day. Maggie stared after her sisters. It wouldn’t do to hurl accusations at her aunt, even if she wanted terribly to do just that.

The good mood granted to her by getting a little jab in at Mr. Darrow had lasted until she reached their guest quarters, where she discovered her sisters at the far window, watching and whispering as the carriages arrived and off-loaded their passengers, and her aunt Eliza going to the opposite window. It had felt like time slowed down as Aunt Eliza reached across the unpacked, unsupervised copy of her manuscript, the many pages stacked neatly on the desk, beautiful and undisturbed, innocent as the gangly fledgling bird before a gust of wind shoots it out of the nest. And then, with that same strange slowness to time, her aunt jerked up the casement, remarking mildly, “The room could do with some air.” The room was stuffy, but that was hardly an excuse!

Maggie felt cold all over. There was another copy of *The Killbride* at her home, but it did not contain her most recent changes and rewrites. Not only that, she had just created a mess for the staff to address while also preparing for Lane and Ann’s elaborate celebrations and masquerade.

No, she hadn’t done it, Aunt Eliza had. If an apology had ever escaped her aunt’s lips, Maggie had not been present to hear it.

When their eyes met, her aunt had the grace to blanch with embarrassment. “Oh, Margaret. I assure you it was an accident.”

“Of course.” Colder, colder, she was turning to ice. She was already on Aunt Eliza’s bad side; she didn’t dare accuse her of scattering the manuscript on purpose. But still. Maggie felt her skin hardening into a shell; her hands ached, remembering the cramps from copying out hundreds of pages.

“The staff here are competent, I’m sure the pages will be found in no time at all.” Her aunt’s voice had the tremulous pitch of someone trying to soothe themselves. Maggie heard a quiet sound out in the hall, and then things got worse. Her other aunt, and the great lady of Pressmore, Mildred Richmond, entered the chamber, leaving her lady’s maid out in the corridor. Her aunts both moved with the deliberate slowness of a person picking their way across hazardous ice. Mrs. Richmond—Aunt Mildred—swanny and beautiful like Aunt Eliza, announced herself with a withering huff.

“I’m told this is the origin of our little issue,” said Aunt Mildred. An intricate lace was draped over her shoulders. She had the tight, pinched face of a woman who had spent most of her life disapproving of one thing or another. She and Maggie shared the same deep-golden hair and bright blue eyes, though Aunt Mildred’s were more prone to narrowing.

Maggie glanced nervously between her two aunts. Did she mean the exploding manuscript or Maggie herself?

“And to enter my house without so much as a greeting,” continued Aunt Mildred, aghast. Maggie shied at that; it was rather rude. “I had heard you were somewhat changed since our last encounter, Margaret, but this is excessive.”

“Oh, sister,” said Eliza, going to Mildred and all but collapsing against her with

relief. “It is encouraging to have your support in this matter, for try as I might, Margaret seems determined to stretch my patience to its breaking point.”

Aunt Mildred observed Maggie, the window, and what was left of her book piled messily by the sill. “The staff is in an uproar, my dears. Explain yourselves!”

“A regrettable accident,” Eliza answered, withdrawing and folding her hands. She had also neatly sidestepped responsibility. “A window, a breeze...Well, you see, I was just about to scold our niece for bringing her book with her. But we must try to find the best in the situation—after all, now she will not be consumed by distractions better put aside.”

Maggie said nothing. How could she set aside the one thing that made her feel like herself? Evidently perturbed by her silence, Eliza’s gaze settled on her, glossy with emotion. “I sometimes wonder if I should resent your father. He encouraged this in you, he prepared you for a world that does not exist.”

“That’s not fair,” Maggie replied, starting forward.

Aunt Mildred heaved a tremendous sigh. “And yet, her mother.”

“No, you’re right, sister, you’re too right. Some blame must go to the mother, too. You have no inkling of what it was like watching your mother put love before duty, her own heart before the happiness of our entire family. There were wealthy men who wanted her, and we watched her spurn them and wait and wait, not knowing if all of us would be on the streets due to her selfishness.” She crossed toward Maggie, carefully taking her hands. “And she was not also pursuing, to her detriment, employment! Dear niece, your reputation is all you have in this world, and that reputation will determine your future. I merely wish to protect you.” And here she glanced at Aunt Mildred, who seemed frozen. “We both wish to protect you, protect your happiness.”

“One cannot exaggerate the joy of knowing comfort and stability,” Mildred added. There was a distance in her eyes, or a sadness, that stirred pity in Maggie’s heart. Mildred plucked idly at the glamorous ring on her left hand. “Mr. Richmond was not a soft man nor an affectionate one, but we had our moments of understanding. And he gave me this”—she gestured to the walls around them—“and my children, so how could one possibly complain?”

Aunt Eliza flinched. Their shared pain was evident, and even studied expressions couldn’t conceal it. They had married in the expected way, and her mother hadn’t, and where the most suffering had taken place was now plain.

Maggie didn’t feel guilty, exactly, but ashamed, perhaps, afraid that she had already disappointed her family and her sisters. It made her lightheaded to think Violet and Winny would live to resent her like this, to speak of her in such a cold way. The family mythology had always decreed that Aunt Mildred was ecstatically in love with the wealthy and aloof Mr. Richmond. Now that she considered it, she had never seen him smile or laugh. She had, however, seen Lane attempt to make him do both of those things frequently, to no success. Maggie had been ignorant, until that moment, of the reality that diverted from the cherished narrative. And so, she fell quiet momentarily, trying to compose herself, aware that their ideas of happiness were nothing alike. “I’m afraid the pages have already flown out the window. What if everyone knows the book is mine?” she asked softly. “I was already the target of whispers. So much for that reputation.”

“The staff will search diligently,” said Aunt Mildred, bustling over to them. Her face softened, though only a little. Maggie felt outnumbered, trapped. “I daresay there cannot be too many of those pages with your name upon them, mm?”

Maggie nodded, hanging her head. “Just the first page.”

“Then we shall find it,” Mildred declared, as if it were easy, as if that page might not

be halfway to Dover by now or already in someone's possession. "The rest we will explain away, and you must put it out of your mind. People must know the Margaret Arden who doesn't always have her head stuck in a book. I'm sure Ann can be relied upon to guide you; she excels at finding husbands."

Maggie turned away, crestfallen.

There is no Margaret Arden without books.

Aunt Eliza let go of her and raised her head, smoothing her palms down her skirt before striding to the open door with her sister. "The journey has left me fatigued, I fear; collect your sisters and see that they are not making a nuisance of themselves."

"Let me show you the new draperies in the library," Mildred was saying, looping her elbow with Eliza's.

"No, no, I'm simply too tired. Later, sister, the draperies will not take offense."

The sisters laughed softly with each other. As she watched them go, Maggie sank into a defeated sadness. They were probably right. She needed to consider what might befall them if Aunt Eliza withdrew her charity and left them without a roof or sustenance. And she could imagine that they must have been boiling when her mother kept them in precarious wondering over their own fates. The three sisters—Emmeline (Maggie's mother), Eliza, and Mildred—did not share a uniformly warm relationship. Eliza and Mildred remained close, but Maggie had always detected a frostiness between her mother and her aunts, particularly a rift between her mother and Mildred.

Her mother was a disappointment, clearly, just like Maggie was in danger of becoming.

Mamma had married for love, and how had that turned out? Three precocious

daughters with few marriage prospects, and all of them relying on Eliza's aid. Maggie would find it easier to disregard her aunts' practical marriage approach if it wasn't paying for Mosely Cottage and putting food on their table.

The chill in Maggie's body dissipated as she hurried out into the corridor and down the grand stairs, retracing her steps to the veranda and then the garden. She wouldn't recover the pages of her book standing there wallowing in misery, and one of Winny's optimistic theories of life offered itself up as her walk became a trot—whenever her sister encountered a misfortune, she murmured (or delicately swore, in her eminently innocent way): “Lost bonnet!” Meaning, one might be walking down the lane when a strong gust carried your bonnet away. Chasing into the field after it could spare one from being run over by a carriage or bitten by a stray dog. In this way, a small setback prevented greater sadness.

Through gritted teeth, Maggie tried to greet the staff and guests with a taut smile. Yes, in fact, it was an excellent thing that her most precious possession had been scattered like so much sand! How convenient! How pleasing! She didn't know how Winny stayed cheerful all the time; it was exhausting, practically impossible.

Maggie rushed outside to find the staff of Pressmore, as Mildred promised, in an uproar, running here and there, trying to swat pages out of trees and recapture them from the tops of tents, battling the wind and chaos as if a swarm of locusts had been freed on the property. Forget the lost bonnet, her mood was black and there was no remedy for it.

She recognized Ann Graddock, Lane's fiancée, swiping pages out of a topiary with a long-handled butterfly net. Laughing, the woman scooped up an errant piece of parchment and turned to hold it up for the staff to see. There was a subdued cheer. She then noticed Maggie poised on the veranda steps like a criminal, somewhat hunched and smallish, attempting to meld with the verge.

Don't see me, don't see me, don't see me...

"I suppose this is your doing?" Ann was already navigating the celebratory tents placed just outside the south lawn of the house. "If this is your attempt at a wedding gift, I respectfully decline. I do love a chase through the hedge maze, but a more orderly treasure hunt is requested next time. And with due warning! My, but it is windy today."

Maggie sighed, cheeks a mortified red as she embraced Ann. Only someone as relaxed and happy as Ann Graddock could take this aggravation in stride. Fishing out a few crumpled, dirtied pages from the net, Ann presented them to Maggie with a wry smile.

"Oh, but there won't be a next time because your wedding will be perfect, you and Lane are utterly perfect, and you will live happily forever, despite this little..." Maggie held up the pages and shook her head. "It is my Aunt Eliza's doing, if you can believe it. Violet and Winny left my manuscript by the window and Eliza thought the room could use some air. I am so sorry, Ann, I know this is the last thing you need while preparations are underway. Whatever I can do to put this right, just say the word. I am yours to command."

Ann kissed her on both cheeks, slinging the butterfly net over one shoulder gallantly. "I tease, Maggie, I only tease, for I would much rather have your words raining down on us than the wet of a summer shower. In fact, it adds to the whimsy of the masquerade, I think. Perhaps I can give out prizes to whomever recovers the most pages! What an amusement!" Ann lowered her voice, threading her arm through Maggie's and pulling her toward the hedges east of the veranda and pavilions. A few stray pages had gotten wedged in the branches there, and Maggie, sheepish, quickly plucked them out of the greenery. "And I already have an inkling of who might win that prize. Shall I tell you?"

A mischievous gleam brightened Ann's already beguiling eyes. From within the hedge maze, she heard her sisters laughing uncontrollably as they tried to catch flying pages. The combination twisted Maggie's stomach into knots. "Why do I mistrust that look of yours?"

"So, you cannot guess? Is this a new development, then?" Ann's inky eyelashes fluttered. "How delicious! And to think, my own nuptials could encourage even more love into the world."

"I can't pretend to know what you mean," said Maggie, exasperated.

With a conspiratorial glance around, Ann urged her closer, her voice a salacious whisper. "I have overheard just now a conversation between my Lane and one Mr. Bridger Darrow. Do you know him?"

Maggie groaned.

"That...is not the reaction I was anticipating," Ann replied, laughing. "How could you respond so to a man utterly enraptured with your words?"

"My what?" Maggie almost screeched it, forgetting herself. Ladylike. Graceful. She was to be no more obtrusive or offensive than a dainty cough into a silk glove. "No, Ann, you're mistaken, you must be. That man despises my book, I've heard it from him directly. And I have already spoken with Lane, who assured me you would do your best to keep me far, far away from the awful Mr. Darrow."

Ann took a step back, frowning. "It is very droll for Lane to say such and think he can speak for me, but I have every intention of pushing you and Mr. Darrow together, not apart."

Maggie hugged the retrieved pages to her chest, heedless of the ink that might smear

onto her frock. God, help me. This wasn't happening. Mr. Darrow was the villain of this wedding, not the hero. "No, Ann, you must listen to me. I have no interest in Mr. Darrow, and we have already had two unbearable interactions that are better off forgotten. Besides, Aunt Eliza says he is not worth marrying, and I dare not disappoint her again. She is single-minded—I must make a lucrative match and set a fine example for my sisters, even if I must marry Mr. Gainswell and his disgusting feet."

"Slow down, Maggie, there is no need for such agitation. Though I must say, your aunt's objections are surprising—for if Mr. Darrow is poor then I do not know of it," said Ann. She crooked a thoughtful finger next to her chin, brows furrowed with thought. "Lane has never indicated he is impoverished, and we tell each other everything. Or almost everything. Hmm. Mr. Darrow presents himself well. The family estate, Fletcher, is reported to be ample and in good condition." Ann turned away from the hedges and walked slowly back toward the veranda; she never did anything without looking like a queen in a procession while she did it. Maggie chased after her, remembering to hide the pages at her side. Ladylike, graceful, dainty cough, etc.

"Regardless, Ann, I beg you—"

"And"—Ann drew out the word theatrically, playfully—"a crucial thought occurs to me just now, as I remember that you want most ardently to set things right, mm, the ardent Miss Arden? Let me throw you together, let me try—the matter of your work will come up naturally in conversation, and I feel confident things will progress from there. That would make me very happy, my friend, exceedingly happy, and the pages scattered all across Pressmore will vex me not a bit."

Maggie began dragging her feet. She had told Ann to command her. Still, a woman had her pride. A small, annoying little voice insisted that maybe Mr. Darrow had undergone a change of heart, or perhaps a specific passage had moved him and

altered his opinion of the work. No! He had been insulting and cruel to her face with his own stupid, handsome face, exposed her to the insatiable gossips of London, and made her swear a silent vow that anyone else on Earth could publish *The Killbride* but not him. Anyone but him.

While Ann handed off the butterfly net to a member of staff and walked inside the house, Maggie planted herself defiantly on the steps, raising her chin. “You will not change my mind about him, Ann. I am determined to hate him.”

Ann swished her lips to the side. “Even if he has high praise for your prose?”

“Well...”

“Oh-ho-ho!”

Maggie scrunched her nose. “No! Yes! Yes, even if he has high praise for my book. It is all over and decided; he has made his first impression, and it was a bad one.”

“Hearts and minds can change and mend,” said Ann, sweet. “Come, Maggie, won’t you let me try?”

Winnie and Violet emerged at last from the maze. Combined, they had recovered perhaps a dozen or so lost pages. God only knew how many remained in the nooks and crannies of stately, sprawling Pressmore. It would take an age to find them all, and she really did owe Ann. Well, Aunt Eliza did, but Aunt Eliza was not making herself available for amends. And really, Maggie ought to have at least wound a few pieces of twine around the pages before cramming them into her luggage.

She felt tingly and hot from her scalp to her toes; she vastly preferred the bracing cold of before.

Reluctantly, Maggie recalled the way Mr. Darrow had looked at her at their first meeting, the intensity in his flinty eyes, the almost vulpine sharpness of his features, and the sensuous fall of his thick, dark hair. It was almost enough to make her want to listen, to make her want to try. But the chilly snap of disparagement in his voice returned to her, too, shattering the rosily conjured image.

The heroine could sprout wings and fly to America, for all I care, and it would still not interest me.

Maggie looked down at the pages of *The Killbride* in her hands. She loved this work, this book, every word chosen carefully, every scene meticulously devised. Often, she pictured her father reading the completed story, watching the play of excitement, joy, and interest move over his weathered face as he devoured the chapters. Bent at her desk, ignoring the cramps in her fingers and the coldness that spread through her under the shawl, fighting the dwindling candlelight, Maggie had poured her memories of her father's story into the book, first to make him proud, then in his beloved memory.

A tremor passed through her hand as she stared down at the pages. What would Papa want for her? Love, certainly, but not with a man who couldn't understand and nurture her brilliance. Even if, for some reason, Mr. Darrow had a change of heart, the words were said, the poison inflicted, and the damage already done.

"Do as you like, Ann, devise your most diabolical romantic schemes. But I tell you now—set aside loving him, I shall never even like him. He could offer to publish every book I ever dream of writing, and he would still not interest me."

5

O, how this spring of love resembleth

The uncertain glory of an April day,

Which now shows all beauty of the sun,

And by and by a cloud takes all away.

The Two Gentlemen of Verona, Act 1, Scene 3

The next morning, Bridger was impressed to discover that his brother had dried himself out long enough to attend the wedding of Lane Richmond and Ann Graddock. Until then, he had eluded Bridger so completely that he had to consider that Pimm had given up and fled Pressmore. Stymied, Bridger had, as Lane suggested, found his way to the Sapphire Library, but not to indulge in the very good brandy. Instead, he gathered up the dozen or so pages of loose manuscript that he had hunted down around the estate and tried to collate them into a sensible order. Then, he read. In fact, he read the pages repeatedly, growing angrier with each pass. When the pages had first shot out of the window above them, Lane had watched him devour the words with a delighted grin.

“It’s obvious, man, isn’t it?” he had asked. “Those belong to my cousin Margaret.”

Yes, it was obvious. Obvious and bothersome.

Bridger was certain the book from Margaret Arden that had landed on his desk in London was little more than a literary whimper. Her talent was present but unrefined. Within five pages, he lost interest and set it aside. But now...Hmm. It rankled him. Perhaps what Miss Arden had said at that too-hot salon was true—once the drawing room drama concluded, the book actually went somewhere. He refused to revise his opinion entirely, but was willing, reluctantly, to admit there was promise here, were the right editor to work with the young lady.

If he could get control of his brother, there was a chance he could be that guide for her. Lane described her as an intelligent and reasonable woman, and with time, they could overcome their shaky start. It was a nice enough thought, but after failing to locate his brother and realizing he might have been too hasty about Miss Arden's work, he tossed through a sleepless night. Now, in the glare of the morning sun, he stood outside the chapel, an amiable walk's distance away from Pressmore, and watched Lane and Ann saunter up the path, man and wife, sealed together by God before family and friends, and on their way to host a magnificent breakfast. He would follow, eventually, but not before seeking out Pimm.

The crowd dazzled in fashionable pastels, mingling as prettily as the flower petals thrown by the fistful to celebrate the new union. Before the ceremony, there was animated discussion about the special license obtained for the couple, signed by the archbishop of Canterbury himself (a favor, allegedly, to Ann's father, the colonel), so that the couple could marry whenever and wherever they pleased, but in the end it was not necessary, for Mrs. Richmond objected to the idea of the couple being married in the Pressmore gardens, preferring the traditional church setting. Ann, it was said, relented with incredible grace, putting Mrs. Richmond's tastes above hers, all in the name of familial harmony. Bridger tried all throughout the morning to be happy for his friend—he was happy for his friend—but he was equally furious with his brother. Pimm, disheveled but miraculously present, loomed like a black band of storm clouds at the back of the church. The moment he could leave, he did, his attendance perfunctory, consistent with Pimm's pattern of taking all the wrong things

in life seriously. And as the cramped stone building emptied out, Bridger fought through the sea of coats and bonnets to catch Pimm before he disappeared again. He lost track of him briefly as he was forced to pause and step aside, Lane and Ann sweeping out the doors under that shower of petals. The couple led the procession back toward the estate, and Bridger popped on his hat and ducked out of the crowd, standing in the cool shade of a bending willow, searching for Pimm.

Shockingly, he discovered Pimm escorting a familiar woman. She was as coldly pale and pretty as a snowdrop, the sort of town beauty that would have her pick of eligible bachelors even without her impressive family fortune. Miss Regina Applethwaite. It was incredible. Two out of the four horsemen of his personal apocalypse were now ambling arm in arm up the charming cobblestone path. After the horrors he had witnessed in France, this was comparatively laughable, but his palms began to sweat anyway. He felt genuine remorse for the way things had ended with Regina. Her family was not so resoundingly wealthy then, and Bridger's father had expressed disappointment that the lady was fair but otherwise lacking—she read too much and had other rough flaws that money might have smoothed over. And didn't all boys wish to please their fathers, to in many ways emulate them? Bridger had done just that, the tone of his letters growing colder and more aloof until she was the one to abandon the courtship. Her final missive had been scathing, her words haunting him long after the initial jolt of heartbreak faded.

His deceased mentor, John, had been the one to introduce them, for he was a close friend of the Applethwaite family. Identifying a shared love of literature between Bridger and Regina, the introduction had been made, and Bridger had found himself quite enraptured. Things might have turned out differently if his father hadn't interfered soon after, purchasing Bridger's commission and pressuring him to snub Regina. Once he left for France, their romance unraveled after a smattering of letters.

If Regina's family had come into their trade fortune sooner, the elder Mr. Darrow might have sung a vastly different tune. Alas.

Bridger's heart ached at the sight of her. I was cruel and ungenerous; she has every reason to despise me. Regina nearly outshone the bride in her subdued blue silk trimmed in silver tassels. Like the willow sheltering him, she had a natural, sylphlike grace. With her tiny, perfect mouth, she grinned up at his oaf of a brother. Seeing that was a different kind of pain. Bridger took long strides to catch them, his mind going blank as he tried to formulate a smooth way to separate them.

Just a few steps behind them, his mind finally supplied something, though it was completely unhelpful: With Lane refusing him, he's going to seduce Regina for her fortune.

No, no. He wouldn't, would he? Bridger groaned internally. Yes, he absolutely would. In fact, it would rank fairly low on the list of Horrible Schemes Concocted by Pimm Darrow. An increasingly horrible thought followed, that Regina might actually be in love with his brother. Lane had mentioned Pimm had another plan to scrounge up some money. Was Regina his plan?

His stomach twisted at the memory of her last cold letter. He had a sharp memory, which sometimes served him and sometimes didn't. In this instance, he longed to forget.

It is clear that you do not understand me at all, Mr. Darrow, not my values, and certainly not my passions. If you write to me again, it will go unanswered.

"I'm certain the Richmonds will have it in the library. Their selection is known throughout the county," Regina was saying to his brother. If by "it" she meant a book, she was shooting hopelessly off target. Pimm was more likely to use a book for kindling rather than for any entertainment or edification.

Bridger coughed lightly into his fist and came up along Regina's vacant left side.

“Good morning, Miss Applethwaite,” he said, taut. “Paul.” Tighter.

“Mr. Darrow,” Regina replied, her cupid’s bow mouth pinched as she raked her eyes up and down his face. Every pass of her eyes scratched. Once, he had fallen into those sparkling periwinkle pools with great abandon, but now they were aloof, wintry. “Good morning. When did you arrive?”

“Yesterday,” said Bridger. “I came directly from Fletcher with some haste, our father is poorly and requires constant attention.”

“I’m sorry to hear it.” Regina gave another not-quite smile, indicating she wasn’t all that sorry.

“Your own family is well?” he asked, anxious. He needed to get Pimm alone.

“Yes, thank you. My mother is here, but she walks with Mrs. Richmond.” Regina gracefully gestured behind them, where, indeed, the indicated women were in merry conversation. She noted Bridger’s gaze fixing on his brother. An intelligent woman, and observant in the way only a well-bred, well-socialized young lady could be, she gently plucked her arm from Pimm’s grasp. “Now that I think of it, I forgot to compliment Mrs. Richmond on her Greek temple. If you will excuse me, gentlemen.”

She curtsied and dropped away, and from the sudden relaxation in her mouth, Bridger had the impression it was with some relief. She wanted to be away from him, and he refused to take offense.

Pimm’s expression altered, too, the creases in his forehead deepening as Bridger came close, clapped a hand on his back, and half marched him toward the right side of the path. A few clusters of guests walked ahead of them, but Bridger wanted privacy for what he had to say.

“I was enjoying her, especially now that her dowry matches her looks,” Pimm muttered. “I especially appreciate how much she despises you. We have that in common.” He was half a head taller than the already tall Bridger, but he had a stooped way about him. Pimm had once been considered handsome, but day by day he squandered it on drink and late nights. A man of thirty years, those choices were corroding him, his skin red and blotchy. In his heavy brow, receding black hair, and jaw, he had always favored their father, but now, aging, Pimm resembled him ever more strongly, down to the jowly, grimacing bullfrog face.

“I don’t let anyone come between me and a pretty woman,” Pimm continued. He glanced over Bridger’s right shoulder at Regina, leering. “Not even you, brother. Not even family.”

“We’re hardly that,” Bridger muttered, keeping a subtle grip on the back of Pimm’s morning coat. “Lane tells me he refused your begging, and that you’ve dreamed up some other way to make yourself less of a disgrace.”

Pimm heaved a shaky laugh; with it came the sour stink of whiskey. It was hardly half past ten, and he was already in the bottle. “Richmond is free to do as he likes, and so am I. Perhaps I should hunt down a rich foreigner like he did. That would patch up our troubles, eh?”

“You’ve already made yourself a spectacle with your behavior in Bath, and now you’re going to do it again here. I can’t reasonably imagine Regina would want anything to do with you after how things ended between us.” Bridger shook his head, tightening his grip. Pimm grunted, twisting against his brother’s strength. “Don’t fight me, you scoundrel, just listen. You’re to forget Lane, you’re to forget Regina, you’re to leave Pressmore at once and return to Fletcher Estate. Father is in his decline, and you can make no more mischief and do no more damage to our name if you sequester yourself and let me do the patching.”

“Regina?” Pimm said her name as if hearing it for the first time. That was morning drunkenness for you. He glanced back at her, eyes brightening with something like familiarity. Then he laughed again and snorted. At last, he managed to shake himself loose from Bridger’s grasp, stumbling hard to the side, sending rocks skittering off the path. He had the uneasy momentum of a dead tree caught in a gale as he listed and just managed to right himself.

“You belong in a ditch, you pathetic drunk,” Bridger muttered, helping his brother to stand.

“I’ll take no orders from you, Captain .” Pimm spat the word, and it set flame to the dry brush of Bridger’s temper. When he sold his commission, he abandoned that title. Everyone in his life knew that; Pimm knew that. “You don’t get to forsake the family and then come to its rescue when it best suits you. Do what you do best, brother, scuttle away.”

“Scuttling? You’re out of line. I was elbows-deep in mud and guts, and now I’m establishing a business that will raise us out of calamity.” Bridger’s hands opened and closed, that sudden fire spreading through his chest, hot and terrible. He couldn’t see anything around him but his ignorant, foolish brother. The trees vanished, the people ahead of them vanished; there was only his rage and his target. “Have you no shame, Pimm? No, don’t answer that.”

Pimm wasn’t so drunk that he mistook the blaze in Bridger’s eyes for anything but what it was: a threat. He turned, walking backward, glaring, his steps larger and faster as he tried to get away from his brother.

“Go back to Fletcher,” Bridger told him in a steely whisper. “I won’t ask again. Father needs you.”

“To hell with Father,” Pimm muttered. “And to hell with you.”

Bridger's hands stopped pulsing, both becoming tight fists. Stumbling, Pimm turned, hurling himself up the shallow hill, but not before colliding headlong into the party walking ahead of them. There was a brief cry of surprise, and the bright shifting of bonnets and sleeves and gloves as the three ladies startled like a flock of exotic birds. Pimm fell against the rightmost lady, who swiveled, and half caught him by the arm as he started to go down.

It was Miss Arden—Margaret—who was unlucky enough to bear the brunt of his weight. But she fought to keep her feet even as lurching, monstrous Pimm threatened to drag her down to the cobbles. Her eyes flew to Bridger's, and she stalled, briefly confused, then angry.

Bridger held her gaze. "Madam, my apologies, if you would hold him just there..."

And she did, eyebrows lifting as Bridger took two swift steps, swung, and punched his brother squarely in the jaw. Margaret let go at the perfect moment, jumping back, letting Pimm fall to the ground like a sack of bricks.

That drew the expected gasps and whispers. Margaret stood staring at him, stunned, then moved only to grab Pimm's hat before it could roll down the hill. Her sisters fluttered behind her, flanking for support. The rest of the world returned again, his focused rage flattening, people and objects sketching themselves back in. And there, beautiful, flustered, was Miss Arden. Blood pounded in his head. She would only hate him more now.

Margaret pressed her lips together and handed him Pimm's hat.

"It gives me no pleasure to be your accomplice, sir," she said, breathing hard. "But he did step on me rudely."

Page 6

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6

Get thee a good husband,

and use him as he uses thee.

All's Well That Ends Well, Act 1, Scene 1

“Someone will collect him, surely.” The woman sitting beside Maggie at breakfast sounded distraught. “They can’t just leave him on the road like that, can they? It could rain!”

Aghast described the general mood of the guests as the breads, sweet rolls, soft, decadent eggs, and mountains of roast capon and succulent tongue were devoured. The long tables were arranged under the intensifying glow of sunshine burning in through the tall windows that looked out onto the veranda. There, the pavilions, hung with bunting, garlands, and banners, promised even more excitement. The red patterned carpets and lush curtains of the dining room made it feel as if they were satiating themselves inside a polished garnet.

There was an empty seat across from Maggie as she carefully sipped her chocolate and moved a bit of food around her plate. Everyone was in an uproar about Paul Darrow being attacked by his brother, but opinions were split—some were certain he deserved it but decried the uncivilized nature of the act; others were calling Bridger Darrow all manner of unkind things.

Violet and Winny, seated near her, came down on their own side—that he had almost

crushed Maggie into a paste and therefore got what was coming to him. Maggie had never seen anyone lose control like that and, in the pit of her stomach, had to admit to herself it was thrilling. Papa had recalled many such brawls from his naval service, though of course fights were forbidden, and punished, but men trapped together on a ship for months at a time were prone to vehement disagreement. The ins and outs of the argument that led to this specific punch eluded her, but she was picking up bits and pieces from the gossips working tirelessly at the breakfast tables.

“It sounds as if he left a terrible situation behind in Bath,” whispered Violet, repeating to her what had been repeated to Winny. The information traveled in a tittering chain over clinking porcelain and silver. Meanwhile, at the end of the table, Bridger Darrow leaned down to speak with Lane. Maggie’s eyes traveled back to the suspiciously vacant chair across from her, then to Ann, who, at the other end of the table, caught her eye and grinned. Then, Bridger Darrow finished speaking with Lane and strode to that very chair, excusing himself to those around him as he removed his gloves and sat.

There was a withdrawn, hunted air about him.

At once, the whispers changed like the sudden redirection of the wind. All mentions of “Darrow” ceased as nervous smiles were hastily offered and plastered in place. Maggie glared around at it with naked disdain until she noticed Aunt Eliza observing her, and she, too, smiled, but only down at her cup of chocolate.

Mr. Darrow attacked a breast of capon with the single-mindedness of a man determined not to be perceived. Maggie joined him, alarmed at the red marks on his knuckles but unable to look away from them.

The whispering winds ebbed and flowed, and to her mortification, returned to the subject she had hoped they would avoid.

Her.

“I found a page lodged in my balcony,” said the woman who had just been fretting about rain. Her voice rose and fell like a singer practicing scales. Even half turned away from Maggie, it was easy enough to overhear her stage-whispering to her companion. “A lot of nonsense about a woman wearing trousers on a boat. Mr. Carlton told me not to read it, for he heard the content was not at all for ladies.”

“It is sabotage, I tell you!” said the woman’s companion. “And one need hardly wonder why. Ann Graddock has her detractors, you know, given her origin. Not me! Of course, but there are detractors—”

“Heavens, no, not you! Nor I!”

“No, never, you should never hear me disparaging Miss Graddock.”

“Mrs. Richmond,” Maggie remarked dryly and with a lengthy sigh. “Mrs. Ann Richmond, you mean.”

“Yes, thank you, my dear, thank you,” said the first woman, whom Maggie had been introduced to that morning. She had already forgotten the lady’s name. Maggie’s interruption was immediately forgotten. “There were objections, at first, among the family. Perhaps those objections persist.”

Maggie shifted, angry on Ann’s behalf. Ann had worked hard to win the hearts and minds of London society after arriving from India with her father, James Lysander Graddock. An East India Company resident, he had fallen hopelessly in love with a Lakhnau courtier named Nourin. Ann was soon born to them and named Halima Rizvi, choosing to restyle herself as Ann Graddock when she later arrived in England.

“Scattering filth all over the estate the day before the wedding,” the woman

continued, fanning herself. “It can only be to embarrass the bride! How awful! Poor Mrs. Graddock—Richmond.”

Maggie wanted to disappear beneath the table. Her neck itched, and it felt like every inch of her was turning crimson. She respected Ann and wanted to count her as a close friend, and now her “filth” was being categorized as an intentional slight against Ann and her marriage to Lane. She glanced at Violet, wondering if her sister would help her feign an illness.

“Rather...” Mr. Darrow had spoken up, emerging from the silent, self-imposed exile of his capon consumption. He coughed lightly, drawing the attention of the gossiping ladies, who fixed him with stern, suspicious glares. Heartbeats earlier, he had been the object of their scorn. Maggie adopted his method, staring resolutely at her tortured food while she turned into a human candle, bright and burning. “The pages I was fortunate enough to find were diverting. I certainly wouldn’t call them ‘filth.’ In fact, I think it might be...a game of sorts. Perhaps we the guests are meant to piece the story together tonight at the masquerade. What do you think, Miss Arden?”

Her eyes raised slowly from the candelabra and flowers between them to his dark blue cravat to his stormy eyes. Maggie froze. Was he rescuing her?

“A game,” she repeated, slowly. “Why...it’s possible. Ann does love a surprise.”

“Hmm.” The woman frowned. “She does tend toward the extravagant. Whoever thought to hold such a lavish wedding, and with a masquerade? Perhaps you two are on to something.”

“Mrs. Richmond looks at ease, does she not?” Darrow continued. The tables and cloth were cleared as the cake was being brought out, the many-coursed midmorning meal drawing to its conclusion. “Why, if this was some scheme against the marriage, she would have had Pressmore scoured of the offending pages in hours.”

The lady's companion, seated farther down the row, was not convinced. She was dressed in muted pink, graying brown ringlets hanging in front of her ears, a Mrs. Allery or Valery or some such. "Or she is putting on a fine show. If it were my event ruined by this mystery, the perpetrator would not be welcome in my home or circle ever again."

"And yet this occasion will be the talk of the ton for months," said Darrow with a light shrug. "In this way, Mrs. Ann Richmond has triumphed." Mrs. Allery or Valery sniffed. "If this is an insult, she has found a way to turn it in her favor. A remarkable skill, don't you agree, Miss Arden?"

Maggie tried not to give herself away with a bark of laughter. "That is Ann, through and through."

"And what do you make of the pages?" he pressed, holding her gaze. Maggie ached to look away but couldn't. She felt breathless and a little stupid, as if no more than a searching look from him could rob her of all sense. Her first impression of him, before he opened his mouth, was devilishly hard to eradicate. Yes, he had tainted it with his nasty remarks about her book, but here he was, as darkly handsome as ever, attempting to steer her boat out of dangerous waters. Or mock her. Maggie stiffened and slipped away, and she saw the flicker of disappointment cross his face as she tore her attention from his arresting eyes and regarded her cup.

"Whoever it is," she risked, unable to help herself, "I think they write very well, not at all overwrought, as some novels are these days."

Mr. Darrow smirked, sitting back. "From what I gather, it could stand up to a bracing edit."

Maggie laughed at him. "Is that so? Perhaps you should read the novel in its entirety before making any sweeping judgments as to its content or quality."

“It is the nature of my profession to make these assessments,” said Darrow, his brow darkening. He rubbed a spot on the table with his forefinger, agitated. “I must ask, from what position of authority do you speak on the subject, Miss Arden? Are you yourself a novelist?”

The ladies recoiled and gasped.

“I speak from the position of my good opinion,” Maggie replied, sharp. “I have loved books all my life, sir. There is more ink than blood in my veins.”

He regarded her over a long, agonizing silence. That busy little muscle worked in his jaw again. His gaze was intent, igniting, and Maggie shifted in her chair. At last, he said, “There is no harm in the alteration of form, so long as the change is in the spirit of improvement.”

“Good heavens, how much of the thing have you found?” Mrs. Allery-Valery guffawed, breaking the spell that had fallen over them. Maggie nearly jumped. She didn’t like admitting it, but she wanted to feel that singular spark thrill through her again, the one that crackled through her when their eyes met.

Darrow cleared his throat, shook his head, and said, “Enough. Enough to see its great potential.”

“Perhaps you should publish it, Mr. Darrow!” cried the woman, extremely amused at herself. “Wouldn’t that be the best end to this mystery?”

Mr. Darrow tilted his head briefly to the side, his gaze sliding along Maggie’s left arm, up to her chin, and lingering there. It made her shiver. “Mm. I may have a mind to do just that.”

Over her untouched slice of cake, Maggie stilled. “If the author is discovered.”

“Indeed,” he repeated with a warm laugh. “If.”

“I, for one, will need it all resolved before we quit Pressmore.” Mrs. Allery-Valery sighed.

“Some things are better left to the imagination, I think,” Maggie murmured, remembering Aunt Eliza, remembering the challenge before her. To be good. To set an example. To put her sisters and future before her passion. “These days, not enough is left to dreams and wonder.”

Not long after, the men stayed to drink port, while the ladies scattered to the drawing room and the gardens. Maggie could feel Mr. Darrow trying to catch her attention as she left the ballroom, but she refused him. She was equally elated and dismayed to be parted from him, for wasn't he utterly perplexing? First hating her book and then defending it! Gallant one moment and striking his brother publicly the next. She couldn't fit him neatly into a person-shaped box, and the puzzling left her over-warm, so she was grateful, at least, for the freedom and air afforded by the outdoors, even if the sun was intent on blazing. She propped herself on a stone banister at the edge of the veranda and pressed the back of her hand to her cheeks, shocked at how feverish she had become.

The garden was swarming. Such colossal waves of guests were not at all common for a wedding, nor was the amount of family and friends who had arrived from every corner of the country to attend, nor the general extravagance, nor the celebratory masquerade that was to be held later that day, but Ann and Lane never did anything the expected way. Particularly Ann. She was the height of glamour and envy in London. Ann and Lane's drums beat off-kilter, which was perhaps what had endeared them to each other in the first place, and what endeared them to Margaret as a couple. Their wealth afforded them the privilege of eccentricity, a quality shunned in the less advantaged but tolerated and sometimes celebrated among the rich. One could pick them immediately out of any crowd, with smiles like diamonds and almost identically

stark belly laughs.

