



# Second Chances (Daring Belles)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Many wish for another chance to find the one they love...and lost.

Here are two novellas starring those who once loved wisely but not well—and make the most of a second chance at love and happiness!

## The Widow's Harvest Hope

The new Earl Barlow returns home from Waterloo, intending to live by his own rules. The woman he loved and lost years ago visits for the Harvest festival—and he plans to offer Vicky Wright what they both want. Can a lady who has lived by the rules throw them all away to seize her last chance for happiness?

## The Beau of Christmas Past

Years ago, Alyssa and Declan were caught enjoying a Christmas kiss, which broke Alyssa's betrothal to another man, and caused the pair to be exiled, far from their families and one another. Home for Christmas, will they find the past something to be overcome? Or fulfilled?

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# Page 1

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## CHAPTER 1

September 17, 1815

Reabridge, Cheshire

Barlow Hall

Victorine Wright allowed herself a slow sweep of the twenty-two guests at her host and hostess's dining room table in the medieval great hall of this three centuries' old mansion. Vicky smiled, happy to see so many of them once more.

Did people ever change?

Not her gregarious Aunt Celeste who sat across from her at this banquet table. Not her aunt's friend, Countess Barlow, who commanded the far end and smiled her approval often at the newest young lady among them whom she'd invited especially to meet her son. Not Gwen Hughes who sat politely quiet for a woman who possessed the courage to do a man's job every day of her life. Certainly not Doctor Owen who had opposed the union of Gwen's brother Evan with Vicky's young sister Yvette.

But Lady Barlow's son who headed the other end of the table had changed. So much had he changed that it hurt to look at him. Six years ago at another harvest time, he had gazed only at me. Tonight he had eyes for every young woman here.

But not me.

Vicky didn't fault him. She was thirty, a widow who was not in weeds, thanks to her foresighted husband's generous yearly stipend. But she was not the carefree girl whom Ford had met and kissed and swept off her feet. No, she hadn't expected to see him here. She'd planned a short visit. One day to examine the baby whose parentage all fretted over. A second to decide about the child's future—and on the third to leave.

And I definitely will not give Stafford James Houghton Barlow, 6<sup>th</sup> Earl Barlow, most recently Colonel Lord Barlow, any reason to believe I came here to see him.

So she wouldn't look. Not at him. Not again.

He could be sitting there bloody well stark naked, and she wouldn't look at him again. She'd already done so much of that since Aunt Celeste and she had arrived here hours ago that he was emblazoned on her mind. In his maturity, at thirty-one years old, he was more man than she had remembered. More man than any she'd ever met. Devastatingly handsome. Dark-haired, silver eyed, silver-tongued, big, broad and undeniably dashing as a sharp-shooter who could kill a man in high winds nine hundred feet away.

Or seduce a lady by flashing her a bright white smile.

But not me.

Vicky shifted in the ancient filigreed Tudor dining chair.

She picked up her soup spoon and dipped it once more into the very good fish chowder. After all, why would she look at him? She knew how Ford looked clothed—and naked. Rather, she had. Six years ago when he was younger, thinner, his hair blacker, his grey eyes clearer. Before he went off to Spain to take up his commission and join his regiment. After he and she had met and kissed and parted.

Never to meet again.

Or so she had thought.

Until five days ago when her aunt Celeste told her she'd received an invitation from her friend, Countess Barlow, on an urgent matter. A baby had been brought to Reabridge in Cheshire a few weeks ago. A child who toddled and babbled some words in French and others in Occitan, and whom many believed belonged to a British soldier and his camp follower. A baby whom English travelers wandering near Toulouse brought to England because they had speculated the child should belong with his family. If they could identify them. If they could find them.

Vicky took a drink of her white wine and pondered how outlandish that possibility was. The child could be anyone's, belong to any family, any country. Yet Aunt Celeste had insisted she and Vicky had to visit her friend, Countess Barlow.

"We must see for ourselves," she'd said, drawing herself up into her dignity and brooking no argument. "Plus, it's time for the Harvest festival in Reabridge. You like parties."