Winnie had come out of the house with Ann's sister, Emilia, and the young ladies chatted amiably, winding through the clusters of guests enjoying the sunshine and the morning. Ann's tagalong cousin, Ruby, was also with them, lagging behind; she was strikingly tall, and someone must have pointed that out at an impressionable age, for she was always in the middle of performing a shorter stature—drooping, leaning, hunching. All around them, people spoke of the weather in an English way, and politely discussed Ann's gown and the refreshments and the groundskeeping.

Bunched at the bottom of one of the pavilion poles, tangled among some fabric and green ribbons, Maggie spied another wayward page of *The Killbride*. Reddening, she hurried over to the pole, pretending to drop her glove to snatch up the crumpled paper. She slid away as smoothly as she could, aiming for Winnie and Emilia, hoping at least to be distracted by their chitchat.

But she was intercepted by Ann, escorting a chilly beauty in a blue-and-silver gown. Her white-blond ringlets were piled on her head, the narrow column of her throat shining in the morning sunlight. Ann's brown skin and sleek black hair contrasted starkly with the other woman, who looked like she might have been freshly plucked from a winter garden.

"Miss Regina Applethwaite," Ann introduced, passing off the lovely lady in something of a rush. "May I present Miss Margaret Arden? Regina was desirous to meet you, Maggie. She has heard of your great affection for books and the art of writing."

Maggie brightened, eager, and curtsied politely. She knew with just a glance that Miss Applethwaite was rich, accomplished, and much sought-after. Rumors had circulated about her family's precipitous rise, a fortune in trade contracts pulling Regina out of obscurity. Money or none, she had the air of a woman who had always

been beautiful and always known it. There was a controlled, swanlike bearing to her that Maggie both admired and envied, for she sketched poorly, played badly, sang passionately but with questionable skill, and would never call her stitches perfect. All of her time and love had gone into her family and her books, and her accomplishments reflected as much.

“I am so pleased to finally make your acquaintance,” said Regina as Ann breezed away, the unquestionable lady of the hour. “And it appears I have done so just in time.”

“Just in time?” Maggie asked, giving the lady her undivided attention.

Regina folded her hands together prettily, casting an icy glance around. Through the window of the ballroom, she spied Mr. Bridger Darrow, and her eyes lingered there for a deliberate heartbeat. “Come closer, Miss Arden. What I have to say should only be said in confidence.”

Maggie inched closer, breathing in the lady’s pristine lily of the valley scent.

“I observed you and Mr. Darrow speaking at the breakfast table,” Regina murmured, thin eyebrows tented. “And I must warn you, as one who knows him well, you must guard your heart against any overtures he makes. Whatever delicate compliments he pays, whatever oaths he swears, he has nothing but disdain for women like you and me.”

Page 7

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7

The violence of either grief or joy

Their own enactures with themselves destroy.

Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 2

The visitor came at a quarter to five, just after tea. Bridger sprang out of his chair, crossed the guest room with swift, silent strides, and pressed himself against the wall to the left of the door.

He left the found pages of Margaret Arden's book on the little table near the balcony where he had been sitting, revisiting her words. Poring over them, actually, if he were to be honest.

Well. It was only a matter of time before Pimm retaliated. His brother was an oaf, but an oaf with pride who wouldn't take the punch as it was intended—as a warning. No, Pimm would view it as a challenge. It had ever been thus, particularly as boys, though in those days, Pimm was the one doing the hair pulling, kicking, and punching. He often tried to goad Bridger into scraps, while Bridger preferred to read either in the safety and comfort of the family's library or under his favorite tree, whichever kept him farthest from Pimm and their father. Earlier, Lane's valet had informed Bridger that his brother was not there to be collected or coaxed when staff searched near the chapel. The brothers were sharing a set of rooms with a connecting door, and there had been silence on the other side of that door, indicating Pimm was out. Likely, Pimm had retreated somewhere to lick his wounds and formulate a plan, the loose

details of which he enacted at this very moment.

Bridger quelled a sigh. Sometimes he wished Pimm was more prone to surprising him—at least, in a small way, it indicated he could one day change for the better. Instead, and as expected, Pimm thumped clumsily on the door. A smarter man would have at least tried to mimic the staff's way of coming and going, but no, Pimm slammed his ham hock of a fist against the door, once, twice, before Bridger leaned forward, gave a quick tug on the handle, and let his brother crash inside.

“That was a cheap go,” Pimm was muttering, spinning to locate his brother. He had the unsteady, toddler looseness of a man deep in his cups. “I’ll get you back for that, brother.”

He meant the punch, of course. And if his bloodshot, wild eyes were any indication, Pimm was still in that moment, still in the middle of being struck, the shock and pain and humiliation as real and confining as bars on a cage.

“I’d rather not thump you again,” Bridger warned, easily dodging a sloppy attempt from his brother. “But I will if you insist.”

“Ha! Little brother! Little...brother...Come here...” He was drunker than Bridger initially thought. Red-faced and sweating, Pimm barreled toward him. It was abrupt enough to catch him off guard. The two men careened across the room, upsetting a delicate side table, the vase upon it, before slamming into the far wall, the top of Pimm’s head lodged up under Bridger’s throat. He briefly saw stars, the flare of panic from being choked flooding his body with vigor. Burly and volatile, Pimm had engaged in his fair share of brawls, but Bridger was a military man. He had seen men die in ways he could never forget. Little remained of his and Lane’s light dragoon regiment; most of those spared by the battlefield had taken their own lives in ways fast or slow, either with a rifle or the bottle. Pimm’s skull digging into his chest seemed to blot out the present, returning him to a man he no longer wanted to be.

There were distant shouts and the reek of gun smoke, bleak ghosts on the edge of memory that plunged him deeper into the rage rising like a squall. Just memories, just hateful memories...

He grabbed his brother by the ears and twisted, hard, until Pimm cried out and sank down. As he lowered, Bridger brought his right knee up, just hard enough to make his brother regret ramming into him in the first place. Knee met jaw, and Pimm rolled toward the wall, the liquor roaring through his blood keeping him from collapsing. Bridger wasn't interested in a prolonged fight; he snatched up the fallen vase from the side table and smashed it over Pimm's head.

Lane arrived not long after to find Bridger smoking a pipe, brooding in a chair, long legs stretched out before him, not far from where his brother lay tied up and gagged.

Head down, holding two cravats in his one hand, Lane was too busy explaining his fashion dilemma to notice the quasi-hostage-taking before him. "Do you know, I quite prefer this blue with the diamonds, but Ann insists the yellow is better suited to our costumes—oh. Oh. Blazes, Bridger, what on earth happened? Is he all right? Are you?"

Lane stared down at Pimm, nearly stumbling over him. The man had gone to sleep after a while, coaxed into unconsciousness by the alcohol that had fueled his initial inclination to storm the room.

Bridger took a draw from his pipe and let the smoke curl out of his nostrils. "I'm not proud of it," he murmured. "And yes, I'm only lightly bruised. Pimm...well, he'll sleep it off."

"A relief, to be sure. What do you plan to do with him?"

"Send him back to Fletcher, naturally. Under his own power, preferably, like this if I

must.” The tobacco was doing nothing to address the headache blooming steadily across the back of his head. Bridger rubbed the base of his skull. “He stumbled in here, dead-drunk, and thought it would be wise to push me up against a wall.” He sighed and nodded toward the broken vase near the site of the incident. “And, um, apologies for the vase.”

“Mother has so many, I hardly think she’ll notice.” Lane lowered the cravats, frowning down at Pimm for a prolonged moment. “It’s like he doesn’t know you at all.”

Snorting, Bridger sat forward, propping his forearms on his thighs. “He doesn’t. He had one thing right in that churchyard—I haven’t been around for him to know. Not for him, not for Father...” His eyes settled near Lane’s shoes. “Not for you.”

Sidestepping Pimm, Lane came to stand near him, placing a gentle hand and both cravats on his shoulder. “You’re here now. So, blue or yellow?”

That reminded him—it was time to dress for the masquerade.

Bridger smirked, standing, and regarded the cravats at a distance. It was just for show; the answer was obvious. “Ann is your lady wife, my friend, so yellow is the only choice.”

“This is why she approves of our friendship.” Lane laughed and went to the open balcony doors. Bridger joined him, soothed, finally, by the tobacco drawn deep from the pipe. The invigorating scent of early evening flowers was carried in on an undulating breeze. As dusk arrived, the lanterns placed out in the garden and veranda began to twinkle softly like playful fireflies lying in wait for the masquerade. Bridger wanted to look at it with hopeful eyes, but he couldn’t forget his bound and bruised brother in the room behind them. Glancing over his shoulder, he noticed Pimm beginning to stir.

“Maybe I should go, Lane. Leave now and take him there myself.”

“There’s no need for that. No need to retreat.”

But the retreat, the isolation, was easier. A quiet corner with a well-loved book, that was easier. He couldn’t disappoint or fail anyone when he was on his own. Bridger lowered the pipe, staring out over the grounds with cooling eyes. He felt his mentor, John, watching him from beyond the grave, and his father, and the men of the regiment he couldn’t save. Shivering, he did indeed retreat, but inward. A desire flashed briefly before him—he could just ask Lane for the money to stabilize the family’s finances here and now. Lane would oblige him.

“And anyway, Ann would kill me if you left now. This confounding masquerade is her masterpiece, and she is determined that it change the world,” Lane told him, smiling down at the yellow cravat in his grasp.

“Change the world? Lofty expectations.”

“That’s Ann.” Lane’s head lifted, and Bridger felt the pressure of his stare.

“What?” he asked, shifting away.

“Perhaps not change the world, then, but change you,” said Lane. “I’m sure you observed her at work already. She rearranged the breakfast seating just to put you and Miss Arden near each other.”

The momentary willingness to ask for help passed, fleeting as a summer rain shower.

Bridger stiffened outwardly, even as his heart did a weird thing at the mention of her name. “Ah. That explains things. Your new wife may be hard at work, but so is the devil. I noted Regina Applethwaite swooping in on her. I’m already at a deficit where

she's concerned. With Regina's influence she will never glance my way again."

"It isn't like you to give up easily," said Lane, peering. "A man of your age needs ties and anchors lest he drift away."

Though Bridger agreed, he was not exactly an attractive match at the moment. Until his financial woes were resolved, it was unlikely any lady would agree to marry him. But Lane was of the mind that there were no issues there, so Bridger merely grunted and changed the subject. "What is Regina doing here anyway?"

"She was introduced to Ann this winter and they became quickly attached. Ann was desperate for company at the operas, and I didn't have the heart to tell her things were uneasy between you and Regina." Lane shuddered and tracked back inside, Bridger turning to watch him go. No doubt it was time for them both to hasten their preparations for the evening's event. "If it will help, I could employ Ann's sister and cousin for the night. They are always eager to be included in a scheme, and if you need them to keep Regina busy it would be a small ask," his friend said, giving Pimm a wide berth on his way to the door. "In fact, it might be good to set them a task. They are nearly as mischievous as Ann herself."

Bridger waved him off from the balcony. "Where Miss Arden and her whims are concerned, perhaps we should let fate decide."

He heard his friend chuckle and pause at the door. "Men at some time are masters of their fates," he called. "I seem to recall you quoting that endlessly on campaign."

His friend had him there. The words of Shakespeare and Donne and Blake had flowed freely from him to the men, for somehow it had been easier to keep his head up and stay the course confidently when everything was on the line. Now, faced with civilian affairs, it wasn't nearly so straightforward. No longer was the mandate "stay alive" but live. Thrive.

“Yes,” he replied. “I was insufferable.”

“Still are,” Lane teased, and, halfway out the door, cravats tucked up under his chin, indicated Pimm on the floor between them. “Don’t breathe a word of this to Ann, mm? I’d rather she not hear about this little squabble until after her grand plan is executed. Let tonight be just for magic.”

With a wink and a smile, Lane disappeared, and Bridger was alone with his pipe, his brother, and his thoughts. He only wanted one of those—his pipe. Snuff was more the fashion, but smoking had gotten him through desolate nights in France, and he liked having something to fuss with and paw and chew. A dragon of white smoke drifted off the balcony, puffed from his lips, joining the bunting and boughs strung between the pavilion poles and threaded through the railings of the veranda. The view swept down to the lake, where a small boat floated like a children’s paper toy, relatively still in the docile wind.

He could only imagine what people would say when they found out about him wrangling his brother into bindings, and he could only imagine what Regina had whispered to Miss Arden. Nothing good, he wagered, for with the sour end to their courtship, he assumed Regina had delivered a warning of one kind or another. The understanding between them had dissolved while he was in France, and like the rage that came on suddenly inside him, he wished that part of him was forever lost. Was he any different now? Truly? Here he was, still cleaning up family messes. But he was also a man who relished the smell of ink and the feel of paper beneath his hands, a man who nearly wept when he first saw a papermaking Fourdrinier machine in action. Even now, if he closed his eyes, he could imagine the churn of the machine, the damp mulchy smell of the linen pulp, and the warmth of the heated rollers as they dried the paper. A man of direction and passions, a man who could be better.

The memories of ink and paper made him smile. More than the tobacco, more than the fresh air, they soothed him. That once-docile wind whipped up from the lake,

screaming across the estate grounds and toward him on the balcony. It carried a gift or a curse, depending on one's perspective. With eyes closed, he felt the wet smack of paper against his cheek. It wasn't part of his Fourdrinier machine daydream, but fate, maybe, tipping its hand.

A night for magic, indeed.

Bridger nearly dropped the pipe dangling from his lips. He scrambled to catch the page that had blown in on the wind. It was another lost artifact of Miss Arden's novel, the title page, in fact. Holding it at arm's length, he grinned crookedly, taken by an unexpected moment of tenderness. The stroke of the pen over her name, though the presence of dew or lake water had caused it to run, was confident, and he imagined her bent over her desk, tongue poking out between her lips in concentration as she boldly put her name to her work. He didn't know why, but the tongue thing seemed important. And if he didn't hurry and dress, he wouldn't be seeing her or her tongue in any capacity that evening.

It rather felt like history repeating itself. He had squandered his chances with a pretty, book-loving lady before, and now here he was, intrigued by another one.

"Would any other pages like to join us?" he asked with a light laugh, waiting a beat before going inside, closing the balcony doors, and setting out the paper to smooth and dry on the bedside dresser. He rang the bell for a manservant to help with dressing, and while waiting, so as not to alarm the staff, he dragged Pimm through the door connecting their rooms. His brother groaned in his stuporous sleep but settled again once placed on the rug.

Back in his own room, he at once found himself glancing at the page near his bed. It felt like it had grown a presence, as if a small, lingering vestige of Miss Arden lived in it. Her eyes and conversation had been lively at breakfast, and it had been a long, long while since he enjoyed the company of a woman. There had been dalliances in

France, but any serious man looking to build a life would want a wife.

Ann's desire for magic, it seemed, was spreading. Regina's interference be damned, he would deliver that title page to Miss Arden himself.

'Tis true: there's magic in the web of it.

Othello, Act 3, Scene 4

Maggie was distracted and cloud-headed while she and her sisters dressed. She avoided their questions, which upset Winny and made Violet more and more determined to know what bothered her. Inexhaustible, Violet had nearly gotten it out of her when Aunt Eliza appeared to collect them so they could all go down together. The appearance of their aunt quelled the mischief, and Maggie in particular knew she was being watched.

“Your Aunt Mildred tells me there are several gentlemen eager to make your acquaintance this evening, Margaret,” said Aunt Eliza. She had very wisely chosen her mask and gown to mimic a doe, and she did have that long-limbed, graceful quality about her. “Isn't that encouraging?”

Winny and Violet giggled behind their masks (Violet, frivolous and self-assured, a peacock, and Winny, shy and thrifty of opinion, a powdery white moth) while Maggie diligently smiled and nodded and kept her true thoughts to herself. For the occasion, Maggie had chosen to be a golden owl. To match her feathered mask, she had donned an amber silk gown embellished with dark brown embroidered leaves and flowers along the neckline.

In the time it had taken Maggie to rest, fret, and dress in her gown and mask, the main floor of Pressmore had undergone a startling transformation. Arm in arm, the

Arden girls descended with their aunt into a fairyland.

“It could be Titania’s kingdom,” she heard Winny whimper on an inhale as they descended from reality into dream.

And so, the young lady had it just right. To Maggie, it felt as if Pressmore had sunken through time. The estate had always held a primal power, the gardens whimsically overgrown, the park their sparse counterpart, dotted with fountains and statues nestled among the manicured hedges. But this was the home in its full wild glory, all windows and doors thrown open to the cool night air, lanterns glowing on benches and tables, hanging from trees, each sparkling with mischievous promise. The air hung thick with lush honeysuckle and rose, the source of which became obvious as the family reached the bottom of the marble staircase—fat, glossy blossoms decorated every corner of the place, so fresh and obliging they seemed to radiate dew. Laughter danced on the garden-scented breeze, and guests danced, too, their identities hidden behind all manner of masks. Here a swan, there a wolf. Two columns of dancers wound through the landing, traveling with light allemande steps, buoyant silken soldiers.

Or perhaps sheep in slippers, shepherded only by a fancy borne on the wind.

Ann had declared that she wanted this event to rival the lavish masquerades of the Argyll Rooms and the Pantheon. Maggie could say confidently that she had accomplished just that.

“My! Ann has outdone herself,” Maggie heard Aunt Eliza say, not entirely approvingly. Weddings were generally small, private affairs, and to celebrate this uniquely and ostentatiously was not necessarily the fashion.

Maggie didn’t care. It was wondrous. She couldn’t stop gazing around, amazed. “I think it’s enchanting.”

Aunt Eliza wore a frozen grimace. “Enchanting, to be sure, but bold, too.” And bold, of course, was bad. Tapping Maggie on the forearm with her fan, her aunt added quietly, “Do not be too free with your thoughts this evening, my dear. Let the men set the tone of conversation. They lead and you follow.”

Maggie did not reply, and also tried not to let it dampen her spirits. At the bottom of the stairs, she felt so small, overwhelmed, and engulfed by not only the number of guests but the wild, lavish decorations. Though she be but little, she is fierce. To recall *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in such surroundings seemed perfect, and she let it bolster her. Nobody was announced. All formalities had been done away with, leading Maggie to feel even more strongly that she had gone to change upstairs in one world and awoken in another.

“What are we waiting for?” Violet asked, whisking her sisters away from the landing—to Aunt Eliza’s visible chagrin—following the trail of the dancers. She called some warning after them, but Maggie did not hear it. None of them did. The dancers led the young ladies to the dining hall, positioned at the heart of the house. Garlands hung low from every doorway, playfully brushing cheeks and foreheads. By the time they stood before the great feasting table, Maggie had been anointed by no less than three plunging, flowered boughs. So many people had come to Pressmore for the day she could hardly believe it, and with the profusion of masks, it made one feel as if anyone could be anyone.

The staff rushed by, tending to the endless table of delights glistening below decorated chandeliers. They wore brightly colored turbans and masks as they replenished deep porcelain dishes heaped with rice and soups, fragrant with spices Maggie had never encountered. Lane and Ann emerged from the dizzying swirl of masquerading guests. There was no mistaking Ann, radiant in gold, with a matching veil swooping down from her equally striking hawk-beaked mask. Tiny stars and moons sparkled on the veil, embroidered with unparalleled delicacy. And naturally, Lane was at her side in a smart blue jacket with a yellow cravat, his mask a simpler

version of hers. He smiled out at them from under his disguise, a jaunty collie of a man, unconquerable, a man who did not so much speak but breathlessly erupt.

“Ladies!” he crowed. Unless Maggie was mistaken, his lips were already lightly stained with punch. On his left side, his sleeve was empty below the elbow and pinned to the shoulder with a gallant star-shaped brooch. “Dear, dear cousins, welcome to our modest celebration.”

“Modest for a fairy queen, perhaps,” said Maggie with a grin. She peered over Lane’s shoulder. “Are we not to dine in the usual way?”

Normally, there would be dancing and merriment, then a break for the guests to sit and eat. Already, she saw folk coming and going, eating at various round tables throughout the dining hall and then leaving to partake in the other amusements sprinkled throughout Pressmore. She itched to explore such things herself, though the table exuded a mouthwatering scent. Ginger, she detected, and rose water, but also a mélange of spices she had no names for.

How was she supposed to behave herself and follow, not lead, in such circumstances?

“Oh, we have dispensed with all of that,” Ann said lightly and with a twinkling laugh. “Our guests may drink when they like and eat when they like, and dance until the morning light chases us back to our chambers. Tonight, we are not in England, we are simply together.”

“My wife.” Lane beamed. “The poet!” Behind his mask, he winked at Margaret. “Though she is perhaps not so skilled with words as some who are present. By the end of this evening, I feel certain all shall be turned on its head, and even shy Margaret Arden will have found herself a fine and true love.”

“Please!” Violet clapped. “Wouldn’t that be fun?”

“What smells so intriguing?” Maggie asked, navigating them away from that topic. It made her anxious to think she might become the center of attention. This was Ann and Lane’s evening, not hers. Ann pursed her lips knowingly, her husband saying, “Ann has had her cook from Calcutta to stay, and we are to experience the tastes of her home.”

“One of my homes,” Ann gently corrected, leaning into her husband. “Arjun has prepared mutton curry, minced lamb with ginger, cinnamon, and coriander, potatoes in a spiced gravy, lovely little flatbreads, and aubergine stuffed with onion.” It was clear she could go on for far longer but paused and cleared her throat primly. “Later there will be sandesh and roshogolla. And of course, more customary treats are available for the less adventurous among us.”

“There’s one now,” remarked Violet, observing a willowy lady in an elaborate ivory mask sniffing distastefully at a miniature plate bearing curry and yellow rice. Even with the disguise, Maggie recognized the young woman to be Regina. “Ooh, she didn’t seem to like that. Hardly surprising. With a scowl like that I wonder if she would find fault with the prince regent himself.”

Violet had no patience for primness and modesty, both of which Regina exuded.

“Violet, be kind,” Maggie chided in an undertone. She still didn’t know what to think of Regina, but she had to admit that she was gazing around with a chilly, imperious air. Maggie couldn’t imagine holding her nose up at all the delicious-smelling food Ann’s cook had prepared.

“Perhaps Miss Regina will find the white soup more to her liking,” Lane commented with his usual congeniality.

“Perhaps she is white soup,” Violet muttered, thankfully only loudly enough for Margaret to hear, and for it, she took her place as older sibling and nudged Violet

sharply in her side. “What? I hate snobbery.”

“She is very rich now,” Maggie replied. “She is allowed to be snobby.”

“Encouraged to be, even,” added Winny, who almost never said a cross word about anybody.

Violet had already forgotten Regina, gently leaning in to Maggie to whisper, “Don’t look now, but our aunts are coming.”

“Oh dear,” Maggie breathed, but they were hemmed in by tables and guests on all sides, and there was no escaping them.

Like Eliza, Mildred had acquired a doelike mask for the event, and even their gowns were similar. Mildred’s was the more elaborate and expensive, but otherwise they might have been twins.

“What a triumph, eh?” called Lane to the two older women.

Aunt Mildred made a quiet sound of half agreement and dodged away from Ann. “It will be a triumph if everyone behaves themselves this evening.”

“What fun would that be?” Violet muttered.

“Come, niece, there are some uncommonly fine gentlemen I would like you to meet.” With that, her aunts tore her away from Violet, enveloping her in silk and perfume. Once more she felt small, squeezed between them, all but marched away from the familiar faces in the room. Queasy and warm, Maggie retreated behind her mask for safety. It served her well, for Eliza and Mildred toured her about the first floor, stopping here and there to make introductions. It was hard to know if the gentlemen were handsome or repugnant, though one had a cleft in his chin so deep that a morsel

of food had gotten caught there. Maggie couldn't stop staring at it while he went on and on about the punch.

She remembered a quarter of the names (Mr. Stanley, Mr. Gibson, etc.) and, an hour later, it was over. Her aunts encountered an old friend who had come in from London, and the distraction gave Maggie the perfect opportunity to slip away. Which she did, finding Winny and Violet had been following and watching from the shadows. They reunited inside an airy gallery running along the outer edge of the home. Gauzy white curtains billowed, stirred by the breeze cavorting through the corridors. A few short marble columns had been moved into that hall and topped with various plasters and Greek busts.

"Thank goodness we have you back," said Winny, embracing her.

"I have so many thoughts," added Violet, already laughing.

"And we will be forced to hear them," Maggie teased.

"Delighted, I think you mean. Come now, we have been hard at work!" Violet insisted, turning red behind her mask. "And all for your benefit. Everyone here is already drunk and willing to share everything, so we made some inquiries." She began pointing at the men who had made introductions. "That one hates reading. That one won't have anything to do with yellow-haired ladies. Oh, he is an interesting case, loves reading but despises novels. This one in the stupid hat insists he is promised to a wealthy woman from New South Wales, whatever that is. The fellow with a squirrel mask just seemed generally disinterested in ladies."

Maggie squeezed her eyes shut. "Violet, that's a bear."

Violet shrugged. Her eyes caught on something moving toward them, and Maggie followed her gaze. "Here comes one with all haste. Shall we inquire after his reading

tastes?”

Before Violet could embarrass them both, the man, large and menacing, charged right by them like, well, a bear. His mask, however, was green and freckled, and not skillfully sculpted. Perhaps it was meant to be a kind of serpent. There was a vaguely familiar aura about him, but he came and went so quickly that Maggie did not have time to interrogate her memories. He shoved his way between them clumsily, leaving behind an imprint of sweat and stale liquor. Bumbling down the corridor, he spun in a complete circle, then seemed to find what he was searching for—a stone bench under the third archway of the open-air gallery. There was a cracked vase sitting at one end of the bench, a splash of pink roses blooming from the pot. As the girls watched surreptitiously behind their masks, the man slid a note under the vase, leaving the tiniest corner exposed. Then, with that same chaotic gait, he trundled back into the crowd.

Immediately, Violet trotted over to the bench.

“Violet, that isn’t meant for us,” Winny chided, catching up.

“Don’t be boring,” her sister muttered. “Oh, come along, you both want to know what it says, I won’t accept you pretending otherwise.”

“Just be subtle,” Maggie replied, while she and Winny shuffled together to form a barrier of skirts while Violet did her peeking. “What does it say?”

“Instructions for a clandestine meeting,” said her sister. Violet popped back up in front of them, grinning with devious delight. The bright feathers on her mask wobbled as she leaned in to whisper: “Blue and gold, our plan unfolds. Find me at midnight.”

“Find me at midnight,” repeated Winny, gasping. “Aunt Mildred would not be

pleased to hear of such things going on at Pressmore.”

“She will never find out, because you will not be a prude and tattle on these lovesick fools.” Violet stuck out her tongue.

“I wonder what plan they could mean,” mused Maggie.

She did not have long to puzzle over it, for Ann had noticed them huddled up and whispering, and came to join them.

“May I steal your sister away? Only for a moment, I know how much you prefer her company,” Ann said, and the girls reluctantly agreed. They were off to giggle about the note under the flowerpot, no doubt, and Maggie hoped they would give a full recounting of their speculation. And parting from them, Maggie grew thoughtful. Ann nudged her. “I have decided this is a night for magic, my friend, not for frowns. What has turned your mood so?”

Maggie watched Winny and Violet disappear into the surging crowd. “My sisters,” she murmured. “My beloved sisters. I must marry and marry well for their sakes, but I’ve been so consumed by my book. Some days it’s all I think about—and maybe that makes me hopelessly selfish.”

Her mind twisted around squirrels and serpents and chins with food stains.

Ann shook her head, leading her to a bench, where they sat. “I see Lane’s mother has gotten to you. Maggie, it isn’t selfish to want the happiness that speaks to your heart.”

“My aunts are convincing, convincing in their dislike for my own mother, who obviously disappointed them. It would break me utterly to disappoint my sisters that way. My heart tells me my aunts are well-meaning but misguided, but they have lived more life than I have. I always gave my father’s advice due consideration...” Maggie

trailed off, searching the room. If she wasn't thinking about her book and her vanishing dream, then she was thinking about Mr. Darrow, who had gone from horrible, to intriguing, and back to horrible.

"Torn in a hundred directions!" Ann gasped dramatically behind her mask. "I do not envy you; I had the fortune of finding my Lane before the poking and prodding of elders became too onerous. But who do you look for so urgently?" Stroking Maggie's gloved hand, her lips curved into a smile. "Could it be Mr. Darrow? I spied your conversation at breakfast, it appeared quite animated."

There was no point trying to deceive Ann, who was altogether too sharp. "I do look for him. I don't know why. Every time we meet, I come away thinking differently of him." If Regina was Ann's good friend, she did not want to speak badly of her or gossip, and so kept the details of their discussion to herself.

"He is a man of good humor and better sense, I think, though prone to isolation. There is a sadness about him I have never understood, but no man is perfect and any who claims to be is proved deficient."

"I thought my opinion of him was improving," Maggie said slowly. "But I have heard information that gives me pause."

Ann leaned in to her, nodding. "You have already been heaped with thoughts and advice, but—do forgive me—here is rather more: Your own mind must always be the decider. What, dear Maggie, do you think?"

It was hard to be clearheaded among the music, the twinkling lights, and the warmth of so many bodies clumping up to chat and dance. But Maggie drew in a deep breath, staring down the length of the pillared gallery with her heart set on calmness. In and out, her chest rose and fell, and she felt the tumult of the party return to its former magic, when it was beguiling and inviting, rather than too much. By and by her eyes

settled on a man striding toward them, cutting a fine figure in a gray coat trimmed in muted gold, an ivory cravat knotted neatly beneath his strong jaw. Dark hair curled above his mask, which was fashioned after the face of a Greek bust, shot through with glittering cracks, as if the face had broken and the scars healed bright.

It was Mr. Darrow, and he had arrived at the masquerade armed with a piece of paper. Tattered and stained, she knew it belonged to her book. She had heard gossip all through the evening about the missing pages, and Ann had put about that it was a sort of game, and any found pages should be returned to staff. In return, guests were given little meaningless trinkets, but at least it provided a kind of explanation. She might even have it all back eventually, and she couldn't help but watch Mr. Darrow approach with parted lips, wondering what piece of her art he had brought along.

Vaguely, she heard Ann mutter something about a headache and drift away; Maggie rose to meet Mr. Darrow, full of curiosity and questions, which, she realized with a jolt, was just the way a man ought to make her feel.

I'll make my heaven in a lady's lap.

Henry VI, Part 3, Act 3, Scene 2

Bridger had reached the main ballroom and gallery late, having been waylaid repeatedly by merry guests stopping to inquire after what page he had found. They were all under the assumption it was a game devised by the ingenious bride, and not the result of some badly timed wind and a naughty window. He knew the truth of it all thanks to Lane, and though he was sometimes given to shyness with strangers, Bridger allowed himself to be drawn into conversation about the “game” of finding the lost pages. More interesting by far was the range of opinions the work elicited. Men and women were moved differently, some delighted, others intrigued, and still others appalled.

Though he could be stubborn, he was not stupid, and the excited way these masked folk discussed the pages only instilled in him a greater urge to read the novel in its entirety.

Which you could have done, simpleton, had you given it the chance it deserved when Miss Arden sent it.

He would make good on that score, and hopefully please her, by delivering the only page he had discovered bearing her actual name. If she was at all worried about judgment from the other guests, this would be the piece that would put an anxious heart at ease.

The woman in question, the woman who was more and more preoccupying his thoughts, rose from a stone bench at the other end of the open-air gallery. The scent of honeysuckle floated to him as he caught sight of Miss Arden. There was no mistaking her, even with the mask, for she always had a slightly tilted, inquisitive posture, and luxurious, full golden waves. Someone had tried to contain that wild mane of blond hair, but only succeeded in making it somewhat more civilized, piled in a Grecian way behind a crisscross of amber-colored velvet ribbons. She was a vision, and his heart twisted, and Bridger slowed his steps, wanting to drink her in at his leisure, for when would there come another night such as this?

He put out of his mind that he was not the most attractive marriage partner. He put out of his mind the brief glimpse of Regina and Miss Arden in conversation. He put it out of his mind that above him, still in his guest chamber, his brother was trussed like a hog for slaughter. He put it all aside and went to Miss Arden.

She peered up at him, fierce blue eyes flashing behind the feathered owl mask covering half of her face.

“Have we been introduced?” he teased, recalling their less-than-auspicious first meeting.

Miss Arden laughed, shook her head, then smiled impishly. “I don’t believe so. I am Artemis of the Hunt, but you...you are Hercules? Hector?”

Bridger lightly touched the edge of his mask with his free hand. “Perseus, who did not fear Medusa and slew the Gorgon terror.”

Her eyes danced, radiant. Behind the mask he saw a flicker of fear and then: ferocity. She turned and began to walk, and Bridger kept pace with her. They left the cool stones of the gallery behind, stepping out into the even more intoxicating surroundings of the veranda and the hundreds of lanterns sparkling on the lawn,

describing a lazy path down to the pond, where fireworks would soon erupt. “That is too bad. I have always had great affection and pity for poor Medusa, who was treated abominably by the gods.”

Bridger let out a hearty laugh. “She turned men to stone!”

They stopped beside a trellis choked with purple flowers. A juggler wandered by, pretending to trip as he beheld Miss Arden in all her masked beauty. Bridger moved slightly closer to her, unnerved by the protective surge that warmed through his chest as the juggler leered, then stumbled his way giggling into the gallery behind them.

“Only because they wanted to harm her! She wasn’t bothering anyone in her lonely cave,” said Margaret. She sniffed, raising her head. “He didn’t even beat her fairly, did he? No, he had help from Athena, Hermes, Hephaestus...”

“And where was fair Artemis to intervene?” he asked, pointing to her mask.

“Punishing Actaeon, I imagine, another loathsome creature.”

“Loathsome creatures?” Bridger lifted both brows, then showed her the piece of recovered novel, which he had noticed her eyeing. “If we are such a nuisance, then we have nothing you could want, not even this, a page bearing the name of one”—he pretended to squint at the writing he had committed to memory—“Margaret Arden.”

“You found it,” she gasped, elated, reaching for the page.

Bridger, much taller, kept it easily out of her reach.

“Please, may I have it?” She didn’t quite pout, but almost. “It is mine, after all.”

“You may have it, Artemis of the Hunt, for a price.”

Margaret took a step back, studying him. “Name your price, Gorgon slayer.”

“I simply want to read the novel in its entirety,” said Bridger, bowing.

She scoffed. “Ha! I believe you already had your chance, Mr. Darrow—”

“Gorgon slayer, please.”

“Perseus.” She spat it. Her mood shifted abruptly, her arms draping around her waist as if to guard herself from him. From somewhere inside, a bell tolled. It had a high, crystal quality, but it seemed unsettling to him; it had a fateful element that he did not trust. Bridger watched as guests began pouring out of the house, including Margaret’s family, Regina Applethwaite, Lane, Emilia, and so on, everyone laughing and enjoying one another. Bridger felt like a buoy tossed by a storm as they flowed around him and Margaret.

“Come now, you two!” Lane called, gesturing for them to follow. “You must see the fireworks! Ann’s parents have sent them from Calcutta! ’Tis a shame Ann has gone up to bed with a headache, she is going to miss all the fun.”

He didn’t move; neither did Margaret.

Jostled this way and that, she continued to glare up at him. “Honestly, I don’t know why you are suddenly so keen on this novel of mine, for I have heard that you regard writers of my sex as undeserving of your notice, and that such women are of low character. Beneath you.”

That warm, protective surge from before turned hot, angry. “What have you heard?” he demanded, perhaps a bit strongly. His eyes followed the stream of guests parading down to the water, finding Regina among them. He knew it. Regina had taken Miss Arden aside and poisoned her against him. And why wouldn’t she? He had treated

her badly, and yes, repeated his father's feelings that a lady too taken in by novels and with a low dowry was not desirable enough to tempt him.

Margaret ignored his question, jutting out her chin. "Pray, what are your thoughts on *Pride and Prejudice* ? I must have them."

Ah. And so, he had, in a letter, described the characters in that novel as being drawn a bit broadly, and Jane Bennet to be almost painfully insipid, opinions that had greatly offended Regina, on top of all the other blundering things he said. He had actually admired the passionate riposte, to the point that he agreed with and adopted some of her feelings on the novel, but the damage was already done.

In all of that, he couldn't remember expressing a general indictment against lady novelists, but it had been a bleak time in his life, and youthful opinions were never meant to be etched in stone.

Bridger looked down at the ground between them, flustered into a place between disappointment and indignation. "I see you have been enjoying Miss Applethwaite's company. I should not be shocked that she has tried to sway you against me, and her intent is plain. Perhaps we did not dissolve things amicably, but I've never wished her ill, and, indeed, there are many fine writers of your sex that I have been known to read and praise, so even there she paints me with the wrong colors."

Even to his own ears, he sounded defensive. Bridger flinched.

Margaret, however, did not. "Many, is it? Name them."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Which writers specifically, sir? I would like you to name them."

Bridger groaned and turned away. Was she serious? The procession left the main house behind, passed the stone cottage on the right, and dipped down toward a bowl of a valley and the wide pond at the base of it. To the east, that pond narrowed into a river that disappeared into the dense woods hugging all sides of the property. There was a commotion down on the water's edge, a collection of crates and metal stands, and men stripped down to their shirtsleeves, hard at work.

“If they are so plentiful and you respect them so much, it should not be difficult,” she added, clearly enjoying his reaction. Regina was wrong about him—the old him, not the current him—but he felt his mind reel and blank at the first pop of sound. He didn't have time to answer her or think, for down over the water, noise and color blazed, and all was briefly chaos. Pinwheels of light exploded near the water's edge, the reflection a blur of silver suns. Each boom was followed by a brief delay, then the stunning flowers of white and gold would bloom in the sky and weep down toward the water before twinkling into nothingness.

“Isn't it marvelous?” a voice inside the house cried. “Isn't it magical?”

His stomach soured from the reek of the gunpowder, and with the sunbursts mounted near the pond giving their last sizzling twirls, he discovered the stones of the veranda beneath his sweat-dampened gloves. He must have collapsed, though he didn't remember the tumble. The sounds. The smells. It had all transported him back to the war, and to the ugliness that lurked in memories he had tried doggedly to forget.

Someone was kneeling beside him, touching his shoulder carefully.

Bridger twisted to the side, discovering Margaret there with him. She had taken off her mask, and the care and concern in her face broke through the jolt of terror that had brought him crashing to the ground. Her lips were gently parted as she searched his mask for answers. Answers. A question. She had asked a question before the noise tore him from reality.

“You,” he said in a whisper.

“Me?” She blinked.

“You,” he repeated, forgetting all about her questioning.

“We were speaking of lady writers.”

“Oh.” He blinked hard, ears ringing, disoriented. “No, never mind that...”

“Here,” she said. The warmth and care had vanished from her gaze. She spoke directly, as if to a stranger who had fallen in the street. “Come, let me help you stand.”

Lane had always told him what a relief it was to find Ann, to discover a person who could stick it out through the bad nights and the inevitable resurgence of horrid memories. Her understanding had been a balm, he said, one he needed now, one he depended upon. Margaret guided him to his feet, and the glances full of judgment and disgust that he expected never came.

Bridger tried to focus again on what they had been discussing, but it was difficult. “I’ve given offense,” he muttered.

“No, no. My father was haunted by certain things,” she told him, and yet, cold. “He served on a seventy-four gun, third-class ship of the line. The HMS Lionheart .”

Bridger dusted off his jacket and waistcoat, coming back to himself. “I see,” he said.

“There is no need to be embarrassed,” Margaret added, correctly interpreting the red skin beneath his cravat. “The stories my father told were harrowing, and I always suspected he spared me the worst of it. I can’t begin to imagine what you witnessed

in France.”

In his shock, Bridger had dropped the recovered page with her name on it. To his horror, it was nowhere to be seen. Blown away or swallowed by the shadows, it was gone. Then, the guests who had gone to watch the fireworks returned, swarming up the lantern-strewn lawn. Lane was at the front of them and came directly to Bridger.

He tore off his mask, taking Bridger by the forearm. “Blazes, man, are you well? I saw you go down. The fireworks...did it...did you...”

“Fine, my friend,” Bridger assured him, shaking off the last of his cold sweat. He looked askance at Margaret, who stole cautious glances at him. “I suppose this is a spot more civilized than Toulouse, eh?”

“A spot, a spot.” Lane laughed grimly.

“Only my pride is bruised,” Bridger added. And here, he looked firmly at Miss Arden. He was beginning to realize he was more embarrassed for having failed her test than reacting intensely to the explosions. She offered back nothing, her face impossible to read.

Lane clapped him on the shoulder, squeezing, as if searching for weaknesses. “Well, then, if you are fit for it, I believe it is now our solemn duty to drain the punch bowls and present ourselves for one last dance, mm?”

There was more he wished to say to Miss Arden, but more and more guests were filling in the spaces around them. Bridger shouldered his way back to her side, clearing his throat, speaking in a tone just for her ears.

“Not Perseus, then,” he said, by way of truce. “Not Actaeon, not Hector...”

“Achilles?” she asked. “We are all of us vulnerable in our own way.”

Bridger’s chest swelled with relief, and with admiration for her generosity, but with incredible timing, Regina made herself known, winding her way between attendees, coming to stand between Lane and Bridger. Her attention was fixed, hawklike, on Margaret, and there was a hard meanness to her pinched smile that concerned him. Subtly, he tried to plant himself between the women. But Regina’s companion tugged on her puffed sleeve, and, turning toward the veranda, the back of the house, and the balcony above, Regina’s eyes slid up and up, lingering for a moment before she turned toward Lane.

“It appears your wife is not yet abed, and pray, who is that with her?” asked Regina, pointing to the upper floors with her fan.

Naturally, Regina’s question directed everyone’s attention to the balcony. Its railings were soft with climbing ivy and wisteria, and it jutted out over a set of tall doors that led out to the promenade and the gardens. Two figures stood silhouetted against the soft yellow light emanating from inside the house. The lady of the pair was partially hidden by a starry veil and elaborate mask, and Bridger recognized it as Ann’s at once. A tall fellow was with her, also masked, his back partially to the outdoors, for the two of them had retreated almost inside. Almost but not quite.

Lane’s lingering laughter died down as the man pulled Ann into a tight embrace, and, cupping her face with both hands, kissed her. They embraced passionately, seemingly unaware of their rapt and scandalized audience.

10

Friendship is constant in all other things,

Save in the office and affairs of love.

Much Ado About Nothing, Act 2, Scene 1

The party erupted and splintered. Out of the corner of her eye, Maggie saw Lane collapse against Bridger Darrow's side. The masquerade, the punch, the fireworks, all of it was swept away in a rush of shock and horror.

"Ann wouldn't," she heard herself say. The blood was draining out of her head so fast it left her dizzy. Darrow half swiveled toward her, supporting Lane and urging him back to his feet. "She wouldn't," Maggie repeated, this time directly to him. "I know she wouldn't."

"Aunt Mildred will faint dead away if she hears this in the wrong way," said Violet, appearing at her side, materializing out of the crowd. Maggie turned in a circle, taking inventory of the chaos—Miss Applethwaite and a lady that Maggie assumed was her mother had stepped back into the gallery to whisper with other feathered, silken ladies; Winny nudged her way free of the milling guests to join Maggie and Violet; the figures on the balcony had disappeared back inside; music played on inside for nobody; Lane snapped out of his stupor and charged across the veranda, headed back inside, no doubt to find his wife and demand answers.

"I need you to find our family and keep them occupied, more importantly, away from

Ann,” said Maggie, taking Violet and Winny each by the elbow. Her sisters were ever-energetic coconspirators and disappeared in a puff of perfume and gasps to locate their aunts. Mr. Darrow had torn off after Lane, and so Maggie went with him, running to reach his side.

“Let me handle him,” Darrow muttered, eyes fixed on Lane. They all ducked inside, the warmth and the cheery lights and the good smells a sickening counterpoint to the disaster unfolding. “He and I have been through worse than this, he’ll come out the other side unscathed, I promise you that.”

Maggie didn’t like his tone and refused to peel away. Ahead of them by a few paces, Lane charged up the stairs. “Meaning what, exactly? You can’t actually believe that was Ann up there! Everyone is wearing masks! It could have been anyone.”

“Yes, and the woman was wearing Ann’s distinctive mask,” Darrow replied hotly. He took the stairs three at a time, and Maggie scrambled to keep pace, lifting her skirt. “Presumably, Ann herself.”

They reached one landing, then the next, the darkened corridor ahead leading to the family rooms. By then, she and Darrow had caught up to Lane as he raced through the estate.

“Ann is sick in love with you, Lane, she would never do something like this,” Maggie insisted, out of breath.

“It isn’t like her,” Lane agreed, grimacing, head down, charging like a bull.

“See?” Maggie arched a brow at Darrow.

“But I know what I saw,” added Lane with a huff. “That black hair, the mask, that lovely skin...”

“See?” Darrow shot back at her in an undertone.

Maggie stuffed the urge to stomp on his foot as they all reached the carpeted space just outside the antechamber of Ann’s private rooms. She ought to stomp on him for doubting sweet, devoted Ann, and for tricking Maggie—just for a second—into thinking he had named her as a lady author he admired and respected. That gruff “you” he had whispered while gazing into her eyes had made her heart twist, only for the delight of it to be dashed an instant later. What he had meant by that “you” she would probably never know, because now they were going to war over no more than a misunderstanding.

Two red vases on enameled plinths flanked the double doors, flowers pouring out of the tops, and they shook, along with the floor, as Lane marched up to the doors and pounded on one with his fist.

“That headache,” Lane was muttering to himself. “She did seem in distress, but if it was all a ruse, just a convenient excuse...”

Boom—boom—boom!

Lane slammed his hand down harder on the door.

“I know Ann is within,” he called. “As her husband, I demand to see her.”

Maggie sniffed and stood to the side, crossing her arms.

“What?” Lane growled, glaring.

“Who would admit you inside after hearing that?” she asked.

“Fine.” Lane sighed, gesturing. “You try, cousin.”

Darrow towered over her, pinning her with a matching grimace. “My friend’s patience is wearing thin, and for good reason.”

“Oh, but you are both too hotheaded. Step back,” Maggie demanded, she herself going to the white doors and knocking delicately, barely brushing the wood. “Lane’s cousin is here. Margaret Arden. May I come inside? I only wish to see that Ann is well and hear what she would say.”

There was a brief pause, then the doors to Ann’s chamber opened a crack, a pair of arresting brown eyes peering out. They belonged to Ann’s sister, Emilia.

“You,” Emilia murmured, nodding toward Maggie. “You may enter.”

Before Lane could block the way, Emilia’s fierce little hand reached out and grabbed Margaret by the wrist, dragging her inside while the men blustered and protested.

“Let me in!” Lane thundered. “I should like to speak to my wife!”

“She heard you,” said Emilia tartly, slamming the doors shut and locking them.

Emilia was quite a bit younger than Ann, though they possessed the same radiant beauty. Long black loops of hair hung over Emilia’s ears, pinned to the larger mass with starbursts of gems and clusters of silk flowers. Maggie couldn’t help but wonder if Emilia was the one Lane had seen on the balcony, for she so resembled her sister. But she saw no fear or guilt in the girl’s eyes as she wilted back against the locked doors. All of Emilia’s ferocity evaporated; her lips drew down in a hard grimace.

“Ann was hoping you would come,” Emilia whispered. She passed a shaking hand over her face. “The windows are open, and we’ve all heard the uproar in the house. It’s horrid what people are saying about Ann.”

“Why me?” she asked as Emilia led Maggie deeper into the series of rooms. They were done in vibrant blue and purple, a profusion of leafy plants erupting from every corner.

A voice answered from the next room, interrupting Emilia’s reply.

“Because I require a friendly face,” called Ann. “Allies, you see, and those whose sympathies do not necessarily align with a man’s opinion.”

“Dear Ann,” said Maggie as they passed through a square arch and into a shadowy bedroom. “Are you well?”

“Well? I’m furious!” Her friend was not strewn across her bed in distress, but rather fists-balled and planted near the balcony. It was the scene of the debacle, Maggie assumed, for it looked out onto the lawn and the pond farther across the grounds. “Furious and unwell.”

Her voice faltered, and Maggie went to her, supporting her with one arm around her waist. Ann pinched the top of her nose and hissed. Ann’s tagalong cousin rose from a bench near the window. Like Ann and Emilia, Ruby had brown skin and black hair, though hers was somewhat curlier. She didn’t share Ann and Emilia’s forthright beauty. She was mousier and darting, and when she spoke, her lips protruded forward, giving the appearance of a bunny nibbling clover.

“I’ve had the most unforgiving headache all evening and retired to sleep. Of course, I did not want to miss the gift from my parents, but I assumed fireworks would only worsen my condition, and now everything is ruined.”

Maggie helped her to an overstuffed chair near a writing desk and Ann slid into it, staring up with reddened eyes.

“Ask,” Ann grunted. “You must want to.”

“You love Lane with all your heart,” Maggie said at once. “There’s nothing to ask.”

Relief like sunshine broke across Ann’s face. “Then there’s hope,” Ann replied, voice thin and wavering. “It cuts deeply that he has jumped to a conclusion. But then, I hear it was a woman with black hair and my mask.”

“How did she come to have it?” Maggie asked.

Ann froze, her eyes sliding to the balcony again. “I wish I could tell you—”

Emilia, who had been lingering near the archway, made a strangled sound. “Think, didi, you must think! You know how these Englishmen are, if your story is not perfect and provable in every way then you will be blamed and ruined!”

“I know that!” Ann leapt to her feet, her voice powerful and full of pain. “Don’t you think I know that? I have combed over every step I took this evening, every word I spoke, and breath I breathed, and the best I can remember is handing my veil and mask to someone at the stairs before I came here to rest.” She paused, sinking down onto the chair again. “It could have been any of the staff, for these upper halls must have been empty for most of the night.”

“That does somewhat complicate things,” Maggie replied. “Yet we can trace that claim, yes? We can speak to your staff, and they will know where the mask and veil were taken. Indeed, it could have been a servant on the balcony. Can you think of anyone who resembles you? Even a little?”

Again, Maggie’s eyes traveled to Emilia and then Ruby, and she studied them subtly, detecting nothing there but concern and fear. Both girls were dressed in lavish gowns, though she couldn’t remember seeing them among the crowd attending the fireworks.

It would be something to ask Ann about privately, for it would be rude to cast suspicions about while the girls were standing there.

“Fanny has black hair and my height. She is one of my maids,” Ann said. She looked heartened by the promise of investigation. “I like to believe she would come forward and admit to the dalliance to spare me this humiliation, but I suppose everything and everyone must be questioned now.”

“Not me and not my sisters,” Margaret assured her. “We are your steadfast allies in this, Ann. I promise it.” Gently, she looked to Ann’s relations, adding, “And, of course, you have Ruby and Emilia.”

“It’s like a mystery from one of Emilia’s novels!” Ruby burst out, swishing her mouth to the side as she huddled against the wall.

“Hush, stupid, nobody has perished,” Emilia replied. “You are always bursting out with the most ridiculous notions. But even so, we will be determined in our pursuit of the truth. Ann deserves no less.”

And Maggie would find a way to bring Lane and Darrow around, too, for their word would matter. Ann nodded along to their words, distracted. “I thank you all, but it is very troubling, for there is the problem of the man that was with her. He must be located, too.”

“Tell me everything you can recall,” Ruby pressed.

“From a distance I could see that he was quite large, and I believe his hair was dark,” said Maggie, conjuring up the image of the couple embracing. “It was so quick and shocking, it’s hard to remember many details. His description could match so many of your guests...”

Ann made a wretched sound, tears gathering in her golden eyes. “How could Lane believe I would dishonor him in this way? And on our wedding day! I can never leave this room, Maggie, not without dying of shame.”

“The shame is not yours,” Emilia insisted, wringing her hands.

“That’s right, and now we must resolve to prove your innocence, if we can. Aunt Eliza has connections in London, there could even be a story in the Evening Gazette to clear your name. But if we are to tell the story—the true story of what happened tonight—we must know what happened.” Maggie squeezed Ann’s hands, then left the desk and chair, pacing near the balcony.

Ann drew in a shaking breath. “If anyone can tell my story, it is you.”

“I thank you for that, Ann, but we will require facts. We must be able to explain the whole scandal, who was involved, and why. The mask and the veil—have your things been recovered?”

“No,” whispered Ann. “I found nothing on the balcony. Those figures might have never been there at all, just ghosts, figments sent to shatter my life and happiness.”

“Nothing is shattered yet,” Margaret insisted. She couldn’t have Ann giving up, though she understood her hopelessness. “As impossible as it may seem, you must stay strong, Ann. Your resolution will only strengthen your claim of innocence.”

“It is not a claim! It is the truth!”

They were out of time. Muted voices could be heard gathering strength outside Ann’s chamber door. Emilia went to investigate, returning quickly. “Mrs. Richmond is here, and she sounds impatient.”

Winnie and Violet must have stalled as long as they could.

“I will speak to her,” said Maggie with a confidence she hardly felt. “Stay here, Ann, and let no one inside unless you trust them. Aunt Mildred—Mrs. Richmond—is terribly old-fashioned, and her sister will have been buzzing in her ears about reputations and gossip and all sorts.”

“She will open these doors!” Aunt Mildred could be heard screeching. “At once! At once! Where is Lane? Bring him here to me.”

Ann rose and gathered Maggie’s hands in hers, then pulled her into a strong embrace. “All of my hopes go with you.” Returning to the desk, she snatched a piece of parchment from inside a drawer, dunked an obliging quill in ink, and dashed off a note. She fanned it to help the ink dry, then blew on it, folded the note, and pushed it into Maggie’s hands.

“Can you deliver this to Lane?” she implored, wiping her red eyes. “Please...”

“Of course, Ann. Have Emilia stay close to the doors, she can pass along whatever she hears of my conversation with Mrs. Richmond.”

“Why?” asked Ann, studying her closely. “Why help me?”

Maggie shook her head. “You made a game of my spilled pages when you could have cast blame, and it is a simple thing to return that kindness. Thanks to you, my reputation among the wealthy men here has been salvaged. Which is heartening for my aunt, who is determined to marry me off to one of them.”

Ann’s note reminded her of the other message she had seen being delivered that evening, the tiny scrap folded and tucked under the vase. Recalling it made the back of her neck prickle with significance; someone was sneaking love notes and arranging

clandestine meetings, and could that have anything to do with the scandalous balcony kiss?

More knocking. More screeching. Maggie hastily crammed the note for Lane into her neckline and trotted to the door. “Right,” she said to the three ladies in a stage whisper. “I will rally Lane as best I can and search out your lost mask.”

“Fanny should have had it,” called Ann from a slumped position at the desk. “Lord, I hope she doesn’t have anything to do with this.”

Aunt. Lane. Maid. Mask. Maggie tried to repeat it to herself to cut through the bramble of worries in her mind. She had to keep Aunt Mildred from behaving rashly, which seemed an impossible task even for a talented storyteller.

Carefully easing outside, Maggie came nose to knuckle with Aunt Mildred’s fist as she raised it to knock on the door again. She ducked to the side, nearly colliding with one of the flower-stuffed vases outside the chamber.

“Good heavens! Margaret!” Her aunt tumbled backward into the frazzled grasp of Eliza.

All the ladies of her own blood had assembled there—Aunt Mildred, Aunt Eliza, and her sisters. Mildred’s lady’s maid was there, too, soothing her mistress frantically with a fan in each hand. Maggie’s first instinct was to study the faces of her sisters; unhelpfully, Winny looked frightened enough to fall down, and Violet was red-faced and sweating, dashing off a quick headshake to tell Maggie...something.

“How is she?” Violet at least asked, venturing a thoughtful question.

“Pleased with herself, I’m sure, I’m sure!” squawked Aunt Mildred, adding a third fan, her own, her graying golden curls blown this way and that. It was disquieting to

see how quickly her aunt had turned against Ann. Disquieting but not entirely surprising. Maggie didn't appreciate the way Aunt Mildred spoke about Mamma, and now she didn't approve of how she discussed Ann. "Now we are all talking about her, which is all the young lady ever desires."

"My, that is unkind, aunt," Winny murmured.

"It is kinder than she deserves!" their aunt added, whirling on poor Winifred.

"Have compassion; she is not at all well," Maggie announced, clearing her throat, raising her voice above the commotion. She hoped Emilia was listening closely at the door. "In fact, she...she..." Five stunned faces stared back at her. Lane and Mr. Darrow were missing, but perhaps it was best they could not add their suspicions to the moment. It was hateful to lie, but this was no ordinary circumstance. They needed time to prove Ann's innocence, and collecting sympathy for the bride would strengthen their chances. When she was a child, her papa would sit her under the shading branches of the tall elm in their back pasture, and, while she twiddled with the rabbit paw fluff of a gray willow bud, read from *Much Ado About Nothing*. He did all the voices. Little Maggie liked Beatrice best, naturally, for she was quick, clever, and never backed down.

Papa gave the friar character a wheezing, soft voice, and she could easily hear her father's voice in that impression, saying: "Your daughter here the princes left for dead. Let her awhile be secretly kept in, and publish it that she is dead indeed."

"She is not well," repeated Maggie, remembering Hero's feigned illness and death. "She...is..." Maggie swallowed, locking eyes with Violet, who increasingly looked like steam might pour out of her ears like a kettle while she awaited the final word. "Sick."

"Sick?" Aunt Eliza scoffed. "I do not believe it."

“No! Yes! She is absolutely ill. Very ill.” Maggie smoothed her hands nervously down her bodice. You’re the storyteller, oh brilliant one, so tell a story. “I have never seen a lady brought to frailty with such suddenness, with a brow dampened by fever, chills racking her body, her vigor utterly sapped. Dutiful Emilia waits at her side, but we must fetch a doctor. I recall that she complained of a headache to Lane and that is why she retired, but it appears her condition has deteriorated.”

“Ridiculous,” Aunt Mildred said, but slowly, as if doubting her own mouth. And Eliza, for her part, had gone quiet, brow furrowed with worry. “Fetch Lane here, then, and we will hear all about this so-called headache.”

“I will gladly find him,” Maggie volunteered brightly, already going.

Her aunt took a few steps, finding herself walled in by Violet and Winny. “But—”

“Do not disturb Ann!” she called once more over her shoulder as she turned the corner of the hall and broke into a run. It was up to Violet and Winny to keep their aunts out of that room. If any pair of stalwart ladies could do so, it was them. She felt confident that if Lane could be persuaded to Ann’s defense, the rest of the house would do the same. As she went, she heard muted grumbling from her aunts wondering after Lane’s valet, after Ann’s maid, and so forth. Maggie did not give them a chance to call her back. She returned to the grand staircase, hearing at once a commotion on the level below. The foyer was packed with guests preparing to leave, but milling and confused, no doubt afraid to appear rude by leaving without first giving their regards to the hostess. Maggie ignored them, choosing to hurry in the direction of the raised voices, both of them belonging to men.

It was easy enough to find the source of the upheaval. One masquerade and the whole of England is turned on its head, thought Maggie, who couldn’t imagine what further mischief had been made that night at Pressmore. The estate always retained an aura of magic and strangeness, surrounded by the wild gardens that seemed always to

encroach and creep upon the house, but she had never in her wildest dreams expected one evening of merrymaking to devolve into scandal and chaos.

She slipped down the stairs, turning left, racing down a plush, carpeted hall hung with art of pastoral children frolicking with lambs. Their painted expressions were awfully doleful given the subject matter, lending the scenes an eerie discordance. Someone had put out most of the candles in the hall, and the shadows felt entrenched. A bit of light spilled out from an open door toward the end of the corridor, the origin of the voices. She couldn't have been prepared for what she found upon arriving, for there inside were Lane and Mr. Darrow, huddled over a small, dark-haired young woman with her hands and feet bound, her cheeks streaked with tears fresh and old.

Given the lingering scent of tobacco, an unidentifiable but pleasant musk, and the lack of bonnets and ribbons, this was a chamber for a male guest. On the bed beside the young servant was a familiar blue mask with moons and a veil.

"These confounded knots!" Mr. Darrow was shouting. "Only a drunk could achieve this kind of muddle."

"Let me try," said Lane, kneeling on the bed behind the young woman.

The servant spotted Maggie snooping from the doorway and wailed, "Miss! Miss, please, you must go to my mistress, she must know I never meant for this to happen. Please! Don't turn me out, please..." She dissolved into blubbery tears while Lane and Mr. Darrow struggled to release her.

Maggie charged over to them, placing a gentle hand on the girl's shoulder. Her eyes drifted to the veiled mask. Well. That was one question answered.

"Christ," Mr. Darrow swore, throwing himself across the room. He opened a cupboard on the writing desk, fetching a small knife for letters, and returned to the

girl, slicing through the bindings with quick, decisive strokes.

Freed, Ann's lady's maid slithered onto the floor, hugging herself and crying.

"There, there," said Lane, straightening his waistcoat and jacket as he stood. He gave Maggie a helpless look, and she tended to the girl, kneeling beside her and taking the poor creature's hand.

"Forgive me, forgive me," the girl, Fanny, was repeating. "I should never have let Mr. Darrow entice me here, 'twas foolishness, all foolishness..."

At that, Maggie glared up at Darrow. "Mr. Darrow?"

"Not me, " he muttered, palming the knife with a growl. "My worthless swindler of a brother. It is he who is meant to be bound up in this room, not the girl. Now he is God knows where, and I would bet my last farthing this evening's mayhem is his doing."

A dark shadow fell swiftly over Darrow's face. Another figure appeared in the doorway, this one belonging to Lane's devoted, gray-haired valet. He was out of breath, pale, and bowed so quickly he nearly fell flat on his face. "Pardon the interruption, sir, I was trying to locate Fanny on Mrs. Richmond's behalf. It appears your wife has fallen ill and—"

"Ill?" Lane bounded across the chamber. "Then I must go to her, man, and now." He cast a glance over his shoulder at Maggie and Darrow, but he was already halfway out the door. His care for Ann in the midst of the great confusion touched Maggie; their reconciliation was not a lost cause.

"Look after Fanny," Lane was saying, off and away before Maggie could stop him and soothe his anxieties. He and his valet disappeared, leaving her cradling Fanny's hand on the ground while the maid sobbed quietly and Mr. Darrow stared down at

them. Maggie snapped her eyes shut, realizing she had failed to give Lane the note from Ann.

“How quickly did this sickness come upon her?” he asked, tearing her out of her frustration, the high arch of one brow suggesting deep suspicion.

Maggie stood, taking him aside and lowering her tone. “It is a lie I concocted to keep my aunt from turning Ann out of the house.”

“Margaret,” he chided, hard, forgetting himself. “Miss Arden, rather. Is that not a risky gambit, given the circumstances?”

Maggie drew back from him, cool. “Someone had to take her side.” Her gaze swiveled to the bed, the cut bindings, and the blue-and-gold mask. “And I’m glad I did, for it is becoming more and more apparent that there is mischief afoot, mischief meant to slander and demean her. Where, sir, is your brother?”

For which of my bad parts didst thou first fall in love with me?

Much Ado About Nothing, Act 5, Scene 2

“How the devil should I know?” Bridger stalked away from Miss Arden to the window. He opened it ferociously, nearly breaking the latch, then drank greedily of the sobering night air. Forget a punch, forget restraints, if Pimm was really the one trying to sabotage his friend’s happiness then he would kill the idiot himself.

Not kill, just...maim? Ship to America? He had failed to keep his temper in check, and it couldn’t happen again. Bridger compromised by slamming his fist down on the sill, startling the girl on the floor by the bed. She wailed again. Perhaps Ann’s cruel headache was going around, because now it had come for him. He pinched the top of his nose and closed his eyes.

“He’s a beast, and wherever he has gone, he won’t keep quiet for long,” he added. Miss Arden’s soft footsteps approached, swishing across the rug. “We need to question the girl. Something is not right here.”

“Then you believe me?” Miss Arden pressed. Her eyes were glittering when he chanced to look at her. The minx. Perhaps she had every reason to be smug. He had been quick to assume the worst of Ann, and now it seemed someone had concocted a plan to embarrass her. His own brother, no less.

“You believe that she would never hurt Lane this way?” she asked.

“I will make no statements of guilt or innocence where the lady is concerned,” he replied, turning to regard Fanny behind her. “But I will admit that my brother is almost certainly involved. The man on the balcony had his same brown hair and they are of similar height. He claimed to have no quarrels with Lane, but your cousin recently denied him a sum of money, and knowing his temper and rotten disposition, this sort of retaliation is not beyond him.”

“His temper,” she repeated quietly, thinking. “A trait you apparently share.”

Bridger grimaced and walked by her, their shoulders brushing. “Surely you can see now why I struck him.”

“Perhaps you did not swing hard enough,” she said, following. He allowed her a dry laugh. She wasn’t wrong. “Do you think he could still be in the house?”

“I doubt it,” he told her, going to stand a polite distance from the servant, who was still visibly rattled. “But it should be searched top to bottom just to be certain.” Then he sighed heavily, crouching near the girl. “Did he promise you anything? What did he say to get you in this room?”

Fanny lowered her head, shivering.

“It’s all right,” said Miss Arden sweetly. “You’re not in trouble, Fanny. We just need to know how all of this happened. Have you heard about what occurred on the balcony?”

The girl seemed more responsive to Miss Arden’s approach, so he kept silent. Watchful. Perhaps his experiences in the war were not suited to this particular kind of interrogation. Flies, honey, etc. “I h-heard the staff all running through the halls, and they were s-saying Miss Ann did something t-terrible. K-kissed a man who weren’t her husband.” She shook her head, curls coming loose from her cap, her watery eyes

imploring as she shakily stood. Miss Arden went to help her. “I tried to shout, but he had jammed the veil in me mouth and tied it with one of the ribbons.”

“That is indeed how we discovered her,” Bridger confirmed. He stood and rubbed the back of his neck, trying to chase off the headache.

Fanny kept her eyes trained on Miss Arden, who stroked the girl’s back. “Is Miss Ann truly that ill?”

“She will be better when this is resolved,” Margaret assured her. “It would help us if you answered Mr. Darrow’s questions. Did his brother say anything that might shed light on all this shadow?”

“I’ll be in so much trouble,” Fanny lamented, dropping her chin. “He saw me going back to Miss Ann’s chambers with her things, and he stopped me and whispered all these pretty things, and when he kissed me, I just thought maybe...maybe with the masquerade and everything, that it wasn’t so bad to go with him, just for a moment, just for...”

Miss Arden’s brilliant blue eyes bore into the side of his face.

“Go on,” he said, toneless.

“Just for a moment,” Fanny continued, heaving. “I thought it might be my turn for luck, for love.”

Bridger groaned.

“It does happen! It does!” Fanny insisted. “It was him who said marriage and all, I was just fool enough to believe him.”

“Marriage?” Margaret echoed. “Awfully desperate of him.”

“That’s Pimm for you.” Bridger turned in a tight circle like a caged animal, then swung back toward the girl. She shivered, and he tried and failed to soften his expression. “My apologies, Fanny, that he filled your head with lies and nonsense, but your candor is most welcome. Did he say anything about where he might go? What he might do?”

“N-no,” said the girl. “Just made his false promises, gave me those kisses, tied me up, and went on his way.” She mashed the heel of her palm into her right eye. “Stupid. Stupid, stupid...”

“You should return to your mistress and make your apologies.” He sighed, striding back to the window, desirous of air.

“Before you go, Fanny, one more question: does this mean anything to you?” And here Miss Arden recited a snatch of poetry or some such. “‘Blue and gold, our plan unfolds. Find me at midnight.’?”

The girl had no idea what Miss Arden was talking about, and neither did Bridger. The maid left, leaving them alone. He had left the small wooden box with his pipe, tobacco, and a tin of snuff on the sill, and then reached for the tin. “What was that?” he asked, studying her from the window. It was rude to smoke in a lady’s presence, but a pinch of snuff might be excused, given the extraordinary circumstances and the headache that was fit to make his head explode. Still, he gestured upward with the tin, asking, “Do you mind?”

Margaret pursed her lips in a thoughtful and altogether darling way, scrunching her nose, then shook her head, indicating he could continue. “I suppose I should tell you...”

“Absolutely you should.”

“Now that we are in agreement that Ann is innocent,” she pressed, sly.

“Mm.” Noncommittal. Bridger indulged in a pinch of snuff, the rush of the stuff bringing immediate relief and clarity.

“ Now that we are in agreement, ” Miss Arden insisted, watching him, almost snarling.

“Very well!” Bridger let her have that one. “It is increasingly clear that Pimm was the brute on that balcony, and I’ve only ever known Ann to be a woman of sense and taste, and no woman of sense and taste would put her mouth near his.”

Margaret nodded, satisfied, and came to join him. Before he could react, she took her own pinch of snuff and popped it up her nostril. She inhaled, hard, and went cross-eyed, then reeled, tipping backward. Bridger caught her before she could teeter away. He couldn’t help but laugh at the brashness of it, and at her reaction.

Shaking her head, she rubbed delicately at her red nose. “Horrible! Exhilarating! Why on earth do you like this?”

“The exhilarating part,” he chuckled.

“I’ve always wanted to do that,” she said with a crooked smile, coughing. “I begged and begged, but my father never allowed it, even if I only wanted to know how to describe it for my characters.”

That was...oddly impressive. He could just imagine Margaret driving her father half-mad, obsessed with capturing the *vérité* of experiencing a pinch of snuff.

“Understandably. Now, Miss Arden, if you are done throwing caution to the wind, could you kindly explain the blue-and-gold plan?” He put the tin of snuff back in the box and latched it. That was plenty for the moment. If his father saw him like this, with this sort of woman, and enjoying it, it might be what finally put him in his grave. It was easy to shake off the thought with Miss Arden’s bright eyes sparkling up at him.

“My sisters and I discovered a man leaving a note under a vase at the party this evening,” she said. “We went to investigate it—”

“Ah. Naturally.”

“And ’tis a good thing we did,” Margaret charged on, ignoring his glibness. “For it appears someone was trying to arrange a meeting to plan something. Listen: ‘Blue and gold, our plan unfolds. Find me at midnight.’?”

Bridger frowned, stroking his chin, relieved, at least, that his headache had dissipated. Then, he reached for his pocket watch, a gift from John Dockarty when Bridger finally decided to pursue publishing. “We need to search the house anyway, for my brother could still be skulking about. This is as good an excuse to start as any. ’Tis nearly midnight, but where to look? Blue and gold, blue and gold...It isn’t much to go on.”

Miss Arden took away her pretty eyes, going back to the bed where Fanny had been tied up and left. Her fingertips ghosted atop the blanket, and Bridger felt the back of his neck tighten with desire. It was an absent gesture, nothing meant by it, but the light touch of her nails over the blanket stirred an unbidden inkling of seduction in him. He closed his eyes tightly, focusing again on the problem at hand. They needed to find his idiot brother, and they needed to discover the identity of the mystery woman that had been with him. The guests might be tight-lipped and secretive if they knew anything, but Pimm would fold under enough pressure; more importantly, he

could never resist gloating.

Leaving Fanny in Bridger's part of the suite, on his bed, was no coincidence. Pimm was goading him, sending a message. That the oaf was a step ahead of them made him want to tear open the balcony door and scream into the night, but he mastered himself. At least they had this secret note to investigate; nervously, he consulted his pocket watch.

"What about the Sapphire Library?" Margaret concluded.

"Sensible," Bridger replied, nodding, one fist on his hip. "And Pimm does prefer the brandy from the shelf there. But are you sure you want to be alone with a man who has no patience for Jane Bennet?"

Margaret rolled her eyes. "Do not try to force a compliment, Mr. Darrow; stay on task. I remember Ann recently had the southwest gardens redone in a Grecian style," she said quickly. He had to stop looking at her delicate hand brushing over the bed, or he would lose focus. "And from her letters to me, I know the tiles under the dome are blue and yellow, so perhaps he means to meet at the new temple."

"?'Tis two minutes to midnight," Bridger said, already crossing toward the door. "We will be far behind if we go to the gardens now."

"But we could split up," Margaret suggested and hurried up beside him. "I could try the library while you go to the temple."

"Absolutely not," he muttered. "Out of the question."

"But to catch him—"

Bridger took her aside as soon as they stepped outside into the corridor. It was quiet

in that part of the house now, guests either abed or long gone in their carriages, and the uproar of the scandal centered now on Ann's chambers. Bridger didn't mean to trap her against the wall, but it happened that way, and noticing her alarm, he took a small step back, then ran his hand impatiently through his hair. "My brother is a dangerous man, Miss Arden. Whether we are friends or not, I would never allow you to be with him alone. We go together or not at all."

With difficulty, she swallowed, and it drew his attention to the lovely column of her neck, and the gentle slopes of her breasts pushing against the neckline of her amber gown. She was beautiful and distracting, and it had been a long while since any woman's body, in sum or in parts, had lodged in his mind so swiftly for later revisiting.

Snap out of it, man.

She did not move away from him, but indicated she understood with a single nod. "The library, then," she murmured. And they went, together.

12

Give every man thine ear, but few thy voice;

Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgment.

Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 3

Maggie struggled to keep pace with Mr. Darrow as his powerful legs carried him at daunting speed through the house, down the stairs, and to the aptly named Sapphire Library. Every shade of rich blue was represented in the vaulted chamber, giving one the feeling that they were standing inside of a crystal. Though the room itself was spacious, it was also filled to overflowing with cupboards, shelves, tables laden with displayed trinkets, and comfortable, overstuffed furniture. It was perhaps not fashionably appointed, a rarity for Pressmore, but it offered privacy for reading and conversation, as well as a well-stocked brandy cabinet and clear view out onto the south lawn.

They had crossed through the foyer, where a few guests bid one another goodbye. There was a crack of a whip outside on the drive as a carriage pulled away. Mr. Darrow went ahead of her, holding his forefinger to his lips and commanding her to stay where she was. He went swiftly around each shelf, hunting through the nooks of the library, almost silent as his shadow appeared and disappeared, and he crept in and out of the shallow pools of waning candlelight.

“Nobody,” he said with a disgruntled sigh. His hair had become quite disheveled, and it gave him a more approachable air. She preferred it, after having him back her into

the wall upstairs with an intensity that set her on edge. No man had ever spoken to her that way, with such heat and proximity, his gaze almost painful to hold as he worried over her safety.

Mr. Darrow glanced at his pocket watch. “I fear we have chosen the wrong location...”

“Perhaps our conspirators are very prompt,” she replied with a frown. Maggie stepped around him, navigating the cramped aisle between two floor-to-ceiling bookcases. A curved window alcove stuck out from the far wall, lined with a cushioned bench. Crawling onto the bench, she swished the lush blue curtains aside and stuck her nose close to the glass, peering out into the night. A few lanterns still burned along the path to the pond, and to the right of that, a gray snake of cobblestones wound away toward the newly built Grecian temple and its matching garden. “Or else we—”

Maggie fell silent, hearing muted voices from beyond the bookcases behind them. Mr. Darrow had followed her to the alcove, and as she froze, his hand landed on her shoulder and squeezed. Her eyes flew to his, and she watched him search along the wall to their right. There was a large, deep cabinet there, carved with cherubs and vines. With all caution and care, Mr. Darrow took a giant step toward the cabinet, twisted open the handle, and peered inside. Then, without words or a gesture of warning, his strong hand wrapped around Maggie’s left wrist, and pulled her inside.