"And dancing?" Vicky had teased her aunt.

"Oui, ma petite ." The woman had leveled the family's famous Fortin sapphire eyes on her. No one refused ma chère tante anything when she trained her sights on a particular goal. She was the incomparable Comtesse d'Vaux, widowed, childless, rich as Rothschild and a ruthless dragon of London society. One did not deny d'Vaux anything. "We will go to look at this baby. But also, for you to remember once when you were there and had fun. To renew yourself which you have forgotten how to do."

But Vicky had known the real reason her aunt pressed her. "I doubt this baby is Yvette's, Tante ."

“We owe it to your sister to look at the boy. It is possible he is Yvette’s and Evan Hughes’.” The lady had removed her tiny reading glasses to fix Vicky with her resolve. “Coincidences do occur.”

But not to me.

To avoid arguing, Vicky had ordered her maid to pack a few useful gowns and written to her butler in Bath not to expect her home until the twenty-first of September. She’d accompanied her aunt from London to Reabridge in her aunt’s decadently plush traveling coach. But Vicky had not anticipated she’d be looking at Ford Barlow. Looking and regretting...so much.

Foolish.

She took another sip of her wine, then drained her goblet. It was rather good. Where had they acquired this? From Champagne? Or from the Loire? How could the French produce good wine in the midst of ridding themselves of Napoleon?

Ah. Mais, oui. Vicky picked up her soup spoon again, as a footman topped up her crystal. The French had not rid themselves of the Usurper. The Allies had done it.

Quite a few men here had helped to make that happen. The vicar’s son, Captain Thomas Owen, was a childhood friend of Ford’s. A man who had struck out on his own to join the military and make a fine reputation for himself in diplomatic pursuits. Across from him sat Captain Jack Wrath who seemed to know Ford well and, from what Vicky gathered during introductions, had come up in the ranks in the 20<sup>th</sup> Lancers. Jack had come to town recently and formed *une tendresse* for gutsy Gwen Hughes. Vicky could see how they regarded each other with a fondness that spoke of a happy future for both.

She hoisted her glass in a silent brava. She would drink to that happiness. To any

couple who were so fortunate as to find love and use it as a basis for marriage. Far too many men and women were forced to wed for all those other seeming necessities like title and land and that perennial requirement, money.

Ford's mother, Countess Barlow, gave a fluttered-eyelash signal to her footmen to do the soup remove and bring the entrees. "I say, Vicar, how is the boy faring in your care?"

"Ah, my lady, he does well, poor little fellow." The man adjusted his old-fashioned wig and smiled at all at table, lingering on the other French émigré here tonight, a petite young lady with dark eyes and hair. "That is due to Miss Charite du Pessac who has come to us in the vicarage and cares for him."

The young woman perked up at the compliment. "Sam is a charming child. He is so easy to care for."

The girl's aunt, Lady Afton, sat across from the girl and beamed at her niece. "That is because you are so good with him, my dear."

"You've not seen him yet, have you, Victorine?" This pointed question came to Vicky from Ford's mother, Countess Barlow.

"No." She met the lady's bright silver gaze and held. "Miss Hughes and I plan to go tomorrow morning." Gwen and she had decided that in a private moment as the dinner guests gathered for introductions. They'd not met in years and had not corresponded, but their camaraderie had survived their mutual tragedy of seeing their only siblings marry and run off to the wars together. "It is our first opportunity."

"You will come to see him together?" Charite du Pessac sounded alarmed.

"We do," Gwen added. "We thought it best."

“Why?” the girl asked.

Gwen hardened as if she were the iron she forged each day in her farrier’s shop. “Because we each knew our siblings best. My brother had a certain look in his eye for peppermint drops.”

“And my sister Yvette,” Vicky added, “laughed at nineteen as she had when a child of five. Like the ting-a-ling of chimes blowing in the wind.”

Gwen nodded at Vicky in approval. “Vicky and I can see things no one may notice...or wish to.”