With the door shut, it was pitch-black inside. The cabinet was half-full, one side taken up by wooden shelves laden with brandy bottles, leaving scant space indeed for two adults. Which is to say, it was a perilously tight fit.

“I can’t see a thing,” she muttered, struggling to even find a face to glare at. Fortunately, it also meant he could not perceive her blushing. Her left side rested snugly against his right, the heat of his leg warming through the thin fabric of her

gown.

Mr. Darrow leaned down and lightly tapped the keyhole near the handle.

“You’re shorter,” he whispered.

Maggie swallowed her tart response, the voices from before moving closer. Whoever had crept into the library behind them followed their same path through the shelves and cases, arriving near the window alcove to speak in low voices. Close as they were, Maggie wondered if Mr. Darrow could feel her pulse hammering against her breastbone; she was certain they were about to learn the identity of their mystery balcony lady.

“I’ve told Bloom to have the house searched for that detestable Mr. Darrow.” It was Aunt Mildred speaking, her voice dripping with venom. Bloom served as steward of the household, overseeing the staff. He was ancient; Maggie couldn’t remember Pressmore without him. “My son is convinced he’s seducing every woman in the house and leading them astray.”

“Every woman except Ann,” and this was said by her other aunt, Eliza.

“Oh, he will never speak a word against Ann.”

“Nor should we, sister, if she is truly ill...” Aunt Eliza trailed off, sighing.

Maggie scrunched down toward the keyhole, trying to catch a glimpse of the women.

“We will know all about that soon enough; Bloom has sent a boy for the physician, and likely he will arrive by dawn,” Mrs. Richmond told her. They were both draped in shawls and Aunt Mildred in particular looked miserably tired. She sat on the bench at the window and gazed out at the darkened grounds. “I can’t help but think it is a

fiction concocted by our niece. Like my son, she is utterly devoted to Ann.”

“Kindred spirits, I think,” said Eliza. “They are both hopelessly wild.”

Aunt Mildred shook her head. “I tried, you know, to persuade him against it.”

“Of course, sister, of course.”

“But it seems our family is doomed, saddled with foolish, obstinate children—at least where marriage and the vital choices of life are concerned.” She glanced around the library as if distracted and Maggie held her breath. Did she sense them there? Seemingly not, for Aunt Mildred rose and disappeared from her view, then returned a moment later with a glass of brandy. She took up her place on the bench and downed the drink.

“Sister,” Eliza chided.

“What? Oh, save your judgment, Eliza, it is only you and I.”

“I see. If I am not allowed to judge, then I suppose I must join you.” And Aunt Eliza did exactly that, going to pour her own generous amount of brandy. The two women shared a dry, long-suffering laugh as they reconvened on the plush bench. “Perhaps when the staff conclude their search, Bloom can have someone scrounge up Miss Margaret, who has conveniently vanished since proclaiming Ann’s condition.”

“Just like Emmeline,” said Aunt Mildred in a bleak wheeze. “Worse.”

“That remains to be seen.” For a brief, uplifting beat Maggie thought Eliza might just stick up for her. “I think Mr. Gibson will have her if he can be persuaded to forget this ridiculous notion of New South Wales. Have you seen his home at Winnowick? Expansive.”

Aunt Mildred cackled and went to refill her brandy.

Eliza tapped her finger thoughtfully on the rim of her cup, brow creased in concentration. “And it will be up to us to see that she does not squander her charms on the Darrow boy. I spied them together this evening and there was a familiarity and ease to her posture I did not like. It is only a passing infatuation, I think, and all because of her novel. Her novel! Her novel! Well. We will put a stop to all of that, won’t we?”

“Did you see her fingernails? Stained black with ink. Emmeline should have done something years ago,” agreed Mildred, returning. “There were indications.”

“It is a favor we do Margaret, lest she fracture the family further.”

Mildred swanned down onto the cushions and made a weird, strangled sound. “Sometimes I have a mind to forgive Emmy.”

“No, sister, no. You mustn’t. Any softness now will only encourage Margaret, lead her to believe this behavior of hers is tolerable. Do not forget—it is my cottage they occupy, my goodwill they exploit, my money spent while the girl wastes her youth and beauty on nonsense. I have a mind to withdraw it all, all that charity, and see how smart Miss Margaret believes herself to be then.” Eliza snorted down into her cup.

“Too harsh, sister. It is not her doing, after all, these far-fetched dreams. Emmy never put her foot down and the father was too permissive. She is a clever young lady, just a weed grown unmanaged; I have a mind to invite her to stay on at Pressmore so that she might be trimmed back and tamed. A vine without a stake grows unchecked.” Aunt Mildred rose elegantly, contemplated the last of her brandy, swallowed it on a shudder, and finished, “We must all compromise eventually. I have faith in us, faith that we will right the wrongs of the mother.”

They continued to converse, the topic moving back to Ann's alleged illness and Lane's worry, and when it was clear they were no longer in the library itself, Maggie slumped forward against the cupboard door, her face on fire. It was getting hot in the cramped cupboard, and she had almost forgotten Mr. Darrow was there.

"The wrongs of the mother," she murmured aloud, squeezing her eyes shut. "And yet her great misdeed was marrying Papa."

A gentle hand touched her back and Maggie jumped, remembering the man squished in beside her.

"It's never easy to endure such things," Mr. Darrow said. There was a tight rage to his voice that she couldn't quite interpret. "And overheard, no less. My father had the decency to say it to my face."

"Decency or cruelty?" she asked, exhausted. Exhausted, overheated, and in desperate need of a private sob. Mr. Darrow was quiet. She felt him breathing against her, and it was comforting. Steady. He wasn't clamoring to get out. And why not? Her aunts had just made it abundantly obvious that she was the embarrassment of the family, a broken doll that must be swiftly fixed and lined up for marriage like every other girl of her age. Maggie found the strength to stand, shaky. "I think I shall stay in this cupboard forever."

Mr. Darrow reached past her, gently, and rattled the latch. What must he think of her? She didn't even know what she thought of herself. Ann had put it best: torn in a hundred directions. There was the right thing to do—listen to her aunts, accept their guidance, meekly marry whomever they put in front of her—but in her heart she knew it wasn't the Margaret thing to do. She felt feverish. Jumbled. Her thoughts spun.

"You may just get your wish, Miss Arden. It appears we are trapped."

Mr. Darrow pushed hard against the interior latch, shaking the entire cupboard.

Of course they were. Maggie erupted with laughter. It was too funny, too, too funny.

“I’m glad you’re amused, but I’m afraid we are no closer to discovering the identity of our mystery woman, and unless you would like to pass the night together in this—blasted—cupboard!” He punctuated each word with a crunching slam of his shoulder against the door. Blowing out a long breath, he leaned back against the wooden wall and closed his eyes. “Unless you would like to pass the night together in this cupboard, we need to find a way out.”

“Right. Forgive me.” Maggie brushed a few sweaty strands of hair behind her ear and tried to shake off the sick, jittery feeling trembling through her body. “Let us push together. One, two, three!”

Side by side, they both threw their weight against the jammed door. It flew open with a crack, dumping them unceremoniously on the patterned blue rug just outside, positioned near the window alcove. Maggie landed first, letting out a muted shriek of surprise and alarm as she crumpled to the floor, Mr. Darrow tipping out on top of her. All that time spent on campaign must have sharpened his reflexes, for he nimbly caught himself, hands on either side of her head, only the scantest weight of his hips landing on her. It didn’t hurt too badly, but she gasped, her hands flying up to protect her head.

“Are you injured?” he asked, rolling to the side, and kneeling beside her.

The gentle blue glow of the library suited his dark coloring, making twin tempests of his almost black eyes. The sight of him would take a weaker woman’s breath away, she thought, then realized she was having trouble catching her own. She had tried to give the hero of *The Killbride* his same intensity, his same controlled strength. Looking at him then, it was hard to imagine his temper, for he seemed totally

contained, gentle in the solicitous probing of his eyes.

He offered his hand, and Maggie took it, captured at once by the calloused warmth of his fingers. That strength she sensed wasn't imagined, for she felt it resonate through his grasp.

She felt the presence watching them before she heard the soft gasp of surprise.

Bridger tugged her smoothly to her feet, half catching her to keep her on balance, while a pale, cool face watched them from the aisle formed by the bookcases. The brighter light of the hallway illuminated her like a winter torch: Regina Applethwaite, unmasked and languidly fanning herself while her eyes gathered frost.

"I'm told your sisters are looking for you, Miss Arden," said Regina, then disappeared, leaving nothing but a chill in her wake.

"This," Miss Margaret murmured, stumbling over her words or her thoughts or both. She hastily pressed a folded piece of paper into Bridger's hands. She stepped back from him, and instantly, he missed her glowing warmth. Even in the gloom of the Sapphire Library's scant candles, he saw she was incandescently flushed. "I was meant to give this to Lane. Ann will be cross with me if he doesn't get it. Can you...Could you...I..."

Bridger grinned, combing a steadying hand through his hair, dismayed to find it was hopelessly mussed. "Of course, Miss Arden. I'll see that he gets it."

She took a few steps away toward the open doors, stopped, and pivoted back toward him. They had been caught, and not by the most forgiving sentinel. He groaned internally thinking of the gossip Regina would spread. Let her. Perhaps it was history repeating itself, his interest in a woman of questionable material means but rich in spirit and mind. And perhaps Regina would hate him even more for it, but a change in

him was occurring, a desire to separate himself from the demands and judgments of his father, and it felt good .

It would feel better once he brought Pimm to heel and returned him to Fletcher. Once he was free of his own burdens, once he knew the family fortune wasn't entirely spent, then, oh then, he might finally make a choice for himself—not out of necessity, but out of pure desire.

Bridger watched Margaret leave the library, his heart light then heavy, heavy as he remembered the weight of the words that had been heaped onto her by her aunts. It wasn't his business to know how dire a burden they considered her, but now he did know. He knew, and his heart swelled with sympathy. He tarried just a moment in the oceanic darkness of the Sapphire Library, letting Margaret get some distance from him before he ventured out to find Lane. It wasn't difficult to locate him; Lane was posted at the front doors, anxiously rocking back and forth on his heels as he waited for the physician to arrive from the village.

The house had gone ghostly quiet. Lane stood in the square of light spilling out onto the low stone steps that led up to the house. He looked like an actor on stage, waiting nervously to take his cue.

“There you are!” Lane slumped forward at the sight of his friend. “The day guests have departed, off to whisper about this to anyone who will listen in London, I’m sure. Everyone else is abed. One never knows who one’s true friends are until something like this happens. They were content enough to eat our food and toast to our happiness, and now they are equally glad to pick through our lives like vultures. Thank God for the rare, constant friend,” said Lane, clapping him on the shoulder. “Say, where have you been?”

“Hunting for Pimm, but I’ve come up short,” he said. I, not we. There was enough scandal fodder on offer. Nobody needed to hear about them getting stuck in a brandy

cupboard, and Lane had enough on his plate already. “The search continues in the morning.” We, not I. Hopefully. “Have the staff flushed him out?”

“I’m afraid not,” Lane murmured, eyes wandering back to the drive, back to the empty space where he hoped the physician would appear. “What has gotten into him?”

“Desperation,” Bridger replied in a dark rasp. “He knows he should be penned up at Fletcher like a loose hog, but he’s always had a wild nature. He rages against the inevitable. Father needs him, and I need him to look after Father, and Pimm never does what he’s told.”

“After everything, after...” Lane’s thought meandered, and he rubbed his eyes with thumb and forefinger. There was a bluish, ill cast to his face that Bridger disliked. “Blazes, he won’t show his face around here again, I’ll wager you that.”

“Not willingly.” Bridger waved that away and guided Lane back inside to where it was at least a bit cheerier in the candlelight. “Let me worry about Pimm, yes? Here, Ann wanted you to have this.”

Bridger produced the note Margaret had entrusted him with and offered it solemnly to his friend.

“And how did you get it?”

“Your cousin. She was meant to deliver it earlier in the evening, but you ran off to tend to Ann before she could do it.”

Lane tore open the note, reading it silently, his lips forming the words. His eyes softened and his shoulders lowered, the hard-coiled knot of nerves in his back unwinding all at once. “Oh, my darling,” he murmured. Bridger couldn’t help but

share in his friend's relief as Lane handed him the tiny slip of paper. It simply read:

Trust that your heart knows the answer.

"We'll find Pimm," Bridger promised him. "And the lady impersonating your wife."

Lane nodded, absent. "Mother is furious, and I strove in earnest to bring her around to Ann's qualities. Now this. Now this..."

Bridger repeated his vow and took leave of his friend. It was all he could do for the moment, but his friend's despair had leapt to him like a disease. He really ought to be leaving for London in the morning, but now he had to chase his idiot brother down. In his absence, work at the publishing firm would crawl to a stop, and he felt a choking sensation rise in his throat as he pictured again the ledgers from his family estate. It was as if Pimm couldn't help himself, couldn't stop himself from making everything worse. He cleared his throat, but the tight feeling remained; lord, it felt like it was up to him to solve his family's problems and Lane's. Alone.

Maybe not alone. He half smiled at the thought of meeting up with Miss Arden in the morning to continue their search. Perhaps there was one advantage to delaying his return to town. That smile disappeared as quickly as it arrived, for he then remembered the savage dressing-down her aunts had given. Margaret Arden was not rich with a tempting dowry, and what Bridger needed more than anything at that moment was a solution to his financial problems. His throat itched and burned; it felt like the world was pressing down around him. If he was expecting to find anyone lying in wait near his guest chamber, ready to attempt another ambush, it was Pimm. Instead, he discovered Regina, hands folded primly by her waist, tarrying near the pastoral tapestry hung beside the door. He was already thoroughly exhausted and seeing her there, eyes bright with mischief, nearly crushed his patience into dust.

Not now. Curse her devilish timing.

Bridger opened his mouth to inquire what it was she wanted, but Regina launched in before he could make a sound.

“What are your intentions with the Arden girl?” she asked, subtly moving between him and the door. Regina, physically angelic in every respect, had retained her beauty in the years between their meetings, but there was a hardness to her cheeks and chin now that hadn’t been there before. It wasn’t gauntness exactly, but like she had been chiseled into a more severe iteration.

“My intentions are my own, madam,” Bridger replied, stiff. He regarded her down the length of his nose, eager to escape this confrontation and climb into bed. That burning feeling in his throat spread down to his chest, his heart beating faster. “We are little more than acquaintances these days, and I find the question impertinent.”

“Impertinent?” Regina laughed, heedless of the late hour. She came closer, narrowing her pale blue eyes. “You have no idea, do you? No idea what you did.”

His patience vanished. His temper, which he thankfully never lost toward a woman, emerged without warning.

“I beg your pardon?” Bridger shook his head, squeezed the edges of his eyebrows, and tried to dodge around her. Regina wouldn’t budge, even as she eyed him with increasing fear. “Right. I see you are determined to enlighten me.”

Regina’s mouth hung open for an instant, a rare chink in her otherwise flawless social decorum. Swiftly, she composed herself and moved aside, granting him access to his room. “Do you even remember how you addressed me in those letters? The belittling? The condescension? I didn’t write a word of my own for years, and it took me that long to recover the barest confidence!”

Her voice climbed to a frantic pitch. Bridger found it hard to look at her. Regina took

a few steps forward, as if she meant to follow him. His temper soared again. “Back away,” he commanded, hostile enough to make her freeze. In a calmer tone, he continued, “I do remember our correspondence, Miss Applethwaite. At the time, there were questions...objections. My father insisted—”

“Those letters were written in your hand, Bridger,” she cut in, setting her jaw. “Yours, not your father’s.”

If he could rest a little, have time to think and gather his thoughts, he might offer a satisfactory explanation...But no. She insisted on pressing him on this subject. She didn’t have the context, and she didn’t understand. Nobody but his brother, mother, and the staff at Fletcher knew what it was like to live with his father. He might be a sickly, frail man now, but not then, oh no, not then. It had taken years of military experience to dampen the terror he experienced in his father’s presence. Even home from France, even hardened, that fear lingered. “Youthful mistakes,” he muttered, waving her off. “Ancient history.”

Regina’s voice quavered as she pinned him with one last skewering look, vowing: “I won’t let you do it again, do you hear me? I won’t let you break her spirit the way you broke mine.”

Bridger took one step toward her, a new edge to his temper, a hard reaction from a soft place. “Is that a threat, Regina?”

She shrank from him and ran, and the minute he was alone, he felt the cold plunge of guilt.

13

I count myself in nothing else so happy

As in a soul remembering my good friends.

Richard II, Act 2, Scene 3

“Maggie! Dearest, where have you been?”

Once inside the dark sanctuary of Ann’s rooms, Winny’s face was the first to appear. Both of her sisters came running out of the shadows, throwing themselves around Maggie and sweeping her into a tight embrace. She sank into their arms, hearing footsteps from around the corner as Ann, Emilia, and Ruby came to investigate the commotion.

“We were worried sick and put about to all the staff and anyone who would listen that you should be summoned at once,” said Violet, pushing Winny to the side and holding Maggie at arm’s length. Violet’s inspection was thorough and completed through a beady glare. “Is something the matter with you? Your face is very strange. Did that Darrow man or his brother tie you up? We have heard the most conflicting and wild stories!”

Maggie gently removed Violet’s digging fingers from her shoulders, and carried herself, exhausted, to Ann. Poor Ann had been crying most of the evening, if the tear tracks and welts beneath her eyes were any indication. “I have not been tied up or anything of the sort,” Maggie reported to them all. They moved as a singular

organism, around the corner, down the short hall, and into the low-lit, warm core of Ann's bedchamber. The red curtains stirred gently around the balcony, honeysuckled air blown up from the gardens below. Fanny was there, dutifully laying out blankets and pillows for the sudden profusion of ladies crammed into Ann's quarters.

She gave Maggie a quick, apologetic glance as she smoothed her hands across a heavy quilt.

As the women huddled on Ann's bed, all eyes and ears were trained on Maggie. They were like a gaggle of wives waiting for news of the war, all clasped hands and mouths open in anticipation.

"I'm sure Fanny has told you what she knows," said Maggie, looking her way once more.

"She has, and though she behaved badly indeed, we must not forget that a gentleman of Paul Darrow's experience is horribly persuasive," Ann replied. "Do you think he was the man in shadow on the balcony?"

"I do." Maggie took her hands and sighed. "And his own brother believes him to be the culprit, too."

Fanny cursed Paul Darrow softly, receiving an admonishing look from both Ruby and Winny.

"Recall, sisters, that we found a note beneath a vase on a bench in the gallery," Maggie went on.

"Of course! And it must be related!" Violet exclaimed. "I was so distracted with our aunts that it utterly slipped my mind."

Maggie briefly explained the note on the bench to Ann and the others, catching them up, finishing with “And it mentioned a meeting at midnight, a blue-and-gold place. Mr. Darrow—not the horrid one, the other one—and I thought it might mean the Sapphire Library or perhaps the new Grecian temple, but we could only choose the one to investigate. We went to the library at the appointed time, but we must have guessed wrong, for the couple did not appear.”

Which reminded her: Mildred and Eliza. She blanched and slithered toward the edge of the bed, tugging her sisters as she went. “We shouldn’t stay any longer, Ann. I think it would be best if we returned to our rooms, or Aunt Eliza will notice our absence and fret.”

And judge. And condemn.

“Absolutely not!” Violet tore her hand away, sulking. “Ann needs us.”

“I’m inclined to agree,” Winny added softly. She worried her lower lip with her teeth. “If it is pleasing to Ann, and she wishes it, it would be better to surround her with the support she deserves.”

Ann touched both sisters on the shoulder gently. “Of course you should stay. There is a dangerous man on the loose, tying up ladies, terrorizing the house with his devilry. I would much prefer to know you are all safe here with me.”

Ruby giggled, kneeling at the foot of the bed. Her cousin Emilia elbowed her. “It isn’t funny,” she hissed.

Withdrawing, Ruby rubbed her arm. “But it is just like the scoundrels in your books—”

“How would you know? Your head is only ever in the clouds,” Emilia muttered.

“I read,” Ruby shot back, wrinkling her nose. She charged on defensively. “And everyone says my penmanship is unmatched, and it is only because I spend so much time copying out passages from *The Romance of the Forest* .”

“So that is where my books are going, it’s you that’s stealing them!”

“Borrowing!”

The girls went on, bickering harmlessly. In her heart, Maggie wanted to stay. It was warm there, and she was so very tired. But she couldn’t stop thinking about her aunts, and how cruelly they had described her. Before she could argue, Ann drew Maggie away from the others and the bed and toward the blousy curtains of the balcony. As she passed her cousin, she added, “Hush, Ruby, or my headache will return with claws!”

Ruby shrank and retreated to the corner, where she took up one of her ill-gotten books from Emilia and kept to herself. Giving a stilted curtsy, Fanny left them, latching the door behind her.

“Sweet as clotted cream but sometimes just as dense.” Ann sighed. “Now, Maggie, just as your sister noted, your expression has been wrong since you came in and I would know why. ’Tis my name on the line, yes? If there is something I should know...”

Maggie lowered her voice and took Ann’s hands in hers, squeezing. “When I was in the library with Mr. Darrow, we happened to overhear my aunts discussing some...distressing aspects of my character. My life. In short, Ann, they tore me to pieces. Wolves rend with more kindness.”

“Ah, and so you would whisk away your sisters to please your aunt?” Ann’s serious frown melted away.

“If she can be pleased.”

Ann’s eyes brightened and she pulled Maggie closer. “Exactly.”

“I don’t know, I just don’t know,” Maggie whispered, looking out the window and toward the sloping lawn. All the lanterns had been put out. The darkness there seemed to pulse, consuming, infiltrating the room with velvety black fingers. She shivered. “They want Mr. Gibson for me, and I have a mind to relent.”

“New South Wales?”

“The very same.”

Ann pushed her jaw forward, and she nodded slowly, rhythmically as she visibly combed through her feelings on the matter.

“All they think about is money. And the way they talk about my mother! I had no idea they resented her this deeply for marrying Papa. If only I could be free to pursue my book, see it published, that would be income for us, perhaps even enough to grant Violet a good dowry. But there is no time and no lenience, the world for us is what it is, and Aunt Eliza has a mind to turn us out of her cottage to punish me, teach me a lesson, and if Mr. Gibson is rich and willing...”

Softly, Ann laughed at her. It wasn’t mean-spirited, just pitying. “So then, you will marry Mr. Gibson and be as wealthy and embittered as your aunts.”

Maggie gasped. “Ann!”

“What? Am I wrong?”

“Not at all wrong,” Maggie admitted with a tense shrug.

“But it is easy for me to say such things, for I have gotten everything I wanted, or at least, I did have everything. Now that is imperiled because of one couple’s public mischief, and the readiness of others to turn on a foreigner. Nothing is constant, Maggie, nothing is certain, except perhaps what ultimate desire burns in your heart.” Ann gestured toward her own bed, where Winny and Violet had curled up side by side, napping like kittens in a basket. “Your sisters adore you, Maggie. They will forgive. They will understand. You are not your mother, and they are not your aunts.”

Maggie said nothing, her heart too big for her chest. There was too much to consider, and foremost in her mind was how selfish it would be to never think of her sisters’ happiness and only prioritize her own. Society would not change just to please her, and the weight of such things tended to crush the person, not the rules.

“Now,” said Ann, leaning into her. “You and Mr. Darrow were alone in the library? For how long exactly?”

It was Maggie’s turn to laugh, this time incredulously. “Is that all you can think about at a time like this?”

Ann drifted away from the window to rejoin the others on the bed. “My mother prepared me for such things long before I ever touched English soil. She warned me that my first mistake would be my last, that if I could make myself into the image of a perfect English gentlewoman then I would be tolerated, that I must not be just accomplished, but the most accomplished, that I must not be beautiful, but the most beautiful. That I must not be agreeable, but the most agreeable. These were not suggestions, Margaret, they were rules governing my survival.”

“It sounds impossible,” Maggie murmured, following. Fanny had returned carrying a tray of light refreshments. She hadn’t realized how hungry she was until her eyes landed on the food.

“It’s meant to be, and the frustrating part is that your aunts know it,” Ann told her simply. Then her golden eyes brightened as Fanny brought around the food, and she picked out a small pastry studded with glistening dates. All the girls scampered close to find something to eat. Ann reclined on the bed, studying Maggie with keen interest. “Nothing would distract me better than a story, Maggie. Perhaps you could start with what transpired this evening between you and Mr. Darrow.”

“You’re relentless,” Maggie muttered, perusing the tray of treats. But the women had gathered round, and it was clear there was no escaping this interrogation. Curiously, she found it easy, even exciting, to discuss the perplexing Bridger Darrow.

Later, she slept fitfully. Violet snored and Winny’s feet were pressed against hers, ice-cold. Lapsing in and out of consciousness, her dreams were filled with stormy eyes and a looming presence, not sinister, not imposing, just there and watchful. It was not long until a disturbance outside the doors roused them all, for the physician from town had finally come and he was eager to see Ann. The ladies composed themselves in a panicked flurry, with Ann pretending to be at death’s door while everyone else sniffled into handkerchiefs and blotted their eyes. Fanny left them to welcome the doctor, Madigan. He was known to the family, dined with them often, and was, according to Ann, a well-meaning but nervous person.

Ann called Maggie to her side with an urgent waving of her hand, turned onto her side, and whispered, “You mustn’t linger here with us. Did you not have suspicions that the kissing couple might meet at the Grecian temple?”

“I can’t imagine they would risk meeting there in broad daylight,” said Maggie, hearing the doctor shuffle inside.

“No, but there could be some trace of their coming and going, and...oh, Maggie, I don’t know, but we mustn’t give up looking,” Ann cried, rubbing her eyes to make them redder. She didn’t have to try very hard; it was obvious she had not slept and

had spent most of the night crying silently. “I don’t know how much longer I can bear to lie about being ill!”

“Then, of course I will go,” Maggie replied, squeezing her friend’s hand with a heartening smile. That seemed to soothe Ann. And Maggie was grateful for an excuse to leave, for it was becoming stifling to sit in the bedchamber with so many anxious ladies.

“See that Ruby and Emilia leave with you,” Ann added, then closed her eyes, pretending to breathe heavily. “They are terrible liars.”

“Very well. You must be our wretched Lavinia awhile longer, Ann, but only until you are triumphant Hero.”

Ann managed a weak smile. “It is not so hard to act like death has come for me. The pain of losing Lane’s love and trust—”

“It is not lost. Soon he will regret ever doubting your loyalty and throw himself at your feet begging for forgiveness, and when he does, I sincerely hope you hesitate, if only to teach him a lesson.”

Madigan peered into the room, arriving on soft tiptoe steps, his wig crooked and his face sweaty. At his approach, Violet tossed herself across the bed, whimpering and wailing. Fanny, eager to curry favor with Ann again and do her part, had unearthed a porcelain basin and a cloth, and came flying through the archway, flinging Maggie aside to press the wet rag to Ann’s forehead.

It was clear to her that the women present had the situation in hand, props included. Madigan stammered out a greeting that was immediately eclipsed by Violet demanding that he cure Ann at once.

“A new bride! And to die so young of a broken heart, one cannot bear it!” she shrieked.

“Ladies, p-please—”

“God bless you, sir,” Maggie said somberly as she passed him. “Thank God you are here, and just in time, too. I fear Ann has taken a turn for the worse.”

“H-heavens...” He trundled over to the bed with a leather case tucked under one arm. Judging by his pink, flustered face, Violet would soon have him believing the sun rose in the west and set in the east. Or at the very least, that their friend was ill enough to require his immediate and sustained attention.

“Emilia? Ruby? Why don’t you come along with me, now, give the doctor room to work his miracles,” said Maggie, summoning them to her side with a quick pat on her hip. Emilia hesitated, glancing haltingly at Ann, but Ruby seemed ready for a change of scenery. The chamber was hot, the curtains drawn, the set for their drama giving the perfect, dreary impression.

Winny followed them a few steps, taking her leave at the door. She leaned in close to Maggie to embrace her. “Be careful, sister. I know your feelings toward Mr. Darrow have changed, but his brother is still a menace, and it makes me shudder to think he is out there somewhere, prowling the grounds.”

“I promise not to visit the temple alone,” said Maggie.

But she would not be going with Emilia and Ruby, apparently, for Ruby had already trotted off down the hall, and Emilia had attached herself to Lane and Mrs. Richmond, who had come to oversee the doctor’s arrival. Poor Lane looked wretched, though her aunt, freshly dressed for the day and draped in a lace shawl, kept her expression a tight mask. There was fury and outrage boiling under there,

Maggie just knew it, but she greeted her cousin and aunt politely, then excused herself. She was eager to change out of her ball gown and into something more appropriate for snooping around; a quick look toward any of the windows revealed a dark ceiling of clouds. It would likely rain, and she would need a sturdier frock.

“There is a small party having a picnic later,” Lane told her in passing. “Mother thought it would be a clever way to distract the remaining guests.”

“Someone has to clean up this mess,” she heard her aunt mutter as Maggie thanked Lane and hurried away. A picnic might be the best way to blend in while searching the temple, for her sister was right—it was dangerous to set off alone, and she dreaded to think of what Paul Darrow might do if he caught her by herself in the Grecian temple, far, far away from the main house and any helpful bystanders.

Finding her way back to the chamber she was meant to share with her sisters, Maggie allowed herself a brief nap, blissfully alone in the big bed, then forced herself to start the day, wash, and dress. She chose a cornflower blue walking dress that Violet always said brought out her eyes and a striped spencer with thick, embroidered toggles.

There was a soft swishing sound from the direction of the door. Maggie went to discover a small, folded message had been slid into the room. Puzzled, she snatched it up, noting the lightly perfumed scent and elegant hand.

Miss Margaret Arden,

Though we are only a little acquainted and not yet friends, I feel I must issue another heartfelt warning. It gives me no pleasure to write these things to you, but I feel honor bound to protect another woman from the great harm I suffered at the hands of Mr. Darrow. Perhaps only my pride and confidence were wounded, but the scars linger and sometimes burst open, renewing the pain.

He is not a man to be trusted with the heart of a sensitive woman. There is no evidence to suggest that he has changed in the years since our acrimonious goodbye. He has no regard for the opinion of ladies, no respect for women generally, but excels in hiding the depth of his disdain. For much of our courtship he concealed his ill feelings, only revealing them when I bared my soul. It was not lightly that I confessed to him my interest in composing my own poems and stories and sharing them with the world. His reaction was quick and brutal, and the insults cut deep. He assured me that no one would ever be interested in what I had to say, that the mind of a woman was better occupied with painting tables and decorating bonnets, and that the true subtleties of literary achievement were attainable by men alone. Upon my honor, he said it, and I have the letters still to prove it.

If his beliefs do not offend you, if you think him to be truly reformed, then ignore this note and my previous warnings. I leave his judgment in your capable hands, and, if you were to take my advice and withdraw your friendship from Mr. Darrow, I know we could be very good friends indeed. Unfortunately, until such a time, I cannot allow myself to be drawn back into his web of cruelty and misdirection.

Yours,

Regina Applethwaite

Regina's fixation on Mr. Darrow struck her as more than just simple jealousy. After all, Regina was perfect in almost every way and could have whomever she wanted. It seemed foolish to discard the lady's misgivings altogether, particularly when she hadn't made up her mind where Mr. Darrow was concerned.

And yet. And yet. His eyes had burrowed into her thoughts. All the well-intentioned warnings in the world might not be enough to pry him loose.

The rain held while she bolted down a light breakfast in her room, sitting before the

very window where her pages had made their escape. It felt like years had passed since that moment. Her eyes wandered from the table to the window, to the closet where the remainder of her manuscript was tucked away. It was a shameful secret, she realized, and one she had been too willing to flaunt about. Her Aunt Eliza was probably even then in conversation with Mr. Gibson, exaggerating Maggie's charms, and being sure to never bring up the mysterious pages that had appeared all over Pressmore. If she married him, she would have to keep her heart's longing, her passion, stuck in a closet like her book. And it would have to be guarded with a permanent lock while she had his children, grew old, and became as resentful and cold as her aunts.

Maggie pillaged the desk for quill, ink, and paper. All the ingredients for a letter were present, though she was not addressing anyone in particular. Words flowed out of her. She had been without a quill and ink for two days and it felt like a burning flood had built up inside of her. She had to let it out, and so she did, tip scratching furiously across the pages. It all came out—her shock and sadness, her worries for Ann, her fear of letting down her family, Regina's note, and then, without warning:

If I could marry a man like Mr. Darrow, a man who understands the importance of books, the good they can do, the magic they create, then I might be content after all—to make my family proud without packing my heart away in a dark and dusty room, that is my dearest wish. There is no Margaret Arden without her writing and her books. One day, that will prove a boon, not a burden.

She looked down at the page, startled, then hastily struck through the last few sentences, folded the paper, and stuck it back in the desk drawer, leaving it there with Regina's note.

He hates your book, and an intelligent woman is convinced of his villainy.

But a man can change.

Maggie stood and paced to the far window, sliding against it. The cool window was heaven on her cheek. Outside, she noticed a thin stream of people wandering out of the house and down toward the hedge maze. The picnic! Had so much time passed? Maggie pinched her own wrist on Ann's behalf, then grabbed the spencer and hastily buttoned it on. The ribbons on her bonnet streamed from her hand as she ran from the room, hoping with a fast-beating heart that Mr. Darrow would see the guests and join them.

Join her .

14

And this, our life, exempt from public haunt,

Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,

Sermons in stones, and good in everything.

As You Like It, Act 2, Scene 1

The clouds sank lower by the minute as Maggie hurried down the gentle slope toward the hedge maze. The picnic goers had gone around, but she knew the path, cutting through the maze, remembering when to veer left and when to dodge around the false wall behind the satyr statue. At last, she reached the other side of the maze, trotting out onto a shallow overlook with a view down to the lower gardens carved out below. She tiptoed along the strip between the maze and the steep wall of rocks to her right, then hopped over a few decorative rocks and started down the stone steps leading to the temple.

At the bottom of the stairs the land flattened out, hemmed in neatly by yew hedges and cypresses planted at intervals, stone plinths holding Grecian statues dotting the natural, shadowy nooks created by the trees. All of this flanked the temple “ruins,” preciously dilapidated and strewn across the middle of the clearing, a pretty snarl of cedar and more cypresses growing about and through the commissioned temple. Bright profusions of hawthorn, roses, and lilac dotted the hillside near the steps, along with cascading, terraced rows of vibrantly blue cornflowers and white-and-purple starburst columbines.

A bracing wind shook the heavy heads of the flowers, and Maggie hugged herself, shivering. As she reached the last step, she paused and watched the staff lay out the blankets and baskets for the guests. There was a subdued energy to the proceedings, and everyone seemed to speak in low tones, the grim atmosphere of the house reaching even here. Maggie wasn't insensible to it, either, watching as Regina Applethwaite broke away from one small party near the temple and glided to where her aunt Eliza stood apart and aloof. Her aunt looked dreary indeed, but her countenance brightened a little at Regina's approach. Whatever their urgent conversation entailed, Maggie couldn't tell, but she started to move closer, hoping to eavesdrop.

That hope was dashed as Winny and Violet hurried down the stone steps behind her and enveloped her, one sister on either side.

"You're supposed to be with Ann," Maggie chided lightly.

"The doctor dismissed us," said Winny, sounding regretful. "But Emilia has returned to her side. Poor Ann, the man is bleeding her dry."

"Then he fell for the ruse?" asked Maggie, leading them subtly closer to where Eliza and Regina spoke.

"Oh, yes, I gave the performance of a lifetime," said Violet, puffing out her chest.

"And scared the doctor half to death," added Winny. "Mrs. Richmond has brought out a chair and is sitting right in front of Ann's door. I fear she is not so gullible as Mr. Madigan."

"Which brought us to you." Violet sighed and pulled away, standing on the edge of the picnic blankets, eyeing the rolls and meats being brought out to eat. "Have you gone through the temple yet for traces of our couple?"

“No,” Maggie told her. It was no use, the wind was blowing against them, carrying Eliza and Regina’s words far, far away to dance with whatever pages of her manuscript were stuck in the trees bordering the property. “I’ve only just arrived, and I was hoping to find Mr. Darrow, as we were something of a pair on this search.”

“I don’t see him,” Winny said, surveying the gardens beneath the yellow brim of her large bonnet. “But—oh, dear—I do see Mr. Gibson, and he is coming this way. Do you think Aunt Eliza spoke to him? Perhaps he is in love with you already. That gown suits you so well, sister.”

“Isn’t he in love with a whale?” Violet guffawed.

“New South Wales,” Winny and Maggie replied in unison. And too loudly. Mr. Gibson’s ears perked up, and his pace quickened. Violet threaded her arm back through Maggie’s and began leading them away, following the edge of the picnic blankets to the right, and carrying them toward the temple proper.

“Well! I won’t apologize, I’ve hardly slept a wink and skipped breakfast entirely, and you know I am cross and useless without food,” said Violet, sticking her nose in the air. “Either way, we must avoid him, and find your Mr. Darrow so the search can continue. Mrs. Richmond will explode if the doctor realizes Ann isn’t dying of a broken heart and reports as much.”

“I don’t see Mr. Darrow,” said Winny.

Maggie couldn’t locate him either and she couldn’t hide her disappointment. They were supposed to meet again, weren’t they? Perhaps she should have been clearer, perhaps—

“Now that is an interesting expression,” said Violet, studying her. “And, come to think of it, Mr. Darrow is coming up an awful lot.”

“A notable amount,” agreed Winny.

Violet swiped a finger sandwich in passing, behind the backs of a canoodling picnic couple. “A suspicious amount. You could certainly do worse, if you can forgive him for all his rudeness about your book. You know, he’s pointy but in a pleasing way.” Violet devoured the sandwich in two bites. “He sort of reminds me of a handsome stoat, a stoat with a noble profile and inscrutable intentions. Mythical, almost.”

Winny giggled. They were nearing the round mouth at the base of the Grecian temple. A border of blue and gold mosaic stones followed the line of the arch. “Oh, yes! Like one of Oberon’s courtiers, don’t you agree?”

“Perhaps he is all of those things,” said Maggie, wilting. Where is he? “But Aunt Eliza does not think him suitable, and therefore we must set him aside.”

“Since when does Aunt Eliza control your life?” Violet snorted.

“She controls all of our lives, Violet. Without her charity, we would have nothing.”

“Cousin Lane would help us,” said Violet, shrugging. “He wouldn’t let us suffer.”

“And is that what you want?” Maggie realized she was peckish and peevish, too, having been too distracted at her desk to eat much of her breakfast. Too distracted by Mr. Darrow, no less. Fool! “To go from person to person, hands out, begging? One of us must make an advantageous match, and why not me?”

Violet and Winny shrank from her in unison. Of course, Violet regained her courage first. “Because your eyes get all wibbly and soft when we mention Mr. Darrow?”

Maggie clamped her mouth shut in anger. There was no arguing with Violet because she was completely right.

“Then I suppose Aunt Eliza has won, since you are making all of her annoying arguments for her,” Violet continued, a little vicious. “You can announce her victory now, in fact, since she’s spotted Mr. Gibson and she’s coming this way.”

“Get inside the temple, go!” Winny told her, and together, the sisters formed a little wall, allowing Maggie to slip below the arch and into the shadowy embrace of the structure. It smelled like wet stones and dried flowers, and a steady drip from somewhere echoed loudly with each rhythmic plop . Immediately in front of her was a small water fountain, nearly empty, though that was the source of the dripping. A stone statue of woodland animals at play rose from the shallow dish of the fountain, and some rose petals had been sprinkled across the still, stagnant water. A spiral of stone steps led up to the second floor, the stairs just to the right of the fountain. The voices of her sisters faded as she silently tiptoed up and up, drawn by what sounded like a soft scratching or pawing. Any number of animals or birds might have nested in the temple, but she crept cautiously just in case, gently hoisting her petticoat and skirt.

As soon as her head peeked above the lip of the landing, she noticed the remnants of a fire on the gray, dusty floor. There was an empty cup, too, several discarded quills, and charred bits of paper among the ruins of the fire. A blanket, too fine to have been here for long, and of a rich enough weave to have been taken from the house, was folded haphazardly near the cup. She knelt and gingerly picked up the vessel, giving it a sniff before balking at the stench of old liquor. Someone had passed significant time here, spent the night here; her senses tingled, and she felt certain this had been the actual location for the clandestine meeting mentioned in the note.

Her searching was cut short by a shadow falling across her vision, then a strong hand gripping her forearm and pulling her back to standing. Maggie whirled, gasping, pulled swiftly into a man’s crushing embrace.

Bridger stared down into Miss Arden’s face with a grunt of recognition.

“?’Tis only you,” he murmured, and though his grip loosened, she remained in his arms. The lady’s hands had flown up in defense, and now rested on his chest. As soon as Margaret recognized him, she stopped struggling.

“Only me,” she replied softly. Her lips remained slightly parted in the most tempting way, and her huge blue eyes blinked up at him with something more than relief. Urgency, maybe, and, unless he was imagining it, interest. Bridger was slapped hard with the memory of his first glimpse of her, flushed and earnest at her aunt’s poetry salon, gripping her smuggled-in manuscript with the desperation of a drowning sailor clinging to debris. It would have been charming if he hadn’t been in such a bleak mood, ambushed at the event with news of his brother’s philandering in Bath. She had been beautiful then, and she was even more beautiful now, unpretentious, vital, and unexpectedly pliant in his embrace. They were alone in the echoing cavern of the temple’s heart, and her eyes ensnared him; Bridger gathered her closer, lowered his head, and kissed her.

Margaret’s lips felt like the summer sun burning through cold rain. He swallowed her gasp of surprise, leaned into her, cradled the back of her neck beneath her bonnet, and felt the sweat gathering there under her hair. Just once, his tongue speared into her mouth, and just once, she arched subtly against him, and then her better judgment must have crashed down, and she pushed him away.

There was a need to keep her, but Bridger only wanted what was freely given. She touched her own lips in surprise, roses gathering in her cheeks. Margaret backed out of his grasp, flattening herself against the column of stone central to the structure.

“Forgive me,” Bridger said, watching her. “I acted impulsively. It won’t happen again.”

Margaret shook her head. “Why did you grab me like that?”

“Your bonnet is most concealing, Miss Arden, you could have been our mystery woman.”

“I see,” she said, though her pulse still raced. He watched it pound against the slim pillar of her throat. “Lord, Mr. Darrow, you frightened me, and then...”

He didn’t like to hear that. It reminded him of Regina’s fear the night before, the way she had run from him. It reminded him of the monster he had been forced to become in France, the cold creature he desperately wanted to forget. A creature not unlike his father, temperamental and full of rageful pain.

“And then?” he asked, bracing.

“Do you need me to say it?” she replied. “To revisit it?”

“I wouldn’t mind it if you did.”

“You frightened me,” Margaret said slowly, almost shyly. “And then...you kissed me—my very first kiss, in fact, sir—and for now it somewhat defies description.”

He arched a brow while hers furrowed. “A writer at a loss for words?”

Margaret’s now-familiar smile returned, and he relaxed. “Enjoy it while it lasts.”

Clearing his throat, taking pity on her, Bridger took his walking cane and prodded the remains of the fire near Margaret’s feet. “Right. Thanks to me we veered from our purpose here. It appears you were right about the temple; we should have ventured here last night.”

She dislodged herself from the pillar and scooped up a burned scrap of parchment, studying it, then pressed her gloved fingers to her chin thoughtfully. A bit of char

transferred, leaving a gray mark on her chin.

“The doctor is with Ann now,” said Margaret. There was almost nothing legible on the paper (he had already looked himself, making out only the words “greatly desire that”) and she let it drift out of her fingers and to the blackened floor. “He has fallen for our stories for now, but I don’t know how long that will last. Mrs. Richmond has taken up a post outside Ann’s room, and without some proof of her innocence, I fear she will pressure Lane to annul the marriage.”

“Lane would never agree to that,” Bridger replied, stern. He was beginning to sense what it was like to be utterly devoted to one woman, and if Lane’s heart at all mirrored his, such a move was unthinkable.

“Maybe, maybe not, but Mrs. Richmond is a tenacious woman,” she said, a little sad. That sadness pulled him toward her, and he carefully wiped the smudge off of her chin. Her clear blue eyes pierced him, glazed with regret, perhaps, or sorrow. God, but he wanted to kiss her again. “And we all give in to family pressures we never thought we would.”

“You have no idea how right you are,” he replied. His fingertips lingered on her chin, enticed by the warmth of her skin, touchable and soft even through the leather of his glove. The impulse that rose in him was almost enough to knock the wind out of his chest; he wanted to hold her face and taste her again. Only a few hours away from her, and he had subsided into navel-gazing loneliness. He had wondered if she would come, but she had, and now they could continue the hunt together. Loneliness. He couldn’t believe how swiftly the dread retreated in her presence.

You don’t have to do this alone.

A quick, dry scratching sound made him withdraw. It would damage both of their reputations but hers in particular if they were found like that together, or if a

bystander learned of their secret embrace. There were small, round holes near the floor, windows of a sort that looked out onto the gardens. The sound had come from below them but dissipated almost instantly. Bridger strode to the round wall of the temple and ducked down. Margaret joined him, pressing close, he noted with no small amount of satisfaction. It seemed her fear had dwindled.

“Look there,” said Margaret, pointing.

A figure, obscured by a long, dark cloak, but feminine in appearance, raced from the temple. She fled away from the picnic, the temple itself shielding her from the guests reclining and eating on blankets.

“She must have heard us and thought better of coming up the stairs,” Bridger replied in a whisper. “I wonder if they were to meet again.”

Margaret righted herself and hurried to the stairs.

“What are you waiting for?” she demanded, pausing there on the top step, and twisting toward him.

“Let me follow her,” Bridger replied. “You should return to the picnic.”

“Follow her?” She was aghast. “Alone?”

Bridger’s face tightened. “I...It would be safer if you remained here.”

“Sir, I have summered here almost every year of my life since I was a child. I know the paths and secret places of Pressmore as well as I know the backs of my hands.” Margaret descended the stairs, and he raced to her side. “I do hope that my sisters will forgive me for leaving them behind like this. Violet is always keen for an adventure.”

“I’m sure they will understand our reasoning,” he said, lowering his tone as they neared the bottom of the stairs. “For I feel certain this is our mystery woman.”

“I feel it, too,” she replied, and the consensus bolstered him.

They turned sharply beneath the stairs. The structure was new, and this was his first time exploring it, but there must have been a back entrance the woman used. A small gardener’s hatch had been built into the far wall, and Bridger shouldered it open with a grunt, powdery dust falling on them both as they returned to daylight.

A discouraging sprinkling of rain made the cloaked lady’s progress across the lawn less noticeable as she disappeared into a break in the yew hedges along the eastern edge of the garden. The rain brought out the ripe, true quality of the plants surrounding them—roses immediately rosier, cedar bark upon the nose like the tingling of a shallow cut, a full and rounded lushness leaping out, giving the impression of being stuffed into a hothouse on a humid day. A few cries of alarm rose from the other side of the temple as the first raindrops fell on the picnic.

“Where do you suppose she is going?” asked Margaret as they followed the damp path through the grass left by the lady.

“You know the grounds better than I.”

“There’s a trail that leads through Worton Woods. It’s really only used for hunting. I wonder...Hmm, if you followed it east long enough, it might meet the road to Cray Arches. If your brother is trying to avoid the estate, he could find a room there at the Gull and Knave.”

They reached the dense row of yew hedges, and Margaret found a narrow gap between branches, scampering through. Bridger bashed a few of the branches until there was enough room for him to fit, then followed. Just as she had described, they

stumbled out onto a rutted, faded path.

“That sounds like an establishment with liquor enough to interest Pimm,” Bridger muttered, fixing his eyes east. As he did, he caught sight of their quarry. They both melted back against the hedges and brush, silently following the woman within the shadow of that thorny wall. The lady half ran, making it difficult to keep pace with her quietly. Rain lashed them with the fickle rise and fall of the wind. Bridger went first, Margaret following, and for almost half an hour they managed to chase the lady unseen. But then the rain drove harder, and as he squinted through the misty drizzle, a horse and rider eased out onto the path ahead. It was hard to tell if the rider had come from down the road or a gap in the yew. The mystery lady reached up toward the male rider, who leaned down and easily pulled her onto the saddle, partially in his lap. Before they took off down the lane, the lady peered over her shoulder, and there was no doubt in his mind that she noticed them there, watching.

Margaret ran a few steps forward, but cursed under her breath as the rider dug his heels into the beast, and they sped off. She held her bonnet in place as a gust of wind tore at them, her gaze drifting back toward the way they had come.

“Should we go back? We will never catch them now.”

“I trust your assessment, Miss Arden—if the path will take us to Cray Arches, we might inquire at the inn for my brother. He’s hard to miss, and always making a nuisance of himself. The barkeep and patrons would remember such a fellow.”

The wind screamed up the path from behind them. Margaret shivered, underdressed for the weather, and he could see the hesitation in her eyes and huddled posture. “We’ve come this far, let’s proceed to Cray Arches.”

They walked a long way in silence, the trees growing denser and closer, hemming them in, Margaret’s bones practically clacking from the cold drizzle. Finally, Bridger

couldn't stand it and pulled off his tiered coat, heavy and wool, and settled it over her shoulders. During the coldest nights of the campaign, freezing in their tents, Bridger had distracted the men with riddles and questions, and it had always eased their suffering and made the time slip by. "It's unusual for a lady to cultivate such an interest in writing. I imagine there is a story there."

Margaret's eyes remained fixed on the narrow road ahead. His coat swallowed her up, and the rain had made a droopy mess of the flowers and ribbons on her bonnet. Even bedraggled, she kept her chin high. Her teeth chattered less and less as she answered him. "Papa made the mistake of reading *Romeo and Juliet* to me at a tender age. He...softened some of the more scandalizing parts. Even so, I despised the ending. Ten years old, and I needed them to live on, so I wrote it for myself. And then *Hamlet*, too, and then *Titus Andronicus*."

Barking with laughter, Bridger wiped the hair back from his forehead, finding it had become completely sodden from the steady rain. "You aren't telling me you read that at ten years of age."

"Papa didn't keep things from me," she replied with a shrug of his huge coat. "If he wanted a son instead, he never said as much. Maybe he should have been more delicate with my education—the governess thought so—but I delighted in stories. I don't think he had the heart to curb my curiosity." With a laugh, she paused and looked up at him. "You wouldn't recognize that Margaret. She was soft-spoken and demure, but when Papa died something changed. I couldn't see the point in anything, all the parts of me I was hiding tore loose, and, well, you heard my aunts. Now I'm nothing I'm supposed to be."

There was a rumbling, clattering sound from the path behind them.

Bridger heard it, watched Margaret hear it, and stepped closer to her. The wheels bumping up the road must have drowned out his next words, for Margaret didn't react

to them. “Or perhaps you’re exactly what you were meant to be.”

“Hello there!” she called, waving to the cart as it appeared through the haze of rain and mist. “They’ve come from Pressmore,” Margaret told him, beaming with relief. “That’s Foster, he works on the grounds. Let us hope he is going to Cray Arches.”

She charged up to the driver as the cart slowed and came up alongside them.

“Miss Arden, this is no weather for a walk through the countryside!” cried Foster. He was gray-haired with a wide, friendly face and thick freckles clustered over his nose.

“I know it, Foster! Mr. Darrow and I were seeking more pages for Ann’s game and wandered too far from the picnic,” she said over the drumming of the rain. “I should know the grounds better, but now I fear we are hopelessly far afield. Are you going to Cray Arches by any chance?”

It was a clever enough story, and Foster nodded along, flicking his head toward the back of the covered cart. “Aye, miss, exactly I am! House ran low on duck eggs, and it’s all Mrs. Richmond will have for her breakfast. The vicar Mr. Corner keeps a few hens. Storm or fine, the mistress will have what she wants.”

Foster looped the reins around a knob on the box, jumped down with a splash, and went around to the back of the cart to pull the hinge and let down the barrier for them. Foster bowed his head respectfully as Miss Arden hurried to the back of the cart.

“You’re miraculous, Foster. My thanks!” she called.

“Storm is rolling in,” he told them as they both climbed into the dusty, hay-strewn belly of the wagon. “We’ll be lucky to make it back to Pressmore fore nightfall.”

When they were in, Foster secured the hinge and waddled back to the front of the

cart. The horses whickered and jolted, and they clattered down the puddly path. They settled down onto the extra horse blankets in the back, side by side, and quietly stared out of the back of the cart, watching the trees sway and their branches droop low, drenched and darkened.

“Thank you for this,” said Margaret, crawling out of his coat.

“Keep it.”

She did, and they lapsed into silence once more. It was uneasy, for Bridger could all but hear her mind whistling like a kettle. If she was anything like him, her thoughts had returned to the temple, to the embrace, to their lips sealed together. His right hand lay flat on the blanket between them, Margaret’s left pinky nearly touching him.

Perhaps we should not have kissed, but I would do it again, a hundred times over, just to feel the loneliness recede for another brilliant moment.

Instead, Bridger said, “We were discussing your early works.”

“Oh, yes,” Margaret replied, absent, gazing at the rain.

“Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet ... Your father must have had some profound love for Shakespeare,” he began. He couldn’t help it, he wanted to draw more out of her. Even caught in the rain, it was the most pleasant afternoon he had spent with someone in years. “Did he ever explain the origin of that obsession?”

“His sister,” she told him in a dreamy whisper. “Her name was Beatrice, and if his stories were accurate, she was wild indeed. She fled the family to live in London and be an actress, and they stopped acknowledging her altogether. Papa read plays to feel closer to her, and when he could afford a few books of his own, gathered them for his library. I never knew her, but Papa says I resemble her closely. He almost convinced

Mamma to name me Beatrice, but he was afraid it was inappropriate due to the estrangement.” Margaret’s voice trailed off, sad. “I sometimes wonder if she is still alive, and if she even knows Papa is gone.”

Bridger stared at the paper-thin gap between their fingers. “You could look for her in London.”

“Mm. That would certainly please my aunts.” Her mouth drew down at the mention of them.

“The name Beatrice would have suited you,” he said, guiding them back to a lighter subject. “How does it go? ‘I would my horse had the speed of your tongue’?”

It had the intended effect. Margaret broke into a mischievous smile. “Indeed! Then, perhaps you should have been called Benedick, mm? ‘A good soldier to a lady.’?”

“I’m afraid not, Miss Arden, for I am not much of anything to a lady these days. Not until my fortunes improve and the burdens of my family are lessened.” He shifted at the probing look she gave him. “But I have lately acquired a very promising manuscript, and I know it will be the spark that lights a blaze of luck.”

Margaret swiveled to face him, eyes alight with curiosity. “What sort of manuscript?”

“About a group of traders in the Americas, exploring caves, their secrets laid bare as their circumstances deteriorate,” Bridger explained, encouraged by her interest.

“Who is the writer? Is it rude to ask?”

“Not at all, Miss Arden. A new author, G. R. Neeve.”

Margaret fell silent, then quietly laughed, and shook her head. The sodden ribbons of

her bonnet finally gave, and it fell off of her head. She pulled it off, settled her loosely pinned hair, and set the bonnet in her lap. Her hand returned to where it had been, and this time he noticed her pinky finger pressed tight to his.

“What?” he asked in response to her laughter. “Jealous?”

“Oh no, no,” said Margaret. “It’s nothing...Well, but it’s just funny, isn’t it? G. R. Neeve? Think on it, Mr. Darrow. Do you not see? Rearrange the letters and it’s the word revenge .”

A cold feeling bloomed across his chest, then he flushed. “A coincidence, surely. Lots of letters spell lots of things.”

“A coincidence, yes, you’re probably right.” Margaret slumped forward a little. “Will this rain ever stop?”

“It had better,” he said, gruff. “Or we shall be stranded in the village overnight.”

Margaret went pale. She drew her hands back into her lap and shivered. The trees scraped and creaked, the wind blasting against the cart’s covering. “My aunts will be frantic if I do not return, for how could I slip any lower in their estimations? No, no, Mr. Darrow, that simply cannot happen.”

15

She loved me for the dangers I had passed,

And I loved her that she did pity them.

Othello, Act 1, Scene 3

It happened.

With a chill, the blood drained out of Maggie's face as they stood before the proprietor at the Gull and Knave, both of them soaked and bedraggled, hungry and tired. She was still shivering beneath the heavy, dark shell of Mr. Darrow's coat, and probably looked like a half-drowned turtle. They had said goodbye to Foster hours before, with an understanding that they would depart the inn for Pressmore just before sunset. None of that came to plan. The pair made inquiries up and down the shops of Cray Arches, but many of the stores had closed up early, the storm driving folk back to their homes. It was a cramped village, though charming on a better day, the shops clustered along the main thoroughfare, squat homes fanned out like cards into the low hills. There was no sign of Paul Darrow or their cloaked lady, and Maggie was beginning to worry they had not ridden into Cray Arches at all or diverted elsewhere due to the weather. At last, when the wind shrieked in earnest and all the windows in all the shops went dark, they retreated to the Gull and Knave, defeated, to find Foster was not there waiting for them.

Bristling and well-bristled, the proprietor barely looked up from his ledger. He was a tremendous brick of a man, black-haired, with a streak of gray shot through his thick

curling beard. His nostrils twitched with increasing irritation after each of their questions, almost in uncanny time with the nervous bounce of Maggie's right leg.

"One room left, is all," the proprietor grunted. He drummed his fingers on the worn table between them, a bright blue ring flashing on his pinky.

"I understand that, and thank you," said Bridger, speaking for them both. While he questioned the bearded man, her eyes roamed the main room of the inn. It was like many posts along the busy road, a warm and relatively upstanding location fit for any travelers changing carriages or resting on a long journey. The clientele was what she expected to find—well-dressed ladies and gentlemen quietly having their suppers, eyes a little big and spooked from the sudden rage of the storm outside.

The inn shook, a clap of thunder making the present ladies gasp and sit up straighter.

"Has a man come through? About this tall, broad-shouldered but hunched, with a scowl and dark hair? Or in your ledger there, do you see the name Mr. Paul Darrow? It's urgent that we locate him," said Bridger, leaning toward the man.

With obvious frustration, the proprietor placed his bulging forearms on top of the messy rows in the ledger. "And what business do you have with him?"

Bridger paused, and Maggie watched his hands open and close as he considered the man's question. She almost jumped in for him, but he replied smoothly, "A dear relation of his has taken ill at Pressmore Estate. It's fallen to me to relay this to him."

"You?" The proprietor's black eyes drifted from Bridger to Maggie and lingered there. She tried not to shrink, for he had an imposing aura.

"Indeed, me." Bridger took a small step in front of her, blocking the man's view. "And my...wife. Yes, my wife, Mrs. Racburn."

Wife? Maggie froze. He was making their predicament worse by the second. Her stomach burned and not from hunger; Aunt Eliza was going to strangle her with her own bonnet ribbons when this was discovered. It was like a drumbeat running under everything: he kissed me, he kissed me, we kissed . And when she could tear her mind away from it, it found another avenue of panic, sealing their fate by the minute, the inevitability of being stranded overnight in Cray Arches with Mr. Darrow.

“That make you Mr. Racburn?” The proprietor snorted and scribbled something at the bottom of the ledger.

“It does.”

“No Darrow here that I know of.”

“But any man of that description that—”

“Right.” The proprietor swished his cheeks and smacked his lips, unmoving, his big arms still blocking their view of the books. Her eyes drifted back to the ring on the man’s finger; it was peculiar, out of place amidst his ill-fitting shirt and mended coat. “One room left, Mr. Racburn. I suggest taking it before the next folks step up.”

Bridger’s face had turned bright red, but so had Maggie’s. It was wise to conceal their true names, and it would be the height of impropriety for them to be together that way and unmarried, but it still shocked her. His shade of crimson was different, however, and those fists of his were balling up tighter. Bridger’s jaw worked back and forth, his temper rising to the surface like fire bubbling through a forge.

“ Dear husband, perhaps we should simply take the man’s advice,” said Maggie, placing an insistent hand on Bridger’s elbow. He tensed at her touch, then flinched. “The storm is only getting worse, and it would be a long, miserable walk back to Pressmore.”

The doors behind them flew open with a bang. A muddied driver clutching his hat stumbled inside. “Carriage overturned half mile out,” he roared, leaning against the wall. “Roads are flooded, worst I’ve seen in six summers.”

They took the room.

He kissed me, he kissed me, we kissed.

The drumming in her head beat on, faster. Maggie told herself it was just a contingency; the rain would ease, and they would find Foster, then return to Pressmore before dark. More thunder boomed outside. Once relieved of their sodden coats, they took a table in the shadowed alcove beneath the stairs, and shillings were exchanged for a bottle of port and some venison in a dark sauce, as well as snail ragout. Bridger couldn’t sit still and kept glancing around, his attention wandering most frequently to the proprietor and the front doors.

“Racburn?” Maggie asked, grateful for the stomach-warming wine that was brought. Maybe if she drank enough of it, she could forget all about the grim fate that awaited her back at the estate. Her fingers were like ice as she tried to spoon sauce into her mouth.

“Hm?” Bridger hadn’t touched his food. He appeared as nervous as she felt.

“Is something the matter?” she asked. “Besides the obvious, I mean.”

“That lout is lying to us,” he growled, glaring at the proprietor once more. He was currently bent double, speaking to a young boy who worked in the kitchens. That same boy, straw-haired and sallow, was making frequent trips up and down, taking things to the rooms upstairs in between tongue-lashings for laziness from the proprietor.

“I’m sure staring at him like that will endear him to us.”

“No, you’re right. I just...Something about this place feels wrong.”

“Perhaps when everyone is drunk, we will have a better chance to pry for information,” Maggie suggested. “Those gentlemen in the corner have been letting the ale flow freely since we walked in. If they saw your brother in the village, they might speak of it with loosened tongues later.”

At that, Bridger fell silent, concentrating on his food for a moment, but only to move it around his plate. He sneaked little glances at her, and Maggie tried not to feel self-conscious about it. The silence was agonizing, so she filled it by talking about what she knew they liked, books. “I’ve recently finished a volume of poetry by William Cowper. Do you know him?”

“I know his work well,” said Bridger, distracted.

She launched into her feelings on the poems, which ones she preferred, and which she felt were lacking. By and by, it drew him out, as she knew it would. Bridger did not hesitate to offer his own view of Cowper’s work, and she found his insights very sharp indeed. They then debated the merits of Ovid, Henry Fielding, Sir Walter Scott, E.T.A. Hoffmann, and marveled at the correspondence between Maria Edgeworth and Scott, and their subsequent friendship. They agreed that Waverley was excellent, though Bridger preferred Scott’s poetry, which was a sensible opinion. Maggie asked him, perhaps a bit pleadingly, to describe the bookbinding process more clearly as he had observed it, and he obliged her. His eyes danced as he did so, and the darkness of his mood slipped away. His passion for his work was undeniable, and it enhanced every quality of his face, leading him to smile more, and even rounding out the tone of his voice. It was easy to talk with him, and Maggie realized that hours had flown by before they once again encountered an uneasy silence.

“Thank you,” he told her gruffly, being the one to break that quiet. “For...before...when we first arrived. You were right to intervene.” Bridger nodded discreetly to the gruff bearded proprietor. As the conversation became easier and more animated, they both lost their aversion to eating. When their plates and bowls were empty, more was brought out, Bridger tucking back into his ragout. “He reminds me of my father. Mouth like a bear trap, every word exchanged an offense or inconvenience.”

“I pity your mother.”

“That would be a waste of your sympathies,” he replied, brooding over his bowl. “She’s been gone a long time. Racburn is a family name, from her side.”

Maggie felt the sadness ripple off of him in palpable waves. He may wish to portray himself as detached, but she could tell there was something deeper going on. The wind howled mercilessly. She huffed and looked around, coming to dire terms with the fact that they might really be stuck there. Hours of literary debate had not chased off the storm. The smell of his coat lingered on her clothing, a rich mixture of his soap, tobacco, and a faint, woody scent she couldn’t place. He kissed me, he kissed me, we kissed. “What was she like, your mother? Paint me a picture.”

“I wish I could, but I’m afraid it would be just one color. Regrettably—no, shamefully—I know almost nothing about her mind or her soul.” He stared down into his wine. “My father worked diligently to disabuse us of the notion that she was a person we should worry about, and when she died, if he mourned for her, I did not witness it. I remember her being quite frail, her voice like a whisper, and her presence calming. She must have been unbearably sad, but she never let us see it.”

“Then perhaps you do not dislike Jane Bennet after all; you were just never taught to appreciate soft creatures.” Shrugging, she went on, eyes on her food as she dug out the nice bits of potato that were perfectly melty. “What a joy it was to grow up

surrounded by women—to know the closeness of sisters, to have a loving mother, and a father who adored her, too.”

“Soft creatures,” Bridger repeated, shaking his head and laughing dryly. “My father had no patience for such people. Perhaps it’s a mercy he never had a daughter. He encouraged Pimm and me to fight over the smallest offense, and scolded whoever gave up first.”

“How awful.”

“Indeed, Miss Arden. He kept me from Regina, he would gladly keep me from you. I see now that he only ever wanted to make me as lonely and miserable as he is.”

The blond boy traipsed up and down the stairs. He grinned at her. Maggie finished eating and more wine was brought. “Whatever transpired between you must have been harrowing—”

“I behaved badly,” he said, abruptly, cutting her off. He tugged on the ends of his sleeves with obvious discomfort. “Let us change the subject.”

“But—”

“Tell me about your book,” Bridger barreled on, undertaking a smile that seemed genuinely to pain him. Her eyes narrowed. The drums in her head were somehow hot now, like a flicked finger striking the bottom of a scorched pan. What didn’t he want her to know about Regina? What was he hiding? A heartbreak was one thing, but it was hard not to think of how outrageously his brother had acted. Her eyes cast about the room, as if just thinking about the man could summon him. The rain beat steadily against the windows, driving sideways.

“I want to know about her,” she said, leaning forward.

“And I insist we discuss anything else.”

He kissed me, he kissed me, we kissed.

“No. I think we shall discuss exactly this.”

“Miss Arden—”

“If I have no choice but to spend the night masquerading as your wife and sharing a room with you, I have a right to know if something sinister transpired!”

The darkness in his already turbulent eyes redoubled. His upper lip quivered, as if ready to pull into a snarl. “What is there to say? We had an understanding when I left for France. My father wasn’t fond of her demeanor or her family’s low connections, relations deteriorated, and there were complicated feelings on both sides. He had no way of knowing—and neither did I—that the Applethwaites would soon come into money and move in more elevated circles.”

Maggie reached for the wine. The alcohol was making her head feel stuffed, too full of hot, throbbing blood. Why was he suddenly so secretive? “Is that all?”

“What would you like me to tell you? That I still love her? I do not, Miss Arden. In fact, I have no feelings toward her whatsoever except exasperation. You clearly desire some confession or admission, but I will give you none, owe you none, and since I have answered your questions, you can satisfy one of mine: why do you care so much about what is between me and Miss Applethwaite?”

Maggie almost came out of her chair. “Because you kissed me!” She lowered her tone, embarrassed. “Why did you kiss me?”

Mr. Darrow stared at her, and she could feel him receding, withdrawing like a beast

into its cave. His face grew pale and taut, his eyes frighteningly far away. “I don’t know, but it was very obviously a mistake, I—”

“Mistake?” This time, Maggie did leave her chair. She stood, tipping over the wine bottle, splashing it a little on herself as she righted it, then hurried away. Mr. Darrow remained frozen at the table. He had said it himself in the cart, hadn’t he? He was in no position to make himself an attractive husband to anyone, and now he had made it perfectly plain that the kiss was meaningless. A good soldier to a lady...Well! He was right about one thing, she did resemble Beatrice, more so than ever in that particular moment. I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me.

Then, the kiss was a mistake. Maggie marched to the proprietor’s alcove and demanded she be shown to their room. The boy with the summer-yellow hair was summoned, and he led her up the stairs running along the wall near the front door. She kept her gaze decidedly away from Bridger Darrow, even as she silently begged him to notice her, get up, chase her, do something. Thunder shook the inn. A table of men in the corner erupted into raucous laughter. It simultaneously felt like everybody and nobody was staring at her, like she could be scorned and forgotten in the same heartbeat.

“It’s a small room, miss,” the boy was saying, taking a right at the landing and leading her down a close, damp, cold hall. “But warm enough with the fire stoked. I’ll warm a brick for you, should keep the chill at bay.”

“Thank you,” Maggie heard herself say. She was holding her fingers pinched together, prim, as if adopting the guise of a rigid, unfeeling lady would somehow protect her from sick, roiling anguish in her guts.

He kissed me, he kissed me, we kissed.

And it was a mistake.

The room was small—tiny—just like the boy had warned. With nothing to do, Maggie went by the bed on the left to the window beside the hearth and stared out at the betraying storm. It wasn't dissipating, and though it was only lately dusk, it looked like full night had fallen, a swollen, bruised color to the world as the clouds unleashed another torrent of wet and a spearing fork of lightning. It struck close enough to make her gasp, a hollow echo vibrating through her chest. She didn't want to cry and told herself to wait until the boy brought the brick to start. With a sigh, she pulled off her sodden, stained gloves and formed them into a ball, leaving them on the sill. Her nail beds were still outlined in stray ink, which reminded her of the stupid words she had written with a stupid pen and shoved into a stupid drawer at stupid Pressmore.

If I could marry a man like Mr. Darrow, a man who understands the importance of books, the good they can do, the magic they create, then I might be content after all—to make my family proud without packing my heart away in a dark and dusty room, that is my dearest wish.

A voice came through the door behind her.

“Warm brick for you, miss!”

The boy sounded strangled or like he was making fun of her. Maggie brushed it off and opened the door, finding a grown man on the other side, his eyes cruel as the clouds hanging low over the village. His teeth flashed, discolored, and she had just enough time to recognize Pimm Darrow before he shoved his way inside. There was no brick, just a knife sharp enough to glint with a kiss from the firelight.

“Not who you were expecting?” He laughed, brandishing the knife. “Scream and I scar that pretty face.”

The drums in Maggie's head became a frantic, icy pounding. She clenched her teeth as Pimm spun her around and used a brutish grip to force her hands behind her back. "What do you want?" she asked, feeling the blunt side of the knife press between her shoulder blades.

"A witness, my good lady." Pimm Darrow chuckled, breath rank, and maneuvered her out into the dark hall. "I'm getting married tonight, and you're our guest of honor."

16

She's beautiful, and therefore to be wooed;

She is a woman, therefore to be won.

Henry VI, Part 1, Act 5, Scene 3

Bridger sat studying the puddle of wine on the table for as long as his pride allowed him to. It was shaped sort of like a badger, but from another angle, a longish dog. He rearranged the cups, and then his napkin, convinced that if he just kept his hands busy enough, it would somehow keep the self-loathing from consuming him whole.

He had called their kiss a mistake, when to him it was anything but. It had been the rightest possible thing in that moment, that moment when her eyes drew him in like a ship coaxed to harbor on a fair breeze. But damn her, damn Margaret Arden, she had turned him into an enemy spy with her relentless questions.

If he told her the extent of it, if he told her the truth—that he had allowed his rat bastard of a father to convince him Regina was beneath him, and that he had insulted her and played the villain until she cut off their correspondence—Margaret might hate him for it.

Instead, you chased her off, too, and here is your father's legacy, likely your only inheritance—once more you are alone.

Alone with the half-finished bottle of wine, he pressed it to his lips and guzzled,

propriety be damned. It was time to acknowledge his error, time to apologize and tell her openly about the humiliating depths of his bad behavior where Regina was concerned. And it was bad, so bad she had abandoned all pursuit of her writing, all passion for her interests, because of his nasty remarks. He had called her taste childish and even disparaged Maria Edgeworth and Castle Rackrent, which he knew to be excellent. Like a coward, he couldn't simply tell Regina his father disapproved, and their engagement could not move forward, and instead forced her to be the one to withdraw.

No, like a coward you listened to your father at all.

Bridger thought of Margaret up in the room by herself and gathered the courage to go to her, fling open the door, and promise her that the kiss they had shared was not a mistake. And if he had his way, if he could turn things around, there would be many such kisses in their future, when he was a proper husband to a proper wife. As soon as he stood, the little blond boy, who had been sweeping and seeing to the rooms upstairs and suffering the proprietor's abuse, appeared at his side. He had noticed a strange ring on the innkeeper's hand, and now he saw a similar one wedged above the boy's knuckle. It was too refined a piece of jewelry for a lad of his station, and though he was not one to care much for another man's fashion, it seemed wrought for a lady's finger.

"More wine, sir?" asked the boy. He had a noticeable fidget to him, peering around like a peevish hare.

"No, thank you, I should like to know which room is mine."

"I could fetch you another bottle, sir, no cost to you, sir!"

"I'm not interested in more drink, lad," Bridger replied sternly. The boy's ring was a garnet, red as a glob of congealed blood. The brain itch that had bothered him when

they first arrived returned, war-honed senses asserting something just wasn't right. A similarly slithering feeling had assailed him before the ambush that had cost Lane his arm. Bridger pushed the boy aside and strode to the stairs, then climbed them quickly.

"Sir? Sir!" The boy called after him. Bridger ignored it.

He arrived in the upstairs corridor to find eight identical doors. The lad had scuttled up the steps behind him, and Bridger took him by the scruff, whirling him around and kneeling until they were nose to nose. "What is your name?"

"A-Alfred, sir, but I—"

"Alfred, which room is meant to be ours and what is waiting for me inside?"

"You weren't supposed to come up so soon," Alfred muttered, quaking. "The wine is all paid for, you's welcome to it—"

"Which. Door."

"That 'un, sir." Alfred gingerly lifted a hand and pointed.

"The man who paid for the wine and told you to delay me, did he also give you that fine ring?" Bridger eased his grip on the boy, but just a little.

"N-no, that was the lady."

Bridger's eyes blew wide open. "The lady? And how would you describe her?"

"Thin as a reed, curly hair, real shy-like, pretty, but scared of the man, I think," said Alfred, gaining confidence. "Not from here, sir. India, maybe, like the ladies up at Pressmore. She didn't want to give up her rings, but the man made 'er."

Not Ann, surely? It had to be one of her relations.

“And where did this man and his lady go?” He was growing impatient. “Or are they still present?”

The boy shook his head and pointed to a door a bit to the left and down the hall. “I was just to say if anyone took the room, and if so, what they looked like and what name they answered to, sir. The man, he was big, sir, rough and big. He gave me the lady’s ring for my help. Your wife went in and when I came back with a brick for ’er she was gone.” Then, he pointed in the other direction, over Bridger’s shoulder. “They’re all gone. That way, sir, down the back stairs the maids use.”

The innkeeper and the boy had nearly matching rings. Pimm had used the woman’s jewels to buy their complicity and silence. The name Racburn wouldn’t fool his brother, and he or the relation would easily recognize Miss Margaret from the estate. As he let the boy go, he went directly toward the door that had been theirs for the evening. How long had he sat stewing in the lower dining room while Margaret was missing? An hour, perhaps? More?

“And you were given no further instructions? No indication of where they might be going?”

A shake of the head, a tremble, and all the while the lad played nervously with the ring that wouldn’t even fit all the way over his finger.

“Go and fetch my coat and cane.”