“But Sam is sensitive. He may not like so many poking at him.”

Vicky smiled at Charite. The du Pessacs were emigres like her own Fortin family. Charite’s had been devastated by Napoleon while the Fortins suffered from the Paris mobs of The Terror. Vicky had sympathy for the girl. She hung on to those she loved. “Gwen and I promise not to poke.”

“Can you not come one at a time?” She sounded sad.

“I, for one,” said Vicky, “cannot. I am here only for three days. Then I return home to Bath.”

“Why do you leave so soon?”

Her insides warmed.

There were the first words Ford had addressed to her since their initial greeting hours ago on the steps of Barlow Hall.

Her fingers pinched the finely blown stem of her crystal wine glass. “I am head of a sponsored event for a girls’ school in Bath. I must return for the Autumn meeting.” Seeing few, biding my time until I bore myself to death writing my memoirs and teaching the fine art of painting to young ladies who have no sense of hue or contrast or character.

“That is a shame. Mother and I had hoped you would stay for a few weeks. You and your aunt.”

How long did she sit there allowing his baritone to flow through her veins like hot honey? She stirred. “That is kind of you. I know Aunt Celeste would like that very much, wouldn’t you?”

Her aunt, the cat, eyed her like a queen of felines. “Most definitely. If you stay, ma petite , I would be happy to go south to Bath with you before returning to London.”

“Good of you.” And once more to avoid argument, especially in front of these dinner guests, Vicky added, “I will consider it.”

And then, she downed the bubbly remaining in her flute.

Ford stared at her. The Tempter. Studied her and let his wide-set sculpted lips curl in a smile.

She tipped her head and fixed her gaze in his. He would not charm her. But then...his electric eyes should not sear hers. That jagged scar from temple to throat should not intrigue her...or make her yearn to trace it with kisses. The broader width of his shoulders should not make her wish to measure them. Nor should she ache at the cause of numerous grey strands in his lustrous midnight hair.

They should not interest her.



The topic did.

She forced her mind to it.

The baby. Again. The baby everyone was here to examine. Coo over. Cuddle, claim and carry away as their own.

She licked her lips and sought the nearest footman. These Barlow servants knew their jobs. She was not alone in drinking more than her proper lady's share. Her Aunt Celeste had drained hers four times. Never lost a beat of the conversation either. A jewel of the highest order, Aunt Celeste could drink the British Navy under the table.

Just then, Ford stood up, his goblet raised. Doctor Owen did as well, then made his way around the long table to Lady Afton. Guests took their cue to cease their conversations.

"Dear friends," Ford said. "Mr. Owen has asked the favor of a few moments of your attention."

Lady Afton stood at Mr. Owen's side looking up at him as if she were a young girl gazing at her first love. The vicar regarded her in much the same way. It wasn't hard to see where this was going.

"Ladies and gentlemen, friends, both old and new. I am very happy to tell you all that Lady Faith Angelica Afton, formerly of Faversham, has consented to be my wife, making me the happiest man on earth."

All the guests spoke at once. Across the expanse of white linen, Vicky fastened her gaze on Ford.

Always courteous, the man recently home from six years fighting on the Continent,

took to his duties as the new earl with the same charm he'd had when she met him. He grinned at his guests and raised his glass. "A toast, to a man whose generosity of heart is unmatched and the woman he loves." Ford moved his glass in the happy couple's direction, but his gaze remained on Vicky.

She shifted in her chair. The vicar's and the lady's love was new and promised a happy future. Your love and mine, Ford, is old and never promised any tomorrows.

Ford drained his glass, his regard of her silent and pensive. Vicky wished she could make him smile, but could not find it in herself.

The young lady his mother had invited to meet him, Clementine Wingfield, noted the looks between him and Vicky with a sharp lift of her chin. At once, she was praising the vicar and his announcement.

Others offered the engaged couple their felicitations. Even Meg, Ford's young cousin who lived here now and who had sat silent as a ghost throughout the meal, offered up her congratulations. Vicky also chimed in and was relieved when the vicar, his lady and Ford resumed their seats.