There was nothing more to be said. He shouldered open the door, finding the slant-ceilinged room empty save for the bed, a small table, two worn chairs, a threadbare rug, and a crooked painting of a bear in a meadow at dusk. A discolored bundle of fabric lay on the windowsill, and Bridger gathered it up, finding they were Miss

Arden's discarded gloves. They were pulled inside out, the inner fingertips lightly blackened with ink. He squeezed the gloves in his hands, then slipped them inside his coat pocket.

Bridger felt empty, cored, and then immediately filled with a white-hot fire. Margaret simply had to be found, there was nothing else to contemplate. The storm raged on as the boy reappeared with his walking stick, coat half-dried from proximity to a fire, and Bridger shrugged it on, a stab of guilt sinking deep as the scent of Margaret's hair came to him, fresh on the wool. He gripped the cane halfway up the shaft and pushed down the corridor, down a set of rickety steps, past a greasy door protecting the sounds of pots and pans clanging, and out the back side of the inn, into a sheltered courtyard adjacent to the stables. A smattering of dust and hay trickled out into the fenced yard, marking a light path to a gate leading to a side street. Shrieking gusts brought the rain pouring under the lip of thatch, but it was shelter enough to preserve a deep boot tread in the mud and hay. It was a single set of tracks, but deeper than one might expect, as if weighted down by a load.

The wind stilled for a blissful interval, and in the void left behind, the church bells rang out. The Angelus chimed, originating from the east, the storm sending a blaze of lightning to illuminate the horizon and the church tower spearing toward the heavens.

It was as good a place as any to start hunting.

Of all base passions, fear is most accursed.

Henry VI, Part 1, Act 5, Scene 2

Maggie sat huddled against the freezing wall of the north transept in the little church. Out in the nave, she heard her captor muttering under his breath about the racket. The bells had been rung, and it had filled the stone belly of the church with vibrations and sound. She closed her eyes and tried to breathe calmly, willing Bridger to find the empty inn room, willing him to listen to the singing bells and follow their call.

Her jaw ached, her entire body clenched with fear. The journey from the Gull and Knave to the church had not been a long one, but even so, she was completely drenched. Her bonnet had fallen off; it sat now on the ground beside her. Damp clumps of blond hair clung to the sides of her face, uncomfortable, but there was nothing she could do about it; Paul Darrow had bound her hands behind her back.

What a ridiculous situation.

Nonsensical to attempt the walk when the rain had already made itself known, and anyone possessing even a meager intelligence would know to turn back and not take the risk. But she had been enjoying Mr. Darrow's company, and after all, they had just kissed, and how could she want to be away from him after that? Still, she berated herself. This was what Aunt Eliza was talking about—she had to use her head more and learn to ignore her unruly heart.

But after a kiss like that, it was hard not to become all heart.

Shadows moved across the worn archway. It was an old, old church, perhaps fourteenth century, weathered by untold footsteps, untold prayers, untold knees pressed into the floor. She could see Paul and his bride-to-be in hushed conversation just beyond the last row of pews, and then an old man appeared, and he was directed by the lady to sit wherever he liked while the vicar finished his preparations. Since Maggie arrived and was unceremoniously dumped in the transept, she had not laid eyes on the clergyman in question. Detaching from the huddled conversation, the bride shuffled toward Maggie with her head hanging like a shunned dog's.

"Ruby," Maggie murmured as the girl came near. "You can't mean to go through with this."

Ruby had dressed in a lovely, soft pink gown, delicate lace along the neck and peeking out from the petticoat. The puffed sleeves made her look painfully young. She still wore the dark cloak that had concealed her as she raced away from the Grecian temple and into the rain. Her fingers were naked, for she had given all of her pretty jewels away.

"And why not?" She stuck out her chin, pulled back her shoulders. The conceit only lasted a breath or two. Soon, she wilted and hurried forward to kneel and undo the ties around Maggie's wrists. "Ann and Emilia always have the men chasing after them. Just once I want to be the one everyone admires, everyone loves. Even during my season, nobody noticed me! They only wanted to see Ann, the great beauty, Emilia, the prettiest girl to ever live! You don't know what it's like to live in the shadow of perfect cousins." She sat back, the bonds undone. Her eyes were big and glossy as she stared at Maggie's face. "They are lovely and clever, but I can be clever, too." She stopped, grinning. "Aren't you curious how we could marry this suddenly?"

Maggie had been too flustered to consider it, but now that Ruby mentioned it...

“I made the license myself,” Ruby declared, proud. “And Mr. Corner couldn’t tell a goat from a goose at five paces. He was a little shocked by the hour and the circumstances, but it was easy enough to convince him that Ann and Mr. Richmond’s nuptial happiness had spurred our own. It seems he’s a romantic like me.”

“You forged a bishop’s license?” Maggie dropped her face into her hands. This wasn’t a romantic notion; it was a fanciful delusion. “Good lord, copying out passages from books,” she muttered, remembering Ruby bickering with Emilia. “This is terribly wrong, Ruby, the consequences—”

“But you will keep our secret,” Ruby interrupted. “For Ann’s sake. For the family’s sake.”

A pit throbbed in Maggie’s stomach. So much scandal and chaos, and all for a quick, sham marriage to fill Pimm’s purse and soothe Ruby’s hurt feelings. Maggie was silent, stunned, amazed at the girl’s audacity.

Ruby smacked her lips at Maggie’s nonresponse. “Say something, won’t you? You simply don’t understand, Margaret—they won’t share the attention; they won’t share anything with me! Not even ribbons. If I want something to read, I have to steal it from Emilia, and then they chide me and call me silly. Just stupid, silly Ruby, that’s what they think, below everyone’s notice. Why shouldn’t I have something all to myself? Something nice.”

“Of course, you deserve something nice,” Maggie quickly said. “Someone nice. But that someone isn’t Paul Darrow. You must see it, Ruby. He’s a disastrous drunk and a brute.”

“Hmph. He’s nice enough to me, and that’s what matters.”

“Ruby, be serious. He was flirting with half the ladies at Pressmore. You were simply the first to take the bait.”

Ruby stood and looked away, but Maggie could see her words were having an effect. “It’s too late. I’ve made a mess of things, maybe, but I’ve come this far.” Her words trailed off as she stuck her knuckle between her teeth and nibbled it. “It’s the first time I’ve done something for myself. And anyway, you’re here now, and Foster...”

She heard the doubt creeping into Ruby’s tone. Brushing off her ruined gown, Maggie stood, clinging to the wall, not encroaching on the girl, but using a gentler tone. “Oh, Ruby. You should tell Ann and Emilia how you feel, how much their disregard has wounded you. I’m certain Ann will forgive you if you put a stop to this now.”

Ruby scoffed. “Indeed! Saint Ann—”

“And what is Paul Darrow? Not a saint, believe me, and not your knight in shining armor. He just wants your dowry so he can drink it all away!”

Ruby switched to a different knuckle, then seemed to realize it was a dirty habit and stuck her hands at her sides. Ruby paced, glancing through the archway as the venerable vicar arrived, perhaps, like the church, from the medieval period, an aged tree knot of a man hobbling up the nave toward the last of the pews. “Tell me, Miss Arden, what is it like to be beautiful? To have men hang on your every word and gesture?”

“Is that a serious question?” She couldn’t help but laugh. Hearing her, Paul Darrow swiveled and fixed her with a glare. She lowered her voice to a whisper, wary. “You must have mistaken me for Violet or Ann, for one man actually told my aunt that I made him feel like a caged lion, and that was one of the kinder criticisms.”

Ruby shied away. “You’re making that up.”

“I’m not, I assure you.” Maggie pushed off from the cold wall, joining Ruby. Even if she was outraged at being a forced witness to this farcical marriage, she couldn’t help but feel sympathy for the girl. Carefully, she took Ruby’s hands in hers. “You’re young, Ruby, so young, and there are people out there who will love you for your sweetness and your determination. They won’t care a fig for Emilia or Ann, and when they look at you, the world and all its cares will melt away.” Her voice shook. For a beautiful, shining moment she had felt that in the temple with Bridger. His gaze had banished every doubt, even every thought, only filling her with warmth and need. Maggie sighed, patting the top of Ruby’s hand.

“Come along, ladies, it’s time,” Paul was calling to them and gesturing. When they didn’t immediately move, he patted his pocket where Maggie knew the knife was hidden.

Ruby stared at him, then yanked her hands away. “I don’t care if he wants me for my dowry. He wants me, and that’s enough.”

“There’s more,” Maggie promised her in a whisper. “So much more.”

But Ruby had already started drifting away. She paused under the worn arch long enough to give a quick, distant glance over her shoulder. “Is there? How would you know? Where is your husband? What gives you the right to judge me?”

They were taking too long for Paul Darrow’s liking. He charged into the transept like a bull, shoving Ruby out toward the pews before turning to glower at Maggie. The knife appeared, the bulk of his body hiding it from those behind him.

“Trying to turn her against me?” he sneered, tilting his head to one side. There was a dangerous glint in his dark eyes. Maggie tried to step backward, but Paul snatched her

wrist and gathered her closer. His mouth lowered to her ear as he bit out his next words. “You’ll stand beside Ruby and keep your mouth shut. Say nothing to the vicar, say nothing at all, and we’ll part ways with no bloodshed.”

“You’re despicable,” Maggie hissed, watching him slip the knife back into his coat.

“Ha. I’ve been called worse.”

“Ruby is an innocent. You won’t get away with this,” she added. “Your brother will find us. Bridger will come and put a stop to it.”

Paul Darrow flinched and recoiled at the sound of his brother’s name. Then he smiled, teeth streaked with brown, his eyes no longer filled with malice but a strange emptiness. He patted the other side of his coat, then opened it, revealing a pistol. “If he does, Miss Arden, I have the perfect wedding surprise in mind.”

18

It is held

That valor is the chiefest virtue, and

Most dignifies the haver.

Coriolanus, Act 2, Scene 2

The storm had made a swollen mire of the road outside the church. The mud sucked at Bridger's boots with such intensity he felt sure he would be dragged between two cobbles and down to hell. He shoved the comparisons to France aside, for he couldn't risk the intrusion; his brother was out of control, tying women up, now stealing them in the night, and he no longer knew to what lengths the bastard would go. Drinking, dicing, and whoring were not cheap, and a desperate man backed into a corner was always the most unpredictable.

Still. Bridger had no proof Pimm had taken Margaret to the church. The tracks he had found outside the inn stable had disappeared long ago, and the muck outside the church doors was so frenzied, trod, and re-trod that there was no point in trying to make sense of it. He came equipped only with this gut instinct, and his foreknowledge of Pimm's ways; the Darrows were on the precipice of total destitution, and Pimm, without employment, skill, or sense, had perilously few options available to him. A dowry, ill-gotten or otherwise, was an obvious choice. He didn't know Ann's family well enough to discern whether this was likely to be coerced or voluntary; he just knew what his heart told him.

Margaret is within. I need to get to her.

The doors were shut against the rain. The bell tower loomed, felt but not seen until another shock of lightning stamped its impression against the low clouds. With a shudder and a groan, the heavy double doors gave way, pushed inward, Bridger putting his full weight into the effort, his boots sliding and slipping as he roared through it. He had to get inside. Whatever strength he possessed would have to be enough. At last, he felt the hinges give and shriek, the timbers shivering against his palms as a crack of light appeared up the middle like a glowing seam. Water dripped from his hair into his eyes and down his chin.

Bridger stumbled inside, looking up in time to see six stunned faces staring back.

The ancient vicar, draped in black, his white collar the brightest thing in the room, was the first to react. Even propped up in the chancel, it was difficult to make out his short stature behind the others. He reached for a pair of thick, immense spectacles balanced on the end of his nose. "S-sir! Heavens, what an abrupt entrance! Have you come seeking shelter from the storm? Wait there, please, good fellow, in the back, for we are occupied with God's business and joining these two as man and wife."

The two in question were his brother, huge and hunched and mean-faced, and a young lady he recognized as Ruby, Ann's cousin. Beside Pimm, she looked like a fawn trembling in the shadow of a bear. Bridger took one look at Margaret's pleading, terrified eyes and chose his words delicately. Something, beyond the obvious, was amiss. Her hands were frozen at her sides, and she gave him the smallest shake of her head. The elopement had all the cheer and ease of a hostage taking. A boy with curly red hair stood off to the side, not far from Maggie, holding an immense Bible.

"Come now," Bridger called, keeping his tone even. He placed his walking cane on the floor, held up his open palms, unthreatening, and walked to the edge of the nave.

The pews were empty. A few scuffed candelabras flickered with golden light, but only near the ceremony, the rest of the church draped in shadow. “You wouldn’t marry without inviting your brother.”

“Absolutely I would,” Pimm growled, swiveling to face him. He held Ruby’s hand, crushing it between his own. She wore an agonized scowl as her eyes flicked between them.

“Why is he here? How did he find us?” she asked, on the verge of tears.

Foster from the estate was there, clutching a basket of duck eggs even while standing as a witness. Margaret, on the other side, near Ruby, still hadn’t moved. Bridger took another big step down the timeworn carpet, then noticed Margaret shift her hand in front of her waist. Her two fingers pointed at the floor, her thumb tucked along them, the rest curled inward as if gripping a pistol.

“Be quiet,” Pimm muttered at his bride.

“But I’ve—we—” Ruby stammered and ripped her hand out of Pimm’s grasp. She stuck both fists in her eyes, digging with her knuckles. “I want to be married! This is my moment! Mine!”

“Madam,” the vicar told her softly. “Peace, please!”

“What would Father think of this, I wonder?” Bridger continued, unwilling to risk another step. If Pimm had brought a pistol, he didn’t want to give him a reason to use it.

“Make him leave!” Ruby cried.

The vicar was making more noises of confusion and alarm. Pimm reached for his

head, tearing at his hair before grunting and opening his jacket, withdrawing the weapon, and extending his arm, pointing it at Bridger. It took the old vicar a moment to realize what was happening, then he shrieked and drew the redheaded boy closer.

“This is a house of God!” he wheezed, taking the Bible from the boy, and holding it in front of them like a shield.

“Calm down, vicar, I’ve no quarrel with you,” Pimm sneered. He smiled over the pistol. “And this meddlesome backbiter is indeed my brother, though I scarcely recognize him as kin. Which is why he shall leave. I have no need for him here. Get on with it, vicar. Make this girl my bride.”

The vicar didn’t seem inclined to do so. Margaret gently took hold of Ruby by the waist, urging her to the side. Pimm didn’t notice or didn’t care; he only had eyes for Bridger, who needed to draw his brother away from everyone else, for a drunk man waving a pistol was guaranteed calamity.

“Has he claimed my father approves of the marriage?” Bridger asked, hand still raised.

Before the vicar could answer, Pimm charged a few steps forward. Red flames scorched up his face until he was drenched with sweat. His finger jerked toward the trigger. “So keen to invoke Father’s name! Let me do it for you, whelp. You’ve done nothing but bother me about his condition, whine about money, and fuss over the estate. Well! Here I am, the eldest son, doing my duty.”

Ruby murmured something incoherent. She had allowed Margaret to lead her away, toward the alcove of the north transept.

“Paul—” the girl began, but Pimm silenced her by wagging the pistol around wildly. The girls froze, then slid to their knees.

“Be quiet, I said!” His voice was thunderous rage. “And you!” The pistol was then aimed at Bridger once more and the hammer cocked. Subtly, carefully, Bridger inched down the aisle. He had to disarm Pimm before he killed someone. His brother could get off one shot before the business of loading another would leave him vulnerable. “Stay where you are, and by God, stand still so I might get a clear shot.”

“You won’t do it,” Bridger warned him. “Look at where we are, man. Have some dignity.”

“To hell with dignity.” Pimm raised his other hand to the pistol, steadying it. Out of the corner of his eye, Bridger watched Margaret’s head snap up. She sprang to her feet, and Bridger had enough sense to dive to the right as the lady threw herself at Pimm. A shot. Two screams. It felt as if the rain were suddenly driving harder, every individual drop as loud as the powder exploding from the pan. Heat sizzled across his skin, and as he landed, Bridger clapped a hand over his left arm, blood rising to meet his fingers and seep between them.

“Bridger!” Margaret’s anguished cry came before the pain. On his knees, clutching his shoulder, the lady pelted down the aisle toward him.

“No, back,” he told her through his teeth. “He only grazed me, but you mustn’t endanger yourself.”

Her hands searched along his arm, found the blood, and she gasped. She reached down and tore a strip of white fabric from her petticoat and wound it around his arm, pulling tight.

“I’m all right,” he promised her, though her touch, her care, was more relief than the notion of surviving the shot. They stood together, though Pimm had crashed to his knees. The pistol hung limply in his hand, and he made no effort to reach for another shot. The vicar and boy had fled the chancel completely. Foster and Ruby hid behind

the pews, tucked into the shadows. Ruby wept frantically.

Margaret stayed beside him, holding tight to the bandage around his arm. And while he drew in a sharp, agonized breath through his teeth, he studied his brother. It was like they were boys again, elbows in ribs, bloody noses leaking onto each other, knees scraped, and trousers torn, and all to please their father. “Is that what you want? To kill me? I suppose it would have pleased you not to miss. With Father and me gone, you would be free.”

The red drained from Pimm’s face, replaced with ghostly white. His eye twitched, then both of them narrowed, and the pistol shook in his grasp. At last, he let go of it. “Free? I will never be free. But you? You were free because of me. I protected you from the worst of Father’s wrath. When he went to hunt you down in the library, I would make a mess, and then the beating would be mine. It made me what I am, taking the licks meant for you, so pardon me, brother, if now I feel entitled to a bit of drink and a bit of diversion to give merry company to the ghosts that haunt me.”

Bridger straightened up. “Is that true?”

“Yes,” he spat. “I’ve the scars to prove it.”

“There are other ways,” Bridger told him, still cautious.

“Your Mr. Richmond already dug me out of the depths once,” said Pimm, shaking his head, trembling with dark laughter. “That girl I got with child in Bath? He was the one that put up the money for her family. So, I came here asking for more, but he refused me.” Sighing, he turned his head to regard Ruby. “I found another way.”

Bridger swallowed around a thorn. “Don’t do this to her. We’re broken boys made by a broken man. We’ve both made mistakes, but don’t become him, brother, for there is no more approval or affection to win—our father’s mind has fled, only his body

remains. When I left our home last, I vowed to make things better.” Little by little, Pimm hung his head. All the rage had fled him, leaving an empty vessel behind. “If you took those beatings for me, let it be for something. Let me carry the burden now.”

The storm collided hard against the church. Rain splattered in through the open church doors. The flames on the candles danced and soared, then quieted as the wind died down.

“I give up, Bridger, you’ve won,” his brother whispered. “Take me home to Father.”

19

Hear my soul speak:

The very instant that I saw you did

My heart fly to your service.

The Tempest, Act 3, Scene 1

“What were you thinking? Charging my brother like that...He could have shot you! You could have been...”

Maggie trained her gaze on the work in front of her, on the clean strip of cloth wound neatly and snugly around Bridger’s arm. But as he failed to finish his statement, she couldn’t avoid his searching stare. Their eyes met over the rounded, muscled dune of his left shoulder. The heat of his skin was incredible, almost scalding, and she quickly pulled her hands away.

“Is that concern I hear in your voice?” she asked, teasing.

“You know it is.”

“Then I will answer—I wasn’t thinking. Not really. I just remember he said almost those exact words when he flattened me, and you thumped him an instant later. I’ll say it was that memory; it told me to act, and so I did.” Maggie trimmed away the tail of excess bandage and sat back, trying not to see the broad, tempting expanse of his

chest in achingly reachable proximity. The blood had seeped through his sleeve, ruining the shirt, and it was easier to see to the wound with it removed completely. They sat before the fire in a small, cozy room upstairs in the vicar's rectory. It was a tidy stone cottage squatting beside the Cray Arches church, decorated to Mr. Corner's tastes; he seemed to favor a mossy green color and pastoral paintings of pigs. He had offered them rooms, aware of the unavailability of the apothecary or doctor with the storm, and willing to provide shelter so long as Paul Darrow agreed to be locked in the wine cellar.

Ruby slept next door, exhausted after crying herself to sleep.

"The sight of blood doesn't disturb you?" Bridger asked.

"Papa told me all about the surgeries and amputations on the ship," she replied matter-of-factly. "And he showed me how to bandage cuts and scrapes. Violet fell out of a tree once and broke her ankle. I was there to help her, and it made me feel sick at first, but there's a sort of clarity in acting and keeping a steady hand. I think I might faint at my own blood, but I've no hesitation when helping another."

Bridger smiled so broadly it took her by surprise. "I've often looked at you and wondered how you came to be, but it is all starting to make sense now. You were remarkably clearheaded in the heat of the moment."

"All's well that ends well, I suppose." She shrugged and sighed. "I should go back to Ruby." Before she could stand, Bridger placed his hand over hers, then anchored it to his wrist.

"Stay awhile. Please." She did. Maggie felt his heartbeat under her hand. The soft brush of the hair on his forearm against her palm felt unexpectedly intimate. His legs were stretched out before him as he watched her fiddle with the bit of cut bandage. After a spell, he said, "I'll take my brother back to Fletcher as soon as the storm

abates.”

“You shouldn’t travel yet,” she replied.

“I’ll survive it. What I won’t survive is another of his schemes. I have to believe Pimm means it when he says there will be no more mischief, for I’ve never seen him cry like that, never knew...” He trailed off, pinched the bridge of his nose. “Thank you for warning me about the pistol. I might have suffered far worse than a graze.”

“I’m just relieved we prevented them from going through with it,” said Maggie. Bone-tired, she reclined in the hard little chair and rubbed the back of her neck. “Do you know, Ruby forged their license? From a bishop, no less? I think we had better hope Mr. Corner doesn’t notice and let Ann’s family handle her punishment. Though it pains me to impose, it would be best if we kept this secret between us. She wanted desperately to be noticed. Now the attention has come, and it will bring her nothing but sorrow. She might not see that now, but...”

“She will.” Bridger shifted, his tone grim. The door behind them was open, and she could hear Foster snoring in a chair outside Ruby’s room. They were alone, but anyone might wander by and see her nestled against his arm. The vicar and his wife had retired long ago, and Maggie knew for propriety’s sake she should do the same. Yet she couldn’t pry herself from his side. When the pistol had fired, her heart had stopped, and for a fleeting, gutting instant, she had believed him dead.

Bridger studied her, the pressure of his stormy eyes insistent but not unpleasant. She wished she could open his mind like a box of little treasures and root around, see just what was inside, know just what he thought of her.

“And as for us,” he continued in a raw whisper. Suddenly, his face was rather closer to hers, and the heat of his skin transferred to her, igniting a path from their point of contact to the base of her throat. She felt alert, alive, acutely aware of him. “Let there

be no secrets between us, Miss Arden.”

She nodded.

“No secrets,” Bridger repeated, the warm gush of his breath spreading across her cheek as he leaned down in the chair, twisting toward her. “Therefore, to speak what is in my heart—I misspoke terribly earlier. I said the kiss we shared was a mistake. That wasn’t true. That singular kiss, Margaret, was everything.” His right hand slid under her jaw, lifting her lips toward his. Any movement, any breath, she thought, would snap her fragile restraint.

“Don’t go tomorrow,” she whispered. “Tonight, I thought I lost you. I couldn’t—I won’t—”

“I’m afraid I must, Margaret. Pimm is too reckless, too unpredictable, and it is beyond time he returned home.” He sounded full of regret, then laughed deep in his chest, stroking his thumb across her lower lip. “At the ball, you called me Achilles, and so I am—a man with one weakness. I will return to you as quickly as I can, and we two unmarriageable souls will never be parted after. If you like, we will go to London, and I’ll show you the press that will print the very first copies of *The Killbride*.”

Maggie shook her head, disbelieving. “That is a pleasant fiction, Mr. Darrow.”

“Our story?” He pulled her closer. “Indeed, I think it will be.”

This time, there was no hesitation in his kiss. She anticipated it and tilted her head to meet his lips, sure there had been a breathless absence from their last embrace to this one. The time between felt stifling, and she wondered if it would always be so, that being without him would distort time, fracture it. He held her face with both hands, possessive, consuming, holding her in place while his mouth opened to hers and his

tongue swept into her, seeking and hungry. A chill ran from her fingertips to her earlobes, and she submitted completely to the warmth spreading through her body. Reality only intruded when he pulled away, breathing hard, and they both looked nervously toward the open door.

Bridger leapt to his feet, striding away to close the door, turning to press his back against it, and nodding toward the noticeably diminutive bed pushed against the left wall.

Maggie raised her eyebrows. “In the parsonage? Really?”

Shoving away from the door, Bridger was upon her in two long bounds, taking her out of the chair, pulling her into his arms, and carrying her toward the little bed. He kissed her, hard, quick, dodging when she tried to do it back, drawing out her laughter. With no effort at all, he lowered her to the blankets, and his eyes, sweeter but still filled with now-familiar intensity, bore deeply into hers. “It could be the floor of Parliament, Margaret, it does not matter. This is the need that does not wait. I want you, and I’ll have you, if you’ll have me.”

She lay back, questioning the moment only briefly, her head sinking into the pillow, her gaze drawn to the bandage. Her fingertips fluttered over the clean cloth, and a shiver of fear coasted through her; if he had been shot, if he had been taken away, then they would never be gifted this time together. Maggie’s fingers traveled from his shoulder to his left hand. Pulling it free from the blankets, she held it up, pressing her palm to his, lining up the matching traces of ink in the ridges of their skin.

Gruff, inquisitive, he leaned down to kiss the seam of their fingers touching, asking simply, “Maggie?”

He looked handsome and lean in his trousers and slim coats, but now, bare-chested and hovering over her, he exuded a power and strength that was intoxicating, eagerly

coveted, and it filled her with excitement to imagine having it all to herself. To enjoy. To explore. She arched her back and gave him a kiss in answer, and he accepted, drawing her further in, pulling her flush against his body. It was better, but not enough. His hand ghosted along her jaw, down her neck, lingering there as if his fingers could memorize every line of her throat.

Bridger kissed her, hungrily, stealing the heated moan from her lips that escaped just as his palm slid over her breast. Every part of her craved his attention. Maggie tugged uselessly at the top of her skirt, and he chuckled, sitting back on his heels, and gathering up the hem of her petticoat, chemise, and skirt, bunching them in his palms as he dragged them up her body, then over her head and arms. Laces were tangled and then untangled, and loops yanked free, and at last Maggie wiggled out of her stays and let them land somewhere on the floor.

Naked before him, bathed in gold and held by the firelight, she didn't know what to do with her hands except drag them down his chest, lightly furred with dark hair. She felt ragged and strange, careening outside the lines of the map drawn by sensations familiar to her. His own need was obvious, as he wasted no time gathering her against his body again.

Her skin burned, a coating of fire barely concealing something molten within. Bridger dove into her neck, kissing and sucking the sweat-slicked flesh there, settling down on top of her, the exquisite strength and weight of him pushing her into the mattress. Nestled between her spread thighs, his hands traveled lower, just skimming the sensitive dune of her belly, and she gasped, then went still, a jolt of fear joining the rush of excitement as he loosened his breeches and jerked them open, removing the last barrier between them.

All hope of maidenly pretenses fled out into the storm. She couldn't stop herself, or him, and she heard her own voice lower to a new octave with a sound ripped from her throat, a pliable, lost moan. Whatever shyness she might have felt was banished by

his eyes drinking her in, shining and starving in the low, flickering light, his gaze flying back to hers briefly. Was it gratitude she saw there, or wonder?

Or concern?

A hesitation. He was letting her retreat. Maggie reached for his shoulders, her touch sending a shiver down his back. She marveled at the freckles and scars and hard swaths of muscle banded over his arms and shoulders. Her desire made her hands tremble, and when his lips found hers again, and opened, it was to mutual surrender. Maggie's back arched, her breasts grazing the coarse hair on his chest, and she sighed, and almost laughed. How could anything be so wonderful? It sent a shock through her, and she bucked against him, fleetingly feeling the hot length of him against her inner thigh, and then he was aligned, and pushing into her.

He was being careful with her, she knew that, and she appreciated it, but wanted only recklessness, to abandon herself to the driving, drumming, luxurious something that promised greater pleasure. Raindrops pelted the window and she urged her hips to meet their rhythm.

"Have I hurt you?" he asked, certainly in response to her groan, and the abrupt, limp way her head fell back against the pillow.

"No!" She clawed at him. "No, it's just..."

"New?"

"New," Maggie agreed, breathless. "New and fascinating."

Bridger pushed his forehead against her cheek, a gust of hot breath trickling over her neck and collarbone. "Is this what you want?"

“If I can have more of it.” She sighed. “It’s better even than I imagined.”

Better than a dream. Better than anything scandalous in a book. Surely nothing could feel better than his body driving her into the bed. Or at least she thought so, until he scooped his hands under her hips and tilted her just so, a bit forward and up, and he settled back more onto his haunches. At first, she mourned the loss of his chest and shoulders, but then the advantages of the angle became clear, and Maggie let her arms fall back into the wild snarl of her hair across the pillow, and let Bridger do what he would. His face tensed as he concentrated, his lips pressed tightly together, his fingers biting into the soft cushion around her hips as he guided himself into her again and again, faster at the encouragement of her rising cries. She bit them back before the noise could give them away completely. And remembering they were meant to be quiet and secretive only made the pleasure that much more delicious, forbidden, like a stolen sweet.

A stunning snap of lightning rumbled through the cottage. An end hastened toward her like music from another room growing louder until it obliterated everything in her head. She arched again and scratched vivid ribbons down his chest, almost aghast that her body could surprise and delight her in such a way. Bridger caught her on the arch, holding her, kissing her, grunting out his own delirious end, pushing into her slick heat once, twice, thrice, and then collapsing. His weight was partly suffocating, partly endearing, his boneless helplessness inviting her to push the wet hair back off his forehead and draw lazy circles around his shoulder blades with still-tingling fingertips.

At his careful, gentle unwinding from her, Maggie felt bereft, but said nothing. They had done something wrong, but the guilt simply did not arrive. How could it be wrong when her heart felt peaceful?

When he was on his back again, chest like a bellows as he drew in air, Bridger reached for her hand, coaxed it into his, and held it until she calmed, curled against

him. His other hand drew random shapes on her back, shapes she realized were letters. L, she thought, then O...

“Don’t go tomorrow,” she urged him sleepily.

“Not long, two days, perhaps, three at most,” he promised her, just as drowsy. His fingertips never quite finished their message. “Afterward we shall have forever.”

20

Do as the heavens have done: Forget your evil;

With them forgive yourself.

The Winter's Tale, Act 5, Scene 1

Bridger left before he could be tempted to stay. It felt Herculean, leaving the darling yellow-haired siren in the bed, and creeping out before dawn to collect his brother and go. He kissed her forehead, her cheek, then pulled the blankets snug to her chin and left, hoping to retreat to his own designated guest quarters before his absence was noted by the housekeeper.

He yearned to stay, but the storm had dulled to just a heavy mist, and the sooner he was on the road, the sooner he could return. Not even Pimm's sour, drooping face could dim his spirits as he hired the carriage for them, herded his brother into the back, and they began the short journey to Fletcher.

"What will happen to Ruby?" his brother asked.

It tore Bridger out of his thoughts. He had been staring out at the countryside as it eased by, his mind not in the carriage at all but still in bed with Margaret. He had just been busy chastising himself for not leaving a note apologizing for the early exit.

"I don't rightly know," Bridger replied, sighing. He rested his elbow on the door, his chin on his fist. "Mar— Miss Arden seems determined to blunt the blow where her

forgery is concerned. I think she hopes the vicar will never notice the false license and Ruby will suffer only for the scandal of that misguided kiss. What were you thinking, Pimm? You put her on display for the whole of the estate to see at the masquerade. If Ann's reputation is to be mended then Ruby's will be torn to shreds."

Pimm sagged in his seat, picking at the callouses on his palms. "The Graddocks are plum wealthy, that's what I was thinking. Ruby was tolerable enough. I could have put up with her, I think."

"Until she bored you and you cast her aside for a mistress," Bridger added, knowing his brother too well.

"And?" Shaking his head, Pimm snorted and glared out the other window. "At least there would be money."

"Money enough to justify shooting your own brother?"

"You lit the wrong tinder, brother. It..." Pimm pounded lightly on the side of his head with one fist. His eyes were glazed, vacant, and his mouth was twisted to the side in pain. "My head will just throb, the world goes blank, and it's like...like the future disappears." A rare moment of lucidity seemed to take him, perhaps owing to the lack of brandy in the carriage. But there was more, Bridger thought, watching Pimm's face relax. "I was a boy once, wasn't I? I had hopes, a thought of what I would be one day, but that hope gets beaten out of you."

They were quiet for a while.

"I dragged mud into his study on my shoes once," Pimm said suddenly. "He took the heaviest book he had off his desk and threw it at my head. I couldn't see straight for days, felt like my brain would explode out of my ears."

“Did he call a physician?”

“A doctor?” Pimm roared with laughter. “He hates them.”

“That’s all he has for company now,” said Bridger. He had not slept well, distracted by the beauty lying in his arms and concerned for her comfort, wedged himself against the wall to allow her as much room as the tiny bed allowed. Scrubbing his sandy eyes with his knuckles, he fidgeted in the seat, finding the carriage too small for two large men.

“Doctors cost money.”

“Anyway, if you were dreaming of a lavish settlement, I doubt you would get a shilling from the Graddocks,” Bridger replied, stifling a yawn. His arm ached where the bullet had grazed him, though Margaret’s fastidious work had held through the night, and the bandage hadn’t budged. It would need to be cleaned and redressed when they reached Fletcher. “The colonel might not preside over his daughters directly, but mark my words, he would have discovered the fraudulent nature of the license and had you taken before the constable. His reputation is spotless, his keenness of mind well-known and well feared. Although, given this caper, perhaps not well enough.”

“Then I suppose you want my thanks,” Pimm muttered.

“An apology will suffice.”

“You might be waiting for that a long while.”

“There is plenty of road yet to travel, brother.”

More silence, and it was bitter.

Bridger contented himself with examining the damage left behind by the storm. The carriage often slowed to navigate the pits and ruts. Many trees were downed along the road, as if a giant had clumsily walked the route. His brother fidgeted, probably desperate for drink.

“What’s your scheme, then?” his brother asked, voice dripping with skepticism. “Does the Arden girl have a sizable dowry? You can’t be after her for her looks.”

Bridger shot him a warning glare but did not take the obvious bait.

“Hide the love bites on your neck better, brother, or I won’t be the last to ask.”

“What is between Miss Arden and me is none of your business, other than the thanks you owe her. Without her interference, you might have turned murderer.”

“But she is wealthy,” Pimm prodded, sniffing with laughter.

It was Bridger’s turn to shift and fidget. He had no idea what her dowry might be and knew only that her circumstances were less than ideal. It had seemed romantic and daring when he called them unmarriageable, but the reality was significantly less charming. “As soon as I return to London, there is work to be done on a promising novel. The potential income—”

“Potential?” Pimm spat. His face turned red. Bridger braced for the next round of insults and maybe a thrown fist. Instead, his brother sank further down on the bench and muttered something like “My little brother the savior.”

Bridger ignored him. And he continued ignoring him all the way to Fletcher. They arrived at midday. The grounds were untouched by the storm, and the squat, cake-like profile of the house made his stomach twist into a nest of vipers as they dipped down the hill toward the entrance. A light rain made the grass sparkle, but Bridger leapt

down into a deep morass of mud. The staff did their best not to look surprised at Pimm's presence or his bloodshot, bruised state. They were much kinder to Bridger, who instructed them to prepare Paul's rooms for his permanent residence. Further instructions were given to keep him away from the wine and brandy.

Halfway down the corridor to his father's study, he encountered Harris. The solicitor broke into a smile at seeing Bridger, greeted him, then pulled him close to speak in confidence. He was wearing his orange cravat again, and the wan light penetrating the hall glittered off the top of his bald head.

"It is good to see you again, lad, but if you were hoping to see your father today, I fear he is not at his best. Eating seems to pain him and sometimes he will not swallow his supper at all."

Bridger nodded in the face of his concerns but pushed past him. "Is the doctor within?"

"No, should I send for him?"

"You probably should," said Bridger, continuing to the study doors. "This won't take long."

There was a damp, sweaty smell to the study. The curtains were closed and scant candles burned, and his father sat swaddled and hunched at his desk, lurking like a hermit in a cave. The same old blade of fear lanced through Bridger as he walked toward his father. His imposing walnut desk was beyond him, heaped with bottles and books. Bridger couldn't help but stare at the heaviest among them and wonder if it was the tome that had been hurled at young Pimm's head. His father seemed shrunken, hollow-faced with hunger. There was a pronounced whistling when he breathed.

Bridger strode to the window and threw open the curtains, a liberty he would never have taken before. At the desk, his father stirred and startled, then spun toward him.

Bridger tucked his hands behind his back, thumbs locked. Out in the garden, an enormous flock of finches moved from tree to tree, surging upward like a brown dragon soaring across the grounds.

“No more flowers,” said his father with difficulty. “Where’s Paul?”

“Trying to sleep, I’d imagine,” Bridger replied, almost conversational. “Trying to forget all the beatings you gave him that turned his brains to porridge.”

“Eh? What did you say?”

Bridger drew in a deep breath. “I said you’re a fucking demon. Pimm is going to look after you now, though I daresay you don’t deserve it. There was a time I’d have said you deserve each other, but I think I pity him.” He pivoted to glance at his father over his right shoulder.

“I should...You dare...” Mr. Darrow tried to reach for a bottle to throw. It took him a few attempts, but he finally managed it, then hurled an empty vial at his son. Bridger dodged it easily; a muscle in his jaw twitched.

“You dared, didn’t you? You dared too much. All the time. We might have avoided this familial slide into infamy and destitution if you had just let me love Regina. She’s wealthy now, and we would have been happy with our bad manners and our books. But she despises me, and the woman I now love might not have two pounds to her name!” Bridger laughed, gleeful, exhilarated. Leaning against the sill, he regarded his father with cold scrutiny. “I’m going to marry Margaret Arden, a woman you would hate. She has too many opinions, voices them, and does so without apology. She’s everything I’ve ever wanted and that you convinced me was rot. The real rot

was here in this house all along.”

He toed the bottle out of the way and left, his father calling after him about the damn flowers his mother had left in the front hall. His father’s physician was riding up the road toward the house. Bridger decided to stay long enough to eat, sleep, and have his bandage changed. In the morning, he would return to Pressmore and Margaret. The house was suffocating him. He went out to the back garden and cut a few flowers, watching the finches make shapes as they swooped and dove.

With the flowers in hand, he wondered if he would ever bring Margaret here. He fancied not. He fancied they would make a life of their own somewhere better, where little boys didn’t have to hide in libraries, where fathers embraced their sons.

Home-keeping youth have ever homely wits.

The Two Gentlemen of Verona, Act 1, Scene 1

They rattled and bumped their way back to Pressmore in Foster's cart. The storm had ravaged the waxed covering over the wagon, peppering it with holes, but the cart served well enough as conveyance through the lingering mist. The trees along the narrow path to Pressmore hung against one another, bent at odd angles, their branches littering the ground. Ruby refused to look at Maggie, as if by sheer force of will she could pretend the other lady wasn't there.

"Do you think Ann will ever speak to me again?" Ruby murmured. It was slow going on the mangled, muddy path, and every so often Maggie had to get down and help Foster move a branch out of the road.

"That depends," said Maggie. "Are you sorry?"

Ruby sat with that in stubborn silence.

"Was it your idea or Mr. Darrow's to appear on the balcony together like that? To implicate Ann when it was your own misguided indulgence—your idea or Darrow's?"

"We arrived at the idea together," Ruby murmured. "He because Lane Richmond refused him another loan, and I because I wanted to feel for one moment like the

charmed woman of the evening! And I did feel it, but then...then it was horrible, but I was too afraid to say anything.”

Maggie nodded. “Mrs. Richmond is a formidable woman.”

“Even if I see my error, it is still unfair! Almost from the moment he arrived at Pressmore, Paul singled me out as the object of his affection. We spent the evening before Ann’s wedding together. We paraded through the gardens, and he kissed my hands, and it felt like a dream to be chosen. I’m sure it sounds silly to fall in love so quickly, in just an evening, but I swear it happened! I always had a heart ready to blossom, it just wanted for nourishing love.” She picked up a twig blown into the cart and began to snap it into smaller and smaller pieces. “Oh, but it isn’t fair, why can you have a Mr. Darrow and I cannot?”

Maggie stiffened and blanched.

“I heard you last night.”

“My Mr. Darrow is not galivanting across the whole of England like a wild stallion pursuing every available mare,” said Maggie. She fussed nervously with the toggles on her spencer. If Ruby tattled, she would be in even bigger trouble than she already was.

All morning, to keep from missing Bridger too miserably, she had rehearsed the story she would tell Aunt Eliza. Mr. Darrow and I were enjoying a chaste discussion of *Pride and Prejudice* when we noticed a cloaked figure running from Ann’s stunning new Grecian temple. We followed, of course, eager to clear Ann’s name, and found ourselves lost in the storm. By sheer chance and good fortune, we stumbled upon Ruby and Paul Darrow at the church. The weather did not permit our immediate return, but Mr. Corner was good enough to let us stay in the parsonage until we could return to Pressmore quite obviously heroes beyond reproach.

It could use a few revisions.

“In fact,” Maggie barged on, “my Mr. Darrow did not need Lane to intercede on his behalf with a young lady’s family in Bath. Nor is he a drunk. Nor is he kissing masked ladies on a balcony intending to cause a scandal!”

“No,” whispered Ruby, smirking. “He is only kissing ladies in the good vicar’s rectory.”

“Lower your voice,” she hissed, mindful of Foster. She continued in a ferocious whisper. “Remember, Ruby, that we are the keepers of each other’s secrets. I will not breathe a word about your questionable behavior if you do not tattle about mine.”

She at least had the good grace to hang her head. “I will make my apologies to Ann.”

“See that you do, unless she has already been turned out of the house.”

It was a bleak possibility. The cart diverted before the maze and temple, turning left onto a small road running along the property, between hedges, curving toward the Pressmore stables. Farther on, they turned left again and joined the main drive, Foster taking them right to the front doors of the estate. The house spread out before them, breathtaking as always, perhaps more so draped in pretty mist, the pale sandstone confection almost overrun in places with climbing hydrangea and clematis, the leaves of which glittered with the previous night’s rain. They must have been spotted far out, for an entire welcoming party swept out onto the paving stones and met the cart as Foster brought it around.

Foremost among them was Aunt Eliza, taller than the rest by virtue of her colossal feathered bonnet, lending her the quality of the toughest hen in the flock.

“Oh, you are alive! We feared you were swept away in the storm!” cried Winny. She

and Violet all but ripped Maggie out of the wagon before the footmen could help.

Maggie embraced her sisters, tears springing to her eyes. They squeezed her so tight, and she felt their tremulous fear.

“Never make us worry like that again!” Violet muttered, elbowing her when they pulled apart. “At best, I hoped you had gone off to be a pirate. But then, of course, there are highwaymen, and I did not want to consider that. Where is Mr. Darrow? For he is missing also.”

“I promise, all will be explained,” said Maggie, seeking out Ruby as she slid out of the cart. “And I do mean all. Come, ’tis time Ruby shed light on this scandal and its true participants. Ann’s name will be restored, and any doubts about her character erased.”

Her aunts waded to the front of the crowd. “We shall see about that,” said Mrs. Richmond, sweeping her eyes up and down Maggie’s soiled, torn, bloodied gown and jacket. Lane met them in the foyer, flying down the grand stairs, cheeks flushed with excitement.

“Cousin! What a comfort it is to have you back safely. I am saddened to say that the report from Madigan is less relieving, for he has bled Ann repeatedly and seen no improvement.”

“What we have to tell will cheer her, I’m certain of it,” Maggie told him. She broke away from her sisters and aunt, tugging Lane aside, into the shadows cast by the stairs. “Mr. Darrow has found his brother and taken him back to their family estate. He has promised to return within three days’ time, and I know he would not want you to worry on his account.”

Lane hoisted a brow. “Has something occurred that would make you the authority on

his desires?”

Maggie was dragged away to the sunny southeast parlor before she could provide an answer. It was a swirling morass of questions that moved through the house, Ruby at the center of it and growing smaller and more shrunken by the minute, no doubt dread overcoming her as she anticipated the conversation to come. And she was right to fret. Upon reaching the parlor, all were dismissed except Lane, Maggie, her aunts, and Ruby. Maggie stood near the young lady for encouragement while Ruby tripped and sniffled her way through the full accounting, from Mr. Darrow's arrival at Pressmore, his imposing, swift courtship, the plan they concocted to both embarrass the marrying couple and then escape for their own secret wedding. When Ruby faltered under the withering gaze of Mrs. Richmond, Maggie gently touched her shoulder and whispered, “Courage, Ruby. Courage.”

The interrogation lasted long into the afternoon, and Ruby was made to stand and answer questions until everyone was satisfied. Lane said little though his face communicated much; he was heartbroken and confused and had difficulty even glancing at Ruby.

“The ladies must be hungry and exhausted,” said Lane, intervening when it seemed the questioning would never end. Ruby extended a grateful look, but Lane didn't see it. “Let us adjourn for tea and share with Ann the tremendous news that she is as blameless as we all knew.”

Slight emphasis on all, to which Maggie's aunts stiffened.

Lane held Maggie back as the others left the parlor. They stood in the square glow of an unshielded window, the happy heads of climbing flowers bobbing against the edges of the glass. A dark ribbon of clouds extended across the horizon, but the view down to the pond was otherwise clear, bittersweet with the promise of rain to come. Lane gathered up her right hand in his, a film of tears over his eyes.

“You never wavered,” he murmured, almost hiccupping with emotion. “You were our champion, and without your persistence, and Bridger’s, our fledgling marriage might have fallen from the nest and shattered. Blazes, you tackled a man with a pistol! Bandaging wounds and solving mysteries, you are just like your own intrepid characters, dear cousin. And you have done it all at great personal cost, for I know well the fury my mother is capable of—she and Aunt Eliza were horrified at your absence.”

“There is nothing to be done about it now,” said Maggie. “Come, we must go to Ann. It will not be easy for her to hear the truth.”

She knew everything Lane said was true; for now, Ruby absorbed the negative feelings that would soon fall upon Maggie. For she had promised Aunt Eliza she would behave and not make a nuisance of herself, and she had done neither. Yet she held her head high; love, for that was indeed what she felt for Bridger, was like a little hand cradling her chin, keeping her from losing hope and giving in to shame.

Poor Ann sat in shocked silence as the tale of Ruby’s betrayal was retold. Ruby herself was not there, but Maggie knew it would not be long before apologies must be made and accepted or rejected. Ann’s response was not for her to anticipate or influence. And, more happily, Madigan could at last be dismissed, Ann making a swift and miraculous recovery, strong enough to meet with her husband in private. Maggie left them in Ann’s chambers, leaving alongside Emilia.

“I can’t believe Ruby sank so low,” whispered Emilia, stricken. “Perhaps we did treat her badly.”

“We can all be kinder,” said Maggie. “If this leads to greater isolation, I fear what it will mean for her.”

Emilia pressed her lips together. Her thick black hair was curled tightly, woven with

pale pink ribbons, and bunched over her ears. She hugged herself, swaying, visibly distressed by what she had heard in Ann's chamber. "Whatever the colonel decides, I will not let her slip through our fingers again." Fanny, Ann's dark-haired maid, slipped out of the double chamber doors behind them. Emilia nodded to her. "Fanny, have some food and clean linens brought to Miss Arden's room. She has earned her rest."

After all the excitement and disruption, Maggie slept deeply, almost the moment her head met the pillow. She rose hours later to eat, then fell back asleep until evening, when her sisters arrived. They found Maggie sitting at the window, feet tucked up onto the bench, a shawl drifting from her shoulders, her mind soaring across the fields of Warwickshire to Fletcher, where she tried to imagine Bridger—what he was doing, what he was feeling.

"Now it is our turn to hear the full and sordid tale," shrieked Violet, running to where Maggie sat and kneeling, pressing her head of black curls into her hip. Winny stood behind her, rising up and down, tiptoes to heels, forefingers and thumbs pinched together.

"Only if you are well enough to share," said Winny. "You must be dreadfully tired."

"But you didn't leave us to become a pirate, did you? You can tell us if you did, I would not tattle to Aunt Eliza about it. In fact, I will never tell her anything again. She said the most horrid things about you while you were gone! Acting as if you had abandoned us, as if you were the most selfish girl in the county. Mother marrying Papa poached her brains, for she thinks everyone is out to insult her personally."

Maggie flinched, tearing her gaze away from the window and her soft thoughts of Bridger. Real life, as ever, encroached. "I would never leave my sisters," said Maggie, and Winny hurried over to join their pile, squealing. "Not even to become a pirate."

“But where is Mr. Darrow?” asked Winny.

“Your one, not the terrible one.”

“He has taken Mr. Darrow—the terrible one—home. But he has promised to return in three days, for Fletcher is not far and he is...” Maggie trailed off, blushing. He is eager to be with me once more. But there was no hiding it from her dear sisters, who sniffed out the missing words immediately.

“I knew it!” cried Violet. “Look at her face, Winny! She’s like a freshly dug beet. Have you ever seen anything redder? Confess, sister! What is between you and Mr. Darrow? Omit not a single detail.”

Maggie relented and told them all. Well, almost all. She left out the part about their lovemaking, though admitted to sharing a bed with him. The lovemaking she wanted just for herself. Just for them. The temple, the walk, the rain, the cart, their conversation and subsequent argument at the inn, then Mr. Darrow (the bad one) appearing to carry her away to the church, Bridger’s daring appearance, the gun, the bandaging, and so on...

“You are disgusting in love.” Violet sighed, crushing Winny to her chest with wistful...something. Not jealousy, but a sudden sisterly overcoming, the act of feeling far too much and not knowing where to put it. “And very sunburned.”

“Love suits you,” Winny had added, fending off Violet’s crushing embrace. Maggie fled their teasing, racing to the bed, but she was soon captured in their arms again.

“It suits her very well,” Violet agreed.

“And what luck!” cried Winny. “A man of learning with a love of books and a handsome face! I will accept him as a brother, dearest, as long as he is always gentle

with you. And he must listen, of course. And he must never endanger your aspirations, but rather celebrate them! Oh, but he could publish your book himself, which makes it all wonderful and like a fairy tale. But if he is ever cruel to you, he will regret it!”

“What will you do?” Violet had teased. “Compliment him to death?”

They dissolved into giggles. There was washing up and rearranging, but Maggie was once again happy to find herself tucked up with her sisters, even if Violet snored and took up too much of the bed. But once her sisters were asleep, Maggie found herself listless. Her heart kept beating too fast and intrusive meanderings plagued her. Violet had once declared that no thought had after nine o’clock could be trusted, but even with that rule in mind, Maggie’s mind wouldn’t settle. At last, she wiggled her way out from between Violet and Winny and went to sit at the window again, shifting the curtains aside to gaze out at the moon.

She was apparently not the sole person at Pressmore for whom sleep seemed impossible, for there soon came a soft rapping at the door. Maggie stood, wrapped her shawl tightly around her shoulders, and went to see who had come.

It was Ann, who whispered, hunched, protecting a candle. “Are you not abed?”

“Obviously not.” Maggie smiled. “And neither are you.”

Ann shared her grin, though it soon faded. “My brain is a husk, I think. I am more leech than lady now after all of Madigan’s bleedings.”

“You do look peaky. Come in,” Maggie beckoned, closing the door behind them both. “Is something amiss? Something more, I mean. I know it is not all well with Ruby.”

Ann drifted inside, noticed Violet's snoring, and continued to the window. Propped against the sill, she set the candle down on the writing desk and gazed outside. "Only that you will leave us soon, now that this farce is all coming to an end."

"Your wedding was not a farce!"

"I am tired, Maggie, not ignorant." She did indeed look drawn, her sadness no doubt transferring from herself to the precarious situation of her cousin. A significant number of people—people inclined to gossip—had witnessed Ruby kissing and caressing a man publicly. Even if they never learned of the botched marriage, the social consequences would be severe. "This would all be much easier to resolve if my father were in the country." Her expression hardened. "Sometimes I wonder if he will return at all. Sometimes I...I wonder if he has abandoned us."

Maggie drew closer, mindful of her sleeping sisters and lowering her voice. "Would he really do that?"

Ann shrugged. The flowery, embroidered shawl she was wearing slipped down her shoulder. "It is not uncommon. Girls like me are sometimes sent to family in England, baptized, reimagined completely, declared English, and cut off from their mothers in India. A father's love is fickle, Margaret, and depends on so much."

"But what will become of Ruby?" Maggie asked.

"Mrs. Richmond has declared she must marry Paul Darrow. Lane and I are firmly against it."

"What?" She nearly shouted it. Violet stirred. It was horrible to contemplate, and Maggie sank back, sitting heavily on the bed.

Ann continued gazing out the window, picking idly at the ends of her shawl. "Ruby

will get what she wants after all and be Darrow's, and we will all sigh and say the right thing was done, but done for whom? The conclusion will be that tragedy was averted. Attention will turn to the next bit of gossip, Ruby all forgot. Over the years, she will be ground down, as all unwanted women are ground down by their husbands, until the bright spark of her is dust, and the Ruby of this moment just a memory." She paused and shook her head. "I gave everything to be English. Ruby will give far more, and in a blink, it could be utterly stripped away from her. Or me."

"Is there nothing we can do?"

"My hope is that she can return to India. If she does, I will never see her again," Ann replied. "I know it is unladylike to hope Paul will somehow marry someone else in a similarly hasty marriage before he can have Ruby, and yet..."

"And yet. Well! I will lend my voice to yours and try to persuade my aunt that Ruby is better off far, far away from Paul Darrow." Ann rose and came to her, and Maggie offered a sisterly embrace, asking, "Is all well with Lane?"

"Not yet," she replied, though without malice. She pulled back, holding Maggie at arm's length. "But he intends to win me back."

Maggie's brows jumped in surprise. Knowing them, she had assumed instant reconciliation. Noting her amazement, Ann continued, "My mother told me that Englishmen come to India, they fall in love and fear with the country, they covet its women, they think us subdued and mysterious. They lust after us, they marry us, and only then do they discover who is the general and who is the soldier."

"And does your mother have any wisdom to provide where Ruby is concerned?"

Ann's smile faded. "I think not. I fear there is little I can do to help her. Mrs. Richmond's outrage is not abating, just shifting from me to my cousin. And I fear

that same anger will come for you, too.”

Maggie looked down at the gap between them. “That is perhaps inevitable. When they look at me, they just see my mother, the woman that disappointed them both.”

“Is that what keeps you awake?”

“Partly,” said Maggie. She didn’t mention Bridger, protective of their budding love, and afraid of the information getting back to her aunts. Perhaps it was even an error to tell her sisters, for Violet was a known blabbermouth. “Stay awhile, at least we can be sleepless in good company.”

“You know,” Ann began, returning to the window. A pretty light suffused her face. It was the sort of glow that preceded the telling of a secret, and Maggie leaned toward her. “We haven’t spoken of anything but sorrow since the masquerade.” She unlatched the window, allowing in the chilled and fragrant night air, and breathed deep. “While I was confined in that room, my thoughts turned often to Lakhnau. I hadn’t missed it much until now.”

“What do you miss most of all?”

Ann’s gaze grew distant, and Maggie sensed she had gone somewhere far away. “Impossible to choose. Impossible. I was just a girl when I left, but I remember valleys filled with flowers, and rivers that seemed to wind on forever. And I remember walking beneath the Rumi Darwaza and thinking it must be the gate to paradise! Mother loved the shrines within the Bara Imambara, and oh, Maggie, you have never seen anything so beautiful, stone worked to look like most delicate lace.” She laughed softly. “If I even start in on the food I shall certainly cry.”

“From the little I sampled at your feast I believe I know why.”

“You would love it there, though the heat can be challenging.” She grinned, and still, Maggie knew she was nowhere near England. “The air there holds you.”

They spoke long into the night, until they both grew too tired to go on. Ann drifted out the door sometime around dawn and Maggie stayed at the window bench, curling up there for the bright companionship of the moon. It was the same moon over Bridger, and that pleased her. But nothing would truly comfort her, for she could not have the one thing she wanted most. It was impossible not to want him, crave him. Impossible not to remember the full heat of his body as he crushed her into the mattress, the hard, demanding pressure of his lips against her neck, the way he had moved inside her with urgency.

Maggie sighed and closed her eyes, though her heart continued to beat too fast. Something was wrong. She could feel it, though she told herself it was nothing, that Bridger Darrow would return to her within three days’ time, and their love, no matter the protests, no matter the obstacles, would be strong enough to conquer anything.

22

Woe, destruction, ruin, and decay.

The worst is death and death will have his day.

Richard II, Act 3, Scene 2

Bridger's father deteriorated rapidly in the night.

The doctor came to fetch him just after midnight, bleary-eyed and stammering. It was bad, very bad, and if he or Pimm had anything to say to their father while he was still somewhat lucid, now was the time to do it. Bridger received this information with a chill. For a moment he couldn't move, certain he had misheard the doctor.

"Now?" he asked, stupidly perhaps, but he was still half asleep.

The doctor grimaced, his mouth hanging open.

"Right. I'll find my brother. Thank you, doctor."

As Bridger fetched a candle and pushed out into the hall, he realized the temptation to blame himself for his father's sudden turn. He had, after all, strode into his study and called him a demon. All manner of self-flagellating thoughts arrived, each more extreme than the last, ending on the big crescendo with: I killed Father.

He recounted all of this to Pimm as they found their way to their father's

bedchamber. It was a room Bridger had entered maybe two times in his life. Mr. Darrow demanded perfect privacy. As boys, they had come up with a game where they would dare each other to go into the room and whoever took the most steps past the threshold won. This game continued until they were caught, by their mother, thank heaven, and the look of abject terror on her face convinced them never to try it again.

“You didn’t kill him,” Pimm grunted. The lack of alcohol was taking its toll. Pimm clearly hadn’t enjoyed even a moment of restful sleep. Bridger was somewhat the same, though for very different reasons. “And if you did, you should be given a medal. I thought he would hang around forever just to torment me.”

“It’s serious, Pimm. Even the death of a poor man is disruptive. Thank God Harris is already here.”

Another vexing thought occurred: he had promised to return to Pressmore with all haste, and this would delay him significantly. Some of the staff had been alerted to the dire nature of circumstances, and Bridger detained the estate butler, asking him to please have a message sent to Pressmore Estate explaining the situation. Even then, he felt a panicked itch begin at the base of his throat. He had no idea what awaited Margaret when she returned from Cray Arches, and he simply had to hope that Lane would protect her if any accusations regarding her virtue were flung about.

Mr. Darrow, small and somewhat childlike in his bed, received his sons with a blank expression. The men took turns tripping through their goodbyes. If Bridger had doubted the doctor’s fears, putting eyes on his father confirmed the man’s worries. He had a vague instinct to take his father’s hand, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it. Wanting to be moved to tenderness was not the same as genuinely feeling it, and it seemed blasphemous to deceive his father at this, his final hour. When it was obvious that he had departed, Bridger and Pimm stood on either side of the bed in silence. Their eyes met, and Pimm heaved a tremendous sigh and said, “I thought we would

have longer.”

Afterward, Pimm seemed taken by emotion and could not speak, so Bridger turned to the housekeeper and instructed that their father should be wrapped in the customary wool shroud, the house must be prepared for mourning, and black gloves and cravats should be aired out for the sons. There was an unendurable smell in the room that made Bridger’s stomach roil. He dismissed himself, went downstairs, out the kitchen door, and to the tree he had liked best for reading as a child. The clouds were moving fast, distorting across the swollen white crescent of the moon like dancing ghouls. A crisp, decidedly unsummerish chill thrilled across the grounds. The spirits, he thought, were uneasy. There was a taste upon the air, crackling on the tongue, the dark presaging of another storm. Indeed, the dampness foretold rain.

The first winks of dawn seemed to hesitate. He stood in the moonlight and felt a shift. A few eager raindrops splashed the leaves above his head. His shoulders eased down, the muscles in his jaw relaxing. For the first time in, well, perhaps ever, Bridger breathed in and felt free.

He only wished Margaret could be there to see it.

23

A heavy heart bears not a nimble tongue.

Love's Labour's Lost, Act 5, Scene 2

Bridger did not return the next day, or the next. By the fourth day, Maggie began living in a perpetual fog of anxiety.

Where was he?

A persistent rain had begun to fall, ugly and gray. Most of the wedding guests departed as soon as the storm lifted, but others tarried, put off by the weather. Maybe the roads had become too dangerous to travel. Maggie consoled herself with that possibility and held it as truth.

It had been decided after all that Ruby would return to India, and until then, she was to be sequestered in her bedchamber like Rapunzel. Each day, feeling sorry for her, even if she had behaved wildly, Maggie took a new stack of books and left them outside her door. She was in the midst of doing just that on the fourth day after their misadventure in Cray Arches, when the door abruptly opened, startling her.

Ruby's huge, doelike eyes stared at her through the narrow crack.

"You must stop bringing me books, Miss Arden," said Ruby softly. Something was wrong.

“It upsets you?”

“Yes, because I do not deserve it. I do not deserve your kindness.”

Maggie drew the books against her stomach, standing. “If Ann forgives you then so do I. You’re very young, Ruby. We all make our mistakes. I don’t say that to condescend, only to assure you that you are not alone in folly. We ladies are often condemned for the smallest of mistakes, and men celebrated for the same actions. One misstep should not define your life.”

Without warning, the girl burst into tears. “I fear I have made another!”

Maggie heard soft footsteps approaching her from behind. She did not yet turn to look, her gaze fixed on the open door. “Ruby—”

“Only—no, no! You must forgive me, Miss Arden! They are sending me away, and I know it is because you and Ann told Mrs. Richmond I must go. And I thought...” She heaved through her sobs, tears dampening the lace of her high collar. “I thought that if I cannot have my husband, then neither can you.”

Maggie’s hands went numb. She struggled to keep hold of the books. “What did you say, Ruby? What did you tell my aunt?”

“Everything,” she whispered, sliding down to the floor. “Everything. Oh, you must forgive me. It just tumbled out, it just...”

“Miss Arden?” It was Fanny that had come down the hall toward them. She sounded impatient. Maggie slowly turned to face her. Ann’s maid was an uncommonly pretty girl, but she looked like a ghost as she stood there in the middle of the wide, swallowing corridor.

“Beg your pardon, Miss Arden, but Mrs. Richmond and Mrs. Burton wish to see you in the Sapphire Library.”

Trembling, Maggie lowered to the floor and left the pile of books near Ruby’s closing door. She didn’t want anything in her hands, afraid she might hurl *The History of Tom Jones* at one of her aunts and make everything worse. It was a doomed march. As they reached the junction of corridors and the grand stairs, she heard shrieks from down the hall. No coincidence. Their guest chamber was that way, and she distinctly noted Violet’s and Winny’s voices as they argued with some unseen person.

“I haven’t given you permission to pack that!” Violet’s cry carried down the hall.

Fanny softly cleared her throat. “Mrs. Burton has decided you are all to leave Pressmore by midmorning. Ahem. Today.”

“Oh,” said Maggie, feeling as if someone had punched her in the stomach. She was dizzy by the time they reached the Sapphire Library. Its grand doors were thrown open, revealing the aisle between two tall bookcases and at the end of it, her aunts standing in the window alcove, almost exactly where they had been when she and Mr. Darrow overheard them from the cupboard. Fanny curtsied and stared at the floor, an implicit apology in her bleak, joyless smile.

Maggie went in. She stood still. She listened, but only half heard as her aunts took turns expressing their shock, horror, and disappointment. Moment by moment, her heart sank lower and lower, until it was buried even beneath the floorboards.

“And to think,” said Aunt Eliza, reaching the fever pitch of her tirade, “I thought we understood each other. I thought you had abandoned the selfish tendencies that would hinder your improvement. But no, you have set fire to your future happiness and the happiness of your family, and all for Mr. Darrow. I am sure there is a lady fit for him somewhere, but she is not in my bloodline! You self-indulgent, reckless, thoughtless

girl! I was entrusted with your safety, and what will your mother say to me now?" Aunt Eliza threw her hands in the air. Her sister moved to comfort her, taking a little fan to cool Eliza's gleaming red face. "And now who will have you?" she further screeched. "Not Mr. Gibson, I assure you! Not he! For Mr. Gibson has quit Pressmore quite in an uproar, and who can blame him? Mrs. Applethwaite and I had recommended you to him so passionately, so genuinely, that he thought himself in love with you already. He gave up all notion of this imagined lady from a pretend place for you, Margaret, and we impressed upon him your many qualities while you were off debasing yourself with Mr. Darrow. Now...now who will have you?"

Maggie lifted her chin just a little. "Mr. Darrow," she ventured. "We have an understanding."

"You have nothing," Mrs. Richmond assured her, scoffing.

"Quite right, quite right. There is nothing between you," Aunt Eliza raged on, out of breath. She nearly collapsed back against the padded alcove bench behind her. Fluttering Mrs. Richmond's fan out of her face, she paced in a tight line in front of Maggie. She had never seen her aunt so beside herself. "You will not speak his name again to me if you would like to continue living in my cottage."

Maggie's mouth dropped open. She started to defend herself, but Eliza wouldn't hear it.

"Oh, yes, Miss Margaret, I have quite made up my mind about that." Aunt Eliza snatched the fan out of her sister's hand and used it to point at Maggie's nose. "I should have done this long ago, but I did not understand the urgency of the situation. There will be no more talk of Mr. Darrow and no more talk of books. Speak of either in my presence, or generally, or ever, and I will turn you, your mother, and your sisters out of Mosely Cottage. That is no idle threat but a promise, and when I make a promise, young lady, I keep it."

There is no Margaret Arden without books.

And now that she had sampled his kisses, his affection, perhaps there was no Maggie without Bridger either. She couldn't speak, couldn't think, her thoughts unraveling at such a painful speed she could only grip the nearest bookcase for support. Even that wounded her deeper, remembering that she must abandon *The Killbride* and any hope of seeing it published.

And she must abandon Bridger, too.

She must, she thought, gasping wretchedly for air, abandon herself.

Where was he? Why had he not returned?

"I must...I must say goodbye to Lane and Ann," Maggie managed. If she could speak to them, then perhaps they could pass on a message to Bridger. She couldn't live with herself if he returned to find she had vanished without so much as a word of explanation.

"I think not," said Aunt Eliza, sweeping forward to take Maggie by the arm. "You and your sisters will leave this place with me at once, and we will see what can be done to salvage your reputation. And unless your mother has any real objections, I think the best place for a wayward girl is where she can be supervised. My townhouse in Mayfair will serve until a suitable husband can be found for you."

Mrs. Richmond approached, and her expression was markedly softer. Gently, she touched Maggie under the chin. "With all love, I will give your goodbyes to my son and his wife. Take heart, my dear niece, you are not ruined yet. Your Aunt Eliza and I will not allow it."

Her misfortunes did not end there. Outside the library, the first face to greet her was

Miss Applethwaite's. Judging by her wide-eyed, stunned expression, Regina had heard some or all of Aunt Eliza's meting out of punishment.

"You must be pleased," said Maggie, hoarse. "I cannot even say his name now."

Regina faltered. At last, she withdrew a small, folded page from her beaded reticule and smoothed it out, then handed it to Maggie. It was the first page of *The Killbride*, the only one containing her name.

"I saw him drop this the night of the masquerade," said Regina. "I promise, Miss Arden, that this is all for the best. Perhaps you cannot see it now, but I know you can do better than a man with no respect for your cleverness or talent."

Aunt Eliza was hovering. She even seemed displeased that Regina had returned the lost page. Maggie tore it in half and let it fall from her hands as she was escorted back to their guest chambers, where Violet and Winny were losing the battle against Mrs. Richmond's diligent staff.

And so, Aunt Eliza had her way. Upon their return to Mosely, there were but weak objections from Maggie's mother, who, depressed, still lost in mourning, and who never argued well against the far stronger Mrs. Eliza Burton, agreed that Maggie had behaved outrageously. Dependent upon Mrs. Burton's charity, how could Emmeline Arden rightly deprive her sister of Margaret's company?

24

When sorrows come, they come not single spies,

But in battalions.

Hamlet, Act 4, Scene 5

Bridger arrived a week after he intended to.

Riding hard up the drive, he found Pressmore cloaked in melancholy drizzle, the lush plants of the gardens flanking the path sagging as if they had endured more than their fill of rain. He wasn't at all surprised to find Lane waiting for him in the doorway. A footman raced from inside the house to meet Bridger and his horse.

"What's the matter?" he and Lane asked each other in startling unison.

"You first," said Lane, ushering him under the overhang. They huddled together watching the footman lead his horse away, Bridger wondering why he was not being brought inside the house.

"My father is dead, and Fletcher will go to my brother, despite everything, despite—well, never mind," said Bridger. "Did no messenger arrive?"

"None," Lane replied, taking him tenderly by the arm. "But the roads have been disastrous for a week. Perhaps he lamed his horse."

“Damn it all,” Bridger muttered, pinching his temples. “And Miss Arden? Is she still here?”

Lane shook his head, then squeezed his arm. “She and her sisters departed days ago. But you must tell me more of your father, Bridger. I know there was little affection between you, but still, you have my most profound condolences.”

Glancing toward the doors, impatient, Bridger explained it all as quickly as he could. They had received only a few visiting mourners. The vicar came, of course, and a handful of townsfolk and old tenants from Bambley. They all struggled to dredge up nice words for Mr. Darrow. Bridger had wished they wouldn’t bother; he detested the idea that death somehow absolved one of all cruelty and wrongdoing. He and his brother were proof that the pain inflicted continued, and nobody was offering condolences for that.

“He was a great man,” someone had said.

“A decisive fellow,” added another.

It made him physically ill to think about his father lying in the space next to his mother in the Bambley graveyard, but such was tradition, and he was too worn down to fight it. Lane listened to it all patiently, still holding him outside the house proper. At last, losing his temper, Bridger shucked Lane’s hand from his arm and stood back. “Why are you not inviting me inside, man? This is highly unusual; I’m soaked through from the rain, and I rode hard all morning.”

Lane glanced down at the tops of his boots, then squinted out at the rain. “You see, Ruby concocted some wild stories about what went on in Cray Arches, wilder even than what we all expected. Your name and Miss Arden’s were mentioned, and not charitably. I think it is all overblown, but my aunt is less forgiving.”

His vision narrowed to just his friend. This was bad. Very bad. His heart ached for Margaret, who must have gotten a harrowing earful from her aunts, if what he had witnessed in that cupboard was any indication. Bridger sniffed and raised his chin. “Are you not the master of Pressmore?”

Lane balked. “Certainly, I am, but it is a courtesy I do my mother now, for she swears she will not have you at our table. I think it ridiculous, but after all that has occurred with Ann and her cousin and your brother, I defer to her nerves just this once. Our friendship is not in doubt, Bridger, it never could be, but it is perhaps best left to the clubs in town and your own residence. At least for now.”

A curtain twitched aside, revealing the grim visage of Mrs. Richmond. She glowered out at him, and he returned nothing.

Lane followed his gaze, going on quickly, “Tell me Ruby is lying and I will defend you to her most ardently.”

Bridger could not meet his eye, furious with himself. Furious with Ruby. “Something...occurred.”

“Oh dear.” Lane blew out a nervous breath. “And...and my cousin...”

“I cannot explain myself, only that I...that I love her. And I had hoped to find her here. The last few days have been trying, but I sent that messenger ahead to explain my absence.”

Mrs. Richmond sat watching and waiting, tapping the window with her knuckle. Grumbling, Lane stepped out of the doorway and took Bridger by the elbow, leading him through the drizzle to the side of the house and the archway crawling with heavy-headed hydrangea. The sight of it made Bridger want to strike the house with his riding crop, for he had met Miss Arden at Pressmore here just after he initially

arrived. Back when he thought her mad and preposterous. Back when he had no affection for her writing or her person.

“And what must she think of me?” Bridger thought aloud. “I did not return and abandoned her to face the consequences alone.” This time he really did strike the house with his crop. An instant later, the curtain nearest to them swished, and there was Mrs. Richmond; she had followed them. Lane urged him farther down the side of the house. Mist crept up from the maze, swirling along the edge of the archway.

Lane sighed. “I am sorry, Bridger. Almost as soon as Ruby’s information was shared, Margaret and her sisters were removed from the house. Even I was not permitted to bid her goodbye; it was all extremely sudden. Certain assumptions were made, and certain promises, too.”

“Threats, you mean.”

“Her aunt Eliza was very displeased. Blazes, they scared me . Napoleon might have beat us back had he an army of Aunt Elizas.”

Another curtain opened. Mrs. Richmond’s breath fogged the glass. Lane removed them to the other side of the archway, behind a pillar, the rain splattering them both.

Bridger shook his head. “If I had been here, if I could have come to her defense...” His rage simmered to self-loathing. “Perhaps it does not matter. Perhaps this was inevitable. What could I offer her? Her family would be right to urge her against me; I’ve no money at all.”

Lane shot forward, gripping his arm again. “But you told me—”

“I know what I told you, Lane. I lied. You’ve already been too generous, and now to discover that you were the one to patch things up for Pimm in Bath...How could I

ever ask you for anything again?”

Lane actually guffawed. “Good God, man, you saved my life! I would do anything to see you whole and happy, even more if it meant you could be part of the family through Margaret.”

“I wished that above all else.”

“It’s only money, Bridger. I will gladly lend you whatever—”

“No, I can’t accept anything more from you.” Bridger leaned back against the pillar, heedless of the wet plants. “I shall write to her and explain all, and hope that I could be forgiven.”

“Your father died, that’s hardly your fault.”

“But I could have demonstrated more restraint,” said Bridger, casting a wary eye toward the windows of the house. A cold, numb feeling spread through his body. The fury that had seared through him a moment before would have been welcome, but now he felt the old, lonely feelings returning. Lane had his wealth and his beautiful wife and his sprawling estate, and Bridger had nothing but a single manuscript that might or might not prove successful.

“If I am not welcome at Pressmore, then I will trouble you no longer,” he said, securing his hat and striding back toward the front of the house.

“I am sorry, old friend.” Lane followed, sounding harried. “Will you receive me in London? It would be jolly to be there once the roads are better.”

Jolly. Bridger tried not to sneer at the word. “Of course,” he said, stiff. “I will always receive you.”

The footman brought his horse again, wearing a perplexed expression at Mr. Darrow leaving so soon. He had swung up into the saddle when a blur of yellow silk streaked across the gravel toward him. Ann had come, her jacket half-buttoned and her bonnet ribbons flying. She went on tiptoes and pressed a wrapped bundle into his hands.

“I found this in her guest chamber,” said Ann. She offered a sympathetic smile, one he was too chilled to accept. “My heart told me you should have it. Pray, when will we see you again?”

“Good day, Mrs. Richmond,” he told her, and galloped away.

When he reached Cray Arches, he rested his horse and took a room at the Gull and Knave to torment himself. The proprietor and boy fell all over themselves to be courteous and did not hesitate to oblige him when he asked for the same quarters as last time. He drank too much wine downstairs, then retired to dry himself out by the fire in the room that should have been theirs. He unwrapped the bundle from Ann, discovering four very different pieces of parchment. One was a note from Regina to Margaret, warning her about Bridger’s cruelties and deficiencies. He was already blank with sadness, but somehow her words found a way to knife beneath the leathery crust of loss and prick flesh.

He assured me that no one would ever be interested in what I had to say, that the mind of a woman was better occupied with painting tables and decorating bonnets, and that the true subtleties of literary achievement were attainable by men alone. Upon my honor, he said it, and I have the letters still to prove it.

Bridger lowered the letter to his lap and grimaced. When he could stomach it, he looked to the next item. It was quite obviously a page taken from a longer diary entry, but Ann had chosen the relevant piece.

If I could marry a man like Mr. Darrow, a man who understands the importance of

books, the good they can do, the magic they create, then I might be content after all—to make my family proud without packing my heart away in a dark and dusty room, that is my dearest wish. There is no Margaret Arden without her writing and her books. One day, that will prove a boon, not a burden.

Lastly, Ann had included the first page of Margaret's book, the only one displaying her name, and the one he had hoped to return to her the night of the masquerade. It was torn raggedly in two.

25

Love sought is good, but given unsought is better.

Twelfth Night, Act 3, Scene 1

August

His new German apprentice, Bastian, hovered at the door, tapping his leg with the letter in his left hand. He insisted on wearing the strangest little hat, Bastian, even indoors, but he was so willing and so obedient Bridger just let him do it. The boy had been sent out to acquire pastries for tea and returned with a basket of treats in one hand, the letter in the other.

“I’m sure the seedcakes will do, Bastian. Neeve will be here any moment and I’d rather your backside not be the thing that greets him.” Bridger scarcely looked up from the papers stacked on his desk, his patience wearing thin.

“Another letter returned, sir, is all,” said the boy. Bastian picked his way across the cramped office, dodging the furniture and bookcases that made the space feel even tinier. Said letter was tossed onto his desk, then the apprentice made a curt little bow and left with the basket of seedcakes.

“Tell Maria lemon and milk with the tea, please,” he called after him. The unopened letter on the desk pulsed like red eyes in the darkness. He had to look, even if he didn’t want to. And as expected, and feared, it was his latest letter to Miss Arden, sent to her aunt’s home in Mayfair and rejected. A man had to hold himself to things, and

he had promised himself that if this one came back, too, then it was really over.

And there it was. Proof of her indifference. Proof that it was time for hope to die.

Bridger scooped up the message and pulled a ring of keys out of the top drawer of his desk. He unlocked the bottom right drawer, nudged it open with the toe of his boot, and dropped the letter inside. It nestled down beside other cherished treasures—a pair of ruined, stained lady's gloves, a few folded notes, and a stack of unread letters, brothers to the one that had just landed. Under it all, the thick stack of pages comprising Miss Arden's *The Killbride*, sent to him many months earlier and never fully read. Well, not until recently. And then, repeatedly.

There was a chime somewhere in the building. Bastian ran hastily through his office, scooting like a panicked lapdog from one door to the other, huffing and puffing.

Bridger slid out from behind his desk and pulled down his waistcoat. Heartbroken or otherwise, he had a job to do. And anyway, it was good to have work. Passionate employment could sustain a man for years; he had seen it be so with John Dockarty. He decided not to consider that John died quite alone, leaving everything to Bridger. Oh God, am I doomed to pass this all to Bastian and his ridiculous hat? Indeed, Bastian reappeared a moment later, hat in hand, bouncing up and down like a song sparrow. He had the oddest expression on his milky little face. It was like he had encountered a ghost.

“What is the matter with you?” Bridger demanded.

“G. R. Neeve is h-here, sir, at least, it should be them.”

“Should be?”

“It's a lady .”

Before Bridger could fully receive that, Bastian swung around and pulled open the door the rest of the way. And there, sure enough, stood a lady. And not just any lady, but Miss Regina Applethwaite, her hair a silvery halo above her blue silk ensemble. A coy smile tugged at her rosebud lips because she obviously could not contain herself. There was a woman fully submersed in the heady liquor of a successful coup.

Despite the shock, Bridger's mind worked very fast.

"G. R. Neeve," he muttered, dismissing poor, befuddled Bastian with a wave. "Revenge."

Regina drifted forward, bringing with her the scent of watery flowers. There was a chair before his desk, and Bridger moved aside, allowing her to have it. She descended like a queen about to hold court, though the smile had vanished. "You worked that out rather quickly."

"I didn't work it out at all," he said. But of course, he couldn't go a single day, a single bloody hour, without Margaret Arden crashing into his thoughts. "Miss Arden pointed out the coincidence this summer, when we were all at Pressmore for the Richmond wedding."

That pleased Regina immensely. She sat up straighter and beamed. "She is uncommonly clever. Even more so for having abandoned your acquaintance."

Bridger strode to his side of the desk, took the worn chair, and refused to look at her, propping both hands under his chin. "Ah yes, which means the two of you must be the best of friends now."

She made a soft, unoffended sound. "Not at all, actually. She has gone out of her way to snub me."

At that, his head snapped around toward her. “Really?”

“Oh, yes. I tried to stop Miss Arden at the opera just last week. She was there with the Burtons, but I couldn’t squeeze more than three words out of her.”

Bridger grinned. “Then your triumph is not complete.”

“Complete enough.” She tossed her head. “You will publish *Sable Falls* to all the acclaim it deserves, and you and I will forever know that I am G. R. Neeve and the source of your publishing success. I have looked over your suggestions for the frontispiece and woodcut, and heartily approve, Mr. Darrow. You really were meant to do this work. I see great things ahead for Dockarty and Company.”

He had never heard a compliment presented thus, like a poisoned blade wrapped in velvet.

Putting his hands down, he shifted in his chair. Regina cast her gaze about the room, rearranging her shawl and reticule several times. The office was not the lavish surroundings she had become accustomed to.

“You are taking this better than I hoped,” she said finally. “It’s deflating.”

“A man who has lost everything is difficult to rob.”

Regina’s eyes widened. “Whatever do you mean by that, Mr. Darrow?”

“It is of no consequence, Miss Applethwaite,” he said. His toe nudged the drawer with all of Margaret’s things, and he swallowed hard. He hadn’t locked it back up, and, ajar, he saw the note from Regina peeking out from inside. “I hurt you terribly, didn’t I?”

Regina sat back, studying him. Her hand fluttered to her heart. “I beg your pardon?”

“I never took full responsibility for it, the depths of what I put you through.” Bridger laughed mirthlessly, then fell silent as Maria entered, bringing tea. It was laid out on his desk among the drifting dunes of contracts and marked-up pages. Neither of them touched the seedcakes, though Regina took a saucer of tea and politely held it. “I think we should publish Sable Falls under your real name, Miss Applethwaite. You should take full credit for the work; it is an astonishing achievement. You could have given up after how much I discouraged you, but you persevered. I’m sorry for what I said to you all those years ago. My father demanded it, but I should have had the courage to end things cleanly. I shouldn’t have listened to him, and I should have treated you better.”

Her mouth hung open briefly. Regina, always polished, always together, collected herself with a tiny sniff. “Thank you, Mr. Darrow.”

“Then, you will agree to put your name on the book?”

Regina sipped her tea twice, put the saucer on the desk, and stood. “Indeed. I think I would like that very much. After all, I am rich, beautiful, and strong enough to endure society’s scrutiny.” She sounded dazed. Stunned. Slowly, she glided like an apparition to the door. Bridger went forward to hold it open for her, a strange buzzing in his chest. She was almost gone, leaving nothing but the imprint of her elderflower perfume, before she cursed under her breath and spun. For a while, she simply regarded him, her expression changing rapidly, traveling from bemused to determined with several stops along the way.

“You have done me a good turn, Mr. Darrow, and so I will match the favor,” she said, then smirked. “Even if you are very naughty for ruining my clever joke on you.”

“A cleverer person than I realized the trick.”

Regina nodded, touching her lip thoughtfully. “This summer I was, well, politely minding my own thoughts when I happened to pass by the Sapphire Library and hear Miss Arden’s aunts unleashing upon her. Which—have you tried, sir, to make amends with the lady?”

“I have written her repeatedly, even gone to the Mayfair address for the Burtons, but I am rebuffed.”

She pressed her lips together tightly. “She has been forbidden from seeing you, speaking of you, and writing her books. It was a painful sentence levied, Mrs. Burton vowing to turn her family out of their cottage if Margaret disobeyed. I fear she ignores you not out of any malice, but for the love of her mother and sisters.”

Bridger stepped back as if struck.

“I...That...” He shook his head, heat burning across his chest and up his throat. Oh God. “Margaret.”

At his lowest, he had thought the most uncharitable things about her. Now he saw that she had been forced to drop him or betray her entire family.

“I wish there was more I could say or do,” said Regina, kindly. “I hope you know I only ever advised her against you because of our past. We are both women pursuing passions outside what society deems appropriate, and I felt protective of her.”

“You have done what you could. Now I will do the rest.”

Regina arched a brow. “If you mean to assist her in some daring, devious literary capacity, I simply must be involved. An olive branch to you both, for all the ways we have misunderstood each other.”

For the first time in a long time, Bridger felt hope.

There was so much to do, he couldn't command his limbs to cooperate harmoniously. He bid Regina goodbye and returned to the warm, leathery depths of his office, retrieving the manuscript from the bottom right drawer of his desk. Breaths and ideas were coming fast now. They were already in the midst of publishing Regina's novel, and that would have to be completed before moving on to *The Killbride*. But that was all right; that would give him time to hammer out the details of the contract with Regina, source a woodcut, meet with libraries, purchase the materials, set the type, edit for spelling, and so on.

It felt good to have a distraction. For the first time in months, he felt purposeful, focused. And better still, he felt close to Margaret.

26

For where thou art, there is the world itself,

And where thou art not, desolation.

Henry VI, Part 2, Act 3, Scene 2

October

My dear Ann,

Your letter arrived on the very day I noted the leaves outside my window were beginning to change. London will be dressed in orange and gold for your arrival, and you cannot imagine my joy at learning you will soon be here. Papa always referred to me as his summer girl, but I must confess, autumn has always brought me the most delight—to see the world change all around you and feel the days turn crisp and cold is like magic. The gaslights burn as beautifully as any firefly in the meadow at dusk. It eases my mind to think that life is not one season, that the heartaches of these last few months cannot last forever.

Please, please convince me that they cannot last forever.

We mustn't dwell there. Since I cannot pursue my writing or that other thing (hello, Aunt Eliza, I know you are reading this), I have tried to find ways to keep my mind constantly employed, lest the ideas bubbling within make it burst. Who requires liberty or love when there are rich bachelors and Mayfair townhouses; I am sure that

is what my aunt Eliza wishes me to say. You would think all the secrets of the universe could be found in the folds of maiden's-blush damask silk, so fervently does she covet it.

It will not shock you to hear that I have devoured everything in the little library here. Thank the lord, my aunt's good friends the Courtenays enjoy an extensive collection and they took pity on me, kindly sending over some selections. Aunt Eliza has strictly forbidden me from attending the raffles at Minerva Press, for she is convinced that a circulating library will be a corrupting influence. Her choices and methods are mysterious to me. I can confess this to you even with my jailors watching, for it is no secret in the house: I tried twice already to smuggle ink and paper into my room in a quantity suitable for drafting. Those fledgling manuscripts were discovered and tossed from the nest. I am likely to try it again if my time here stretches on much longer.

How I miss Mosely and my sisters! How I miss freedom.

But I have the strangest news. I have never told you of my father's sister, Beatrice, who was cut off from the family after she chose a life on the stage. My father always spoke tenderly of her and kept a locket in his study with her likeness inside. We otherwise knew nothing about her, and we were never introduced, for Papa never corresponded with the lady after she left. My being in London is no secret, as Aunt Eliza has trotted me out exhaustively to every ball and salon in the hopes of luring a suitor, and it must be that way that the name of Arden got about and traveled to the folk now caring for Beatrice in her old age.

She is not well, and the Smiths have taken care of her for months now as she declines. A lingering cold from last winter has not abated and worsens monthly. They are not wealthy, the Smiths, but people of such generosity that I could not help but be moved by their pleas for help; recently they moved Aunt Beatrice from St. Giles to their own home. It is not a Mayfair beauty, but it is suitable for me to visit. Aunt

Eliza also does not have a heart of stone, not always, anyway, and has allowed me to help care for Beatrice and to bring her supper every Friday.

And Ann! She is such wonderful company—clever, well-spoken, and, though weak, eager to tell me stories of her youth and her happiest days on the stage. Often, I see what her audiences must have, a shining gem, a woman born to perform and entertain. Sometimes it is just like sitting with Papa again, and it has become such a needed balm for my spirit. We find ourselves discussing the hardship of estrangement, and I'm sure you can imagine where my mind and heart go when that is the subject. It is those Fridays, your letters, and the letters of my sisters that keep me from going completely mad. Violet says she will come to see me soon, we only await Aunt Eliza's permission.

Give Lane my love and keep as much as you need for yourself. Do not worry about me; I think I can endure anything so long as I have books enough to read. That is what I tell myself when the nights are too lonely to bear.

Yours,

Maggie

“I wonder, Margaret, at your lack of a husband.”

She sat by the fireside with Beatrice while her aunt sipped her fortifying soup. Maggie had been lost in thought, watching the flames dance and shiver, remembering the exact warmth of the hearth on the night she and Bridger slept at the vicar's parsonage. The question made her jump back into herself, and she fussed idly with the stitching that was in her lap, which she had been poking at on and off while she chatted with Beatrice and kept her company.

She had been trying to embroider a lovely pastoral rabbit, but Winny was the artisan

of the family. Her poor little rabbit looked more like a lopsided weasel.

“You are young and clever and lovely,” said Beatrice, hovering over the bowl. The Smiths kept a small, tidy home, unremarkable but for the curtains, which were of excellent quality and thickness; they had made their money in that trade. “How is it that you have not married?”

“I could ask you the same question,” Maggie replied. Beatrice had never accepted a husband or had children, though she had shamelessly recalled for Maggie a long list of lovers, from actors to politicians to dukes.

Beatrice set down her spoon and laughed, the laugh degrading into a painful cough. Shifting out of her chair, Maggie offered her a handkerchief, then patiently waited for the fit to stop. She hugged a pretty shawl closer around her thin shoulders; Winny had made it and sent it from Mosely for Maggie to deliver. “You tease me! Who would have me now?”

“I ask myself the same question,” said Maggie, her gaze drawn back to the flames. The house smelled like rising bread, yeasty, bright, and soothing, enhanced by the profusion of dried herbs hanging on hooks above the hearth. The blanket covering two elderly ginger cats rose and fell, the cloth draped over a deep basket, giving the appearance of a pie bubbling as it cooked. Their purring snores rolled beneath the snap and pop of the fire. Maggie stared down at her sad rabbit, ready to give up on it entirely. Maybe Winny could unpick it and fix the shape, if ever she was allowed to go home.

“You are too hard on yourself.” Beatrice sighed, returning to her soup. “Or else, I cannot find fault with you. If you would rather keep your secrets close, then—”

“There was a man,” Maggie blurted out. She clutched the sewing in her lap and gasped, the needle pricking her thumb. A bead of blood oozed out, and she was

almost grateful for it, for that tiny, human pain. Things varied so little day-to-day, trapped in Eliza's gaudy, gilded cage, that feeling anything was a thrill.

During her visits with Beatrice, she had spent hours describing her childhood, assuring the old woman that Mr. Arden had been a doting father. She never went to sleep without first having a bedtime story, and during those same bedtime stories, her father described the unknown years of Shakespeare's life. Nobody really knew what his early time in London was like. The time between 1585 and 1592 was something of a blank. The Lost Years, they were called. That phrase had stayed with Margaret from the instant she first heard it. The Lost Years. It felt like what she was living now—the time between seeing one's destiny and actually getting to live it.

The second part of Henry VI sprang to mind— For where thou art, there is the world itself, and where thou art not, desolation.

Beatrice waited, like all smart women, knowing more would come if it was meant to. Sticking her pricked thumb between her lips, Maggie turned and faced her aunt. It was impossible not to see the resemblance between them. Illness, age, and hard living had given her aunt a sunken appearance, her hair thin, the skin beneath it marked with orange splotches. But their eyes danced with the same blue embers, their mouths lifted in the same bemused smile, and it was so like looking in a mirror to the future—she beheld herself an old maid, leaping the years that might be filled with her own style of happiness. Beatrice had been solitary but not alone, and her stories were never tinged with regret.

“I told you Aunt Eliza has unofficially assumed my guardianship to shop me around to London society,” Maggie said slowly. “And that is true. But I did not tell you why she is so strict and overbearing—there was a man this summer, the first man I have ever met who matched me in wit. He is handsome, to be sure, but it was his humor and intelligence that captured me. We talked about all the things I love for hours—Scott, Cowper, Edgeworth. Poetry, biography, prose...he could speak to all

of it, and we passed a single perfect evening together. Perfect for me, but my aunt had other feelings.”

Leaning back, Beatrice nodded. “Your family did not approve of him.”

“Neither of us have money,” Maggie replied with a dry chuckle. “After Father died, we had scarcely five hundred pounds between us. With three girls grown, you can imagine how far that goes, and how little inducement there is to marry us beyond our charms and looks. Mosely Cottage is not ours, but my aunt’s, and she is the ruler of our little world. Without her charity...”

“Poor, dear heart,” said Beatrice. “I’m sure you weighed the costs.”

“I did. Impossible, unthinkable, to harm my innocent sisters. But believe me, I have considered changing my mind every day. Every minute.”

They were interrupted by Mrs. Smith arriving, a fluffy blue bonnet in her hands. She was a small woman, cheerfully rounded, apples in her cheeks, and with an unflinchingly rosy disposition. “You wished for me to remind you of the noon hour,” said Mrs. Smith from the doorway.

“Of course!” Maggie had lost track of the time. She leapt up and placed her sewing in the small basket near her feet. The cats stirred and turned over in their bed by the fire. “I’m sorry, Beatrice, I must leave you early today. My friend and sister are arriving today. They stay a fortnight, and I’m sure they will want to accompany me next Friday, if that is agreeable.”

“We would be delighted,” Mrs. Smith cried.

“Your sister?” Beatrice smiled serenely. “Yes, dear, I so wish to meet her.”

“Then I will see you both very soon.” Maggie went to embrace her aunt, troubled by the frailty of her body. She lingered there, then left the cozy row house and took the carriage that was waiting for her. An almost unbearable impulse rose in her to tell the driver to take her not to Mayfair, but to Paternoster Row in St. Paul’s Churchyard. She remembered addressing the Killbride manuscript to Dockarty she wasn’t eating properly. The paper fell away, revealing a gleaming, beautiful, blue, marbled leather-bound book. As she cracked open the fragrant new cover, her heart stopped in her throat. She thought she might faint and choke as she digested the text.

THE KILLbrIDE.

A NOVEL.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

BY A LADY.

VOL. I.

LONDON:

PRINTED FOR B. DARROW,

MILITARY LIbrARY, WHITEHALL.

1817.

A note slipped out from between the next pages. Maggie’s hands shook as she cradled the precious book to her stomach with her left, and with her right, carefully unfolded the letter.

For the author,

It is with pride that I present to you a first edition of the first volume of *The Killbride* by A Lady, bound in goatskin, the whole of which is to be published in two duodecimo volumes. You will find it in cloth binding at the circulating libraries of London, where it is already proving quite popular. Our small press will do what it can to meet the demand. As for the profits generated by this novel, they are entirely yours. Miss Regina Applethwaite generously put up the sum required to print the run, and has forfeited all expectable income from *The Killbride*, instructing that it should instead go to the author.

This does not violate the terms of your arrangement with Mrs. Burton, as there is no indication that you, dear one, are the author. This has been done with no expectation of acknowledgment or thanks; if it would endanger your family, do not respond to this gesture, merely take it with the spirit in which it is meant: my sincere respect and love.

You once wrote that there is no Margaret Arden without her writing. We both know I have never hesitated to offer critique where needed, and in this, I feel strongly, you are wrong. For I fell in love with a woman, not a book, and if you could never produce another word again, it would not diminish you in my eyes.

With unflinching admiration,

Mr. Bridger Darrow

“I can’t breathe,” Maggie whispered, reading the note again and again. “I really don’t think I can breathe.”

“You’re speaking well enough,” said Ann.

“Hold her up, Ann! Hold her up! Don’t let her damage the book!” Violet crowded them, hands flung out wide.

Ann laughingly took Maggie by the shoulders, standing behind her, prepared to catch the lady if she indeed fell. Tiny spasms of shock rolled through Maggie’s body. It felt like her tongue had touched lightning. She flipped through the book, confirming that yes, those were her words printed in a real book. It was unbearably beautiful.

He was unbearably beautiful. He had done it for her. After her cold, stony silence, he had still done it for her.

“Is it real?” she asked, gazing up at them in a daze.

“Absolutely real,” said Ann.

“Can you believe Miss Applethwaite helped?” Violet shook her head in disbelief. “I thought she had all the depth of a boiled leek, but I am happy to be wrong.”

“After your last letter,” Ann added, “I instructed Lane to share with Mr. Darrow that we would be in town in October, and that if he had any...important errands for us to run, we would be at his disposal. It just so happens, he had a very specific task in mind.”

“But then, you’ve seen him,” Maggie murmured, drifting a few steps toward the door. She hadn’t removed her coat or bonnet.

“We have,” Violet told her, grinning ear to ear.

“And how did he look?”

Violet held her hands to her lips. “Still in love with you.”

It was then that Aunt Eliza chose to appear. Mr. Burton was nowhere to be seen, which was usually the case, and given his grumpy demeanor, nobody ever complained about it. Feathered and frocked in jewellike purple, Eliza opened her arms to greet her guests. “But what is the matter, girls?” Her eyes fell keenly and swiftly on the book and letter in Maggie’s grasp. “What is that?” she asked, sharp. Lord, but she had a devilishly keen nose for Maggie’s misbehavior.

But Maggie scarcely heard her. She certainly didn’t heed her. “I have to go to him.”

Frantic, Violet’s head snapped back and forth between her sister and her aunt. “Run, sister, I will hold the line!”

“What could you possibly mean by that?” Aunt Eliza stormed past her guests, quickly surmising what lay in Maggie’s hands. “Give that here, Margaret. You know our understanding! Wait, I see it now—have these two sirens come to tempt you toward more misadventure?”

Maggie made up her mind quickly. And really, Aunt Eliza made the mistake of forcing the issue. She lunged for the book, surprisingly agile, eluding Violet long enough to make an earnest grab for the gift. The spell was broken. Maggie crashed back into her body with a cry of alarm, spinning before her aunt could reach her. She used the momentum of the turn, racing for the doors and stumbling through them before the footmen could stop her.

“Take my carriage!” she heard Ann shout from within and over Eliza’s squawks of protest. “My driver knows the way!”

To thine own self be true.

Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 3

Bridger had given up on work for the day. He sometimes slept in his office, having made a crafty little nook behind the largest bookcase in the back corner. There had been a good deal of shame when Bastian unearthed it, but he could only afford to keep a cook and one maid, and sometimes the threadbare dreariness of his London townhouse was too oppressive even for a war-hardened man.

But it had cheered him tremendously to see Mrs. Ann Richmond and Miss Violet Arden. They had accepted his gift and letter for Margaret with something like wonder. At least, thank God, it wasn't pity. He tidied his desk. Pimm had written; he and Harris were ramming horns over the estate finances. It was nothing new, but Bridger was beginning to wonder how long Harris would put up with it all. He was happy to be away from Fletcher, though the occasional stab of guilt arrived with Pimm's letters, a feeling that he was somehow still abdicating or running away.

Will you come for Christmas? his brother wrote. The tone was impossible to discern. Was that a request or a fear? Bridger didn't know, anyway. Bastian trundled in from the east door with a stack of pages for him to review. It could wait until after he ate, or perhaps until the next day.

"Finished for the afternoon, sir?" the boy asked, noticing the gloves Bridger had just pulled on.

“I believe so. ’Tis too fine a day to spend it all indoors.”

“Very good, sir.” Bastian, facing the window, glanced away from him at the sound of carriage wheels over cobbles. “Someone’s arrived, I think.”

“I’m not expecting anyone.” Bridger took in the somewhat scattered nature of his desk and sighed. “Am I?”

The boy didn’t answer, trotting out the office door and down the corridor. He loved appointments. Bastian enjoyed chatting away with printers and deliverymen, refining his English, and practically erupting with glee when he stumbled upon another German. It was a busy Friday, for in the Row it always was, and it was bloody hard to tell who was coming for their little slice of the publishing business or for another’s. He heard soft voices exchanged, a trickle of incoherent conversation traveling down the hall. The door to his office had been left open, shards of light thrown across the floor in the corridor outside, and the exterior somehow letting in a draft.

Bastian had found a German or something and wandered off.

“The door, boy!” he shouted, still poised over his brother’s letter, gloved fists pushing into the desk. “There’s a chill and these pages will scatter.”

“Allow me,” said a sweet, playful voice. A familiar voice. Bridger didn’t allow himself to hope. He slowly raised his eyes, finding Miss Margaret Arden outlined with golden autumn light in the open doorway. “After all you have done, I owe you much.” She stepped inside and closed the door behind her. “There.”

Bridger straightened, bowed. “Miss Arden. I...I trust you received my gift?”

“It is the most wonderful thing.” She held it out for him to see.

“I’m inclined to agree.”

“The woodcut is just right,” she said. His heart swelled. “You chose perfectly.”

“I only did so with the author in mind.”

She came forward a few steps and placed the book on his desk, removed her bonnet, and looked around. Seeing nowhere to put her hat, she held it at her side. “I have long wondered what Dockarty and Company is like.”

“And what is your estimation of it?” he asked, watching her. Hawkish. She was thinner than he remembered, and it wounded him to think she had suffered while they were apart. But if their hearts were aligned, then she had languished as he had, and there was no escaping that.

Margaret shied and glanced down at her bonnet, inhaling deeply. “I’m glad you ask me that. It is good that...that you still want my opinion. I thought...when I...when we...” She closed her mouth so firmly her teeth clacked. “I have a feeling you were writing to me. Were you?”

“All the time,” he assured her. Ducking down, he unlocked the drawer with her things and drew out the pile of letters. Maggie came to study them, gasping softly as if pricked or wounded.

“I knew it,” she whispered fiercely. A storm brewed in her eyes. It heartened him to see her look stronger, defiant. That was the Margaret he knew and loved. “I knew she was guarding the post.” Then something almost imperceptible, perhaps “the harpy.”

Bridger swallowed with difficulty. “I meant to return to Pressmore directly. In June, I mean, after we...” He laughed at himself, at his own stubborn embarrassment. He shook it off. “After that lovely night we spent together. I was detained, unfortunately.

My father died.”

“I know,” said Margaret, shaking her head. “I heard at Almack’s.”

His hands fell to his sides. “I saw you there, accompanied by your aunt and her party, and I dared not make myself known, but...I saw you. And I confess it comforted me to see you without a gentleman on your arm. I, um, I take it Mrs. Burton’s attempts to match you have been unsuccessful?”

“Not for lack of trying.”

“Ah.” Bridger found a spot on his desk and rubbed it anxiously with his gloved fingertip. “And now that you are here, now that you have disrupted the terms that dictated her charity, what will Mrs. Burton do?” He squeezed his eyes shut. “I worry for you so, Margaret.”

“I don’t know what she will do,” she said, reaching for him. “Right now, I can’t care.”

Bridger reached, too, gathering Margaret up in his arms, and kissed her. It was not like their first kiss, tentative and exploring, but an unleashing of time spent too long apart. He was hungry for her, claiming, tugging on the hair at her nape to tilt her head to greater advantage and allowing him to plunder her sweet mouth with all the unspent need burning, screaming, thundering...

He let go of her, gratified that she clung afterward to his waistcoat, holding him fast. Laughing, half-crazed, half-elated, he bit the ends of his gloves and yanked them off. “I want to feel you with my own hands. Let there be nothing between us.”

He kissed her again and again, guiding her toward him, and then watching her ease back against his desk, sitting upon it and kicking his chair away. The noise it made

clattering against the nearest bookshelf only drove the spike of desire deeper into his chest. He felt like an animal, like a man denied his true craving and nature for too long. She was his, and he would be damned before another obstacle came between them.

Margaret came up for air, leaning back, exposing her neck. He eagerly took the invitation, biting and sucking at the sweet, soft flesh of her throat. “I gave your boy a shilling and told him to buy something sweet,” she whispered. “And I told him to be slow about it.”

“I love you for so many reasons, you wicked girl, I shall never have time to list them out.”

“How can I be blamed for wanting this time with you?” She sighed and covered her face with her hands. “It may be taken from us again! I have been brave this once, but—”

“Shh-shh.” He peeled her hands back, beholding her lovely face and bright blue eyes. How he had missed it. Tenderly, he plucked the gloves from her fingers, then kissed the tips, noting they were stained with ink, the enduring and endearing feature that always appeared in his dreams. “You have shown your courage many times, I’ve seen it with my own eyes. When you stood your ground for your friend, proved your loyalty and wisdom where Ann was concerned, when you thrust that book into my hands at your aunt’s salon, when you threw yourself at Pimm to protect me.” He listed off the events, kissing a finger for each demonstration of bravery. On the last, her right forefinger, he sucked it into his mouth and groaned at the delicious sound she made. His teeth rasped the pad, and she shuddered, falling back against the desk, sending pages and quills flying.

He thought of the ink-stained gloves of hers in his desk drawer and fancied that perhaps this second pair would be a fine addition. But treasures and little precious

things could be considered later. Margaret was before him, and writhing so beautifully, he could not take his eyes off her. Kneeling behind the desk, he rolled her skirt and petticoat up until they were bunched around her waist. She made a breathy, questioning sound that was briefly silenced, then transmuted into sighs as he kissed his way up her ankles, the delicate architecture of her knee, her inner thigh, traveling toward the very center of her heat. When he arrived there, placing a firm, insistent kiss over her mound, Margaret squirmed and shot up off the desk.

“More?” he asked, lips moving against her.

“Ever so much more, yes, please, if you will,” she squeaked.

Bridger vented a deep laugh against her inner thigh, resting his forehead there for an instant before returning to his hungry work. He parted her with his lips and explored with his tongue, listening to the sweet, rising music of her cries. Her strong hands grabbed fistfuls of his hair, urging him closer, more, faster, and he obliged. When her thighs clamped around his head and tightened, he helped her tip over the edge into ecstasy completed. She relaxed, both of them filmed with sweat, but he stayed on his knees, using his tongue to spell a playful message against her thigh.

“Love,” she laughed. “Whatever you just did must certainly be love.” Margaret propped herself up on her elbows, gazing down at him, grinning muzzily with pleasure. “When you first rejected me so outrageously, I never thought I would see you on your knees before me.”

Bridger slowly rose and leaned over her, wiping his mouth with his coat sleeve, then shucking it and tossing it to the side. “And when you handed that damp manuscript to me, I never imagined I would see you again, let alone hold you closest and dearest in my heart.” He brushed a few errant blond curls from her cheek and kissed her chin, pressing down against her. “But now, with this book, the world will see you as I do.”

“Oh dear, that’s worrisome. Skirts up, sitting exposed upon your desk?”

Snorting, he shook his head. “As a skillful writer,” he said, and drew her hips to his, warming her with his whole body. “And soon, I think, as my wife.”

She helped him raise her skirts the final few inches and busied herself with the buttons on his clothes that needed undoing. “But you will not leave tomorrow.”

“Oh, don’t remind me,” he murmured, brow furrowing. He pushed his nose against her temple, breathing her in. “I thought I had lost you.”

“Never.”

Maggie held Bridger close, feeling him, reveling in the reunion she had imagined a thousand times. His tailcoat whispered to the floor, his shirt and waistcoat following soon after. There was no pretense of shyness or hesitation. They were not practiced at lovemaking, not yet, but eagerness and need more than made up for habit. His arms rippled at her light, seeking touch. She gloried in the way his eyes scrunched up and his nose twitched when she opened her thighs wider and invited him in. His need for her was overpowering, those brutish kisses returning to mark her, to make her lips tingle pleasantly, a lingering, unforgettable embrace.

Her head fell back, loose on her neck as she anticipated their joining, but Bridger, maddeningly, made her wait. She opened one eye to see him admiring her, flushed and wanton on the desk. He jerked hard on her bodice, baring her breasts to the dusty light of the office and his gaze. It was terrible and wonderful to be looked at, and she blushed, perfectly exposed. His lips followed his interest, tongue coasting along heated, tender flesh, the first graze of his teeth over her nipple sending her jolting off the desk.

“Then you’ll marry me?” he asked, kissing a trail up her collarbone to her neck.

His hard, branding heat was hovering near hers, tantalizingly close.

“I’ll consider it,” she whispered.

Bridger’s hips dodged away. Merciless. “Margaret...”

Complex ideas melted before she could express anything more intricate than “Please.”

“I will have you, forever, not to be undone by deals or distance.”

“Please.”

His warm laugh gusted across her ear, and she shuddered, gasping again when his chest brushed against hers, the friction sending a thrill through her. Her entire body thrummed with a ragged heartbeat. “London’s most exciting new writer reduced to this,” he teased. “I never thought I would live to conquer her.”

Maggie’s eyes flew open. Conquer?

She wrapped her legs around his waist, dragging him into her. The moment their bodies touched, the moment he realized how much slicker and ready she had become, Bridger relented. There were no more coy games as he eased her back on the desk and pushed inside, filling her, drawing a winding groan from her throat as she clung to him. Her feet dug into his lower back, urging him deeper; if there was deeper to go then she wanted to experience it. She wanted to leave no part of herself untouched.

Even as Bridger moved inside her there was no relief. She planted her palms on the desk and thrust out her chest, crashing back against him, chasing the tingling in her cheeks that intensified the more she had of him. He found his way back to her mouth, kissing her, the two of them passing back and forth the fevered sound she made with

each crescendo. His pace increased. She could chase the swell no longer and risked freeing one hand to smash his cheek against hers, crying out. He groaned and spent himself inside her, and Maggie shuddered under him. She panted and laughed, heedless of the noise, loudly in love with him and all his flesh and passion and heat provided.

“Of course, I will marry you,” she said, watching him lift his head and gaze down at her. His stormy eyes were the softest they had ever been. “For who else would publish my books?”

Bridger rested his head on her chin, sighing with feigned exasperation. “Only if they are as good as the last. You know I will always tell you honestly what I think.”

“The greatest gift of all.” Maggie sat up, pulling the bodice of her stays back into place and wiggling until her skirt fell back down, replacing some of her modesty. Bridger yanked up his trousers and half sat on the desk beside her, reaching for her hand and cradling it in his. “Did you mean what you said in that note?” she asked, suddenly a bit serious. The sparkling fog of lovemaking had faded, and she found herself retreating to the most naked parts of her heart. “That you would love me even if I could not write?”

“I meant it, Maggie—I will always be plain with you, always frank.”

She nodded, believing him, for no eyes that dark and serious could lie. His returned letters had spilled across the desk. She chose one, picking it up and scratching at the wax. At once, Bridger snatched it away. “Not that one,” he said, turning scarlet to the roots of his dark, soft hair. “It was the last. By that time, I had somewhat lost faith.”

“Always plain?” Maggie smirked. “Always frank?”

Bridger relented and let her have it.

It was full of his hurt, his fear, swinging between blaming her for not telling off her aunt and lamenting the timing of his father's death keeping him from her at the crucial moment. Her eyes filled with tears. She knew this circle of hell intimately, and folded up the letter, then swished it away, aiming vaguely for the fireplace. It bounced harmlessly against the stones and fluttered to the ground.

"What are we to do?" she asked, trying not to be miserable.

"Whatever we must." Bridger cleared his throat and stood and rummaged in the desk, withdrawing a tattered ledger that, in all honesty, probably needed replacing, or at least some repair. Dropped, it thudded down onto the desk near her thigh. His eyes were blazing when he next looked at her, and for a moment, she thought anything might be possible. And perhaps it was, for this man had found a way to publish her book and make a dream something she could hold. "Here is the income we've already received from volume one of *The Killbride*, and we shall publish the second volume in the coming year. How quickly, dear one, can you write another book?"

With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come.

The Merchant of Venice, Act 1, Scene 1

Mr. Bridger Darrow and Mrs. Margaret Darrow took a cottage in Cray Arches. It was so merrily situated, in fact, that the fairy crown of Pressmore Estate could be seen presiding on the hilltop overlooking everything, easily spotted from their back garden. They both had a fondness for Warwickshire and had no desire to go elsewhere, though much of their time was spent in London, in the townhouse that could now afford more than one cook and one maid. Beadle Cottage, their home in Cray Arches was called, and though small, it suited them well. Mosely was quit and given back to Mrs. Burton, and though there was some hurt pride and prickly feelings, Winny, Violet, and Mrs. Arden relocated and made their home where they were welcome. There was no more talk of charity or ultimatums, and no more badgering from Aunt Eliza, for Margaret Arden was married at last and settled.

And that, dear reader, was that.

Mrs. Burton did not attend the wedding at the little church in Cray Arches, a snubbing that was met with quiet jubilation. Mrs. Mildred Richmond and Mrs. Ann Richmond were there, one more visibly elated than the other, and of course, Lane stood up for his friend and beamed and said “blazes” too much, offending Mr. Corner, the vicar, who was still not seeing well and mistook Winny for Violet several times. The girls found this very funny, and never corrected him.

Pimm Darrow issued an excuse, claiming urgent business at Fletcher kept him away. It was understood by both Bridger and Maggie that he likely did not want to return to a place he associated with infamy and betrayal. Word arrived, too, that Ruby was matched with a suitable husband, a rich merchant chosen by the colonel, and she wrote long, flowery letters to Maggie, promising to advance her books among the sparkling ladies of her circle.

Regina was there, too, naturally, to congratulate the couple. Sable Falls had taken London by storm, and her ascension in literary circles made her well positioned to recommend another title by a talented woman, *The Killbride* .

They did not make much money, and they did not enjoy extraordinary fame, but Maggie found herself suited to writing her books, and walking to Pressmore, and giving her family a modest living where true love was celebrated, and where true love won.