The topic of discussion wended back to the harvest festival that culminated tomorrow and of course, the mystery of who might be the mother of the eighteen-month-old child.

"How many girls from this town ran off to the wars?" asked the vicar's fiancé, Lady Afton.

That was a very pertinent question. The town was at most one thousand people strong. How many young women would leave their homes and embrace a vagabond life amid the turmoil of war? How many were lovely, wealthy young women with good prospects before them? How many had fallen for a man so different from them

that all it took was just one look, one night, one bold assignation beneath the stars and the girl would run off into the unknown? To Spain. To a life of hardship and fright. With a man she adored and would never once complain of the dust or the deprivation until she was with child and feared the birth might come in the midst of battle and she might not survive.

Who did that?

Her own sister.

The sweet girl who chose love and ran off into the wide world embracing the one she adored...and who never came home.

Vicky pushed her glass away. Surveyed those at table.

How many people in this room had changed their lives with one bold decision?

Her Aunt Celeste had fled France with all her money transferred to an English bank in the City at first sign the French mobs would guillotine poor fat Louis.

Gwen Hughes had taken up her brother Evan's trade and shop when he ran away with Yvette to the army and the wars. Gwen now ran the shop, the only female farrier for miles around.—and from what she gathered from their earlier conversation, Gwen was good at it, too.

Ford Barlow had joined the sharpshooter 95<sup>th</sup> Rifles because he was the third youngest son and would inherit nothing here. But he had one skill. He was a fine shot with a rifle or a pistol, and he had joined the day after Vicky had refused his proposal of marriage.

Yvette was not here, only in spirit tonight. But her young sister had been brave, too.

Falling in love with a man whom many saw as less than she. Yet her little sister declared she loved him and ran off with him to Spain and war and hardship. Then somewhere in southern France in February of last year, heavy with child and alone, she had feared the birth of her baby. "I will deliver soon. Promise me you will take care of him or her," her sister had written in the last of only four letters Vicky had received from Yvette in five lonely years.

Now Yvette was gone, buried who knows where, and there was this child whom Vicky had come to see and decide if he were her sister's. Her family. Her blood. Her flesh to claim and rear and love.

Did Vicky resemble any of them? Years ago, she would have said she was proud of what she had done with her life. Followed the rules. Been an obedient child. A proper young lady. An honorable wife. A respected widow.

But had she ever been brave?

No. Not me.

### CHAPTER 2

Dinner conversations had unraveled her.

Ford was too focused on her. The young heiress, Clementine, made no secret of her wishes that he'd train his attentions instead on her. Vicky had tried to summon the hope that he would, but she was too selfish, too needy. She remembered so much about the house party six years ago when they had fallen in love. His kindness, his wit, his words of praise and his kisses were indelible impressions on her mind. That he might now bestow such blessings on this beautiful girl with money and pedigree and sunshine in her smile, made Vicky sick to her stomach. During dinner she had tried to recover.

But her confidence waned. Oh, the company was superb. Yet it was a rare thing for her to be unsettled by others. But as the guests bid good night and headed for their homes or assigned chambers, she had not taken the turn for the stairs and her bedroom in the far east wing. Instead, she stood in the hall, a hand to the old sculpted oak newel, transported to a moment when she felt strong arms around her and fierce lips upon her own. The charms of Ford in love with her and the sadness of her own introspection had her turning and remembering the way to the garden.

The Tudor-era garden parterre was what the English termed a maze. With tall evergreen box hedges that rose to six feet and discreetly hid children at games and lovers at play, the pebbled paths were dotted with stone statues and urns. For those who wished an assignation, benches and even a chaise longue or two were available. Famous and infamous, the Barlows' knot garden was known throughout the land as a remnant of old Henry Tudor's time when romance reigned supreme and the king had

lain with more women than he could marry or kill.

Vicky found one lane she had preferred six years ago when she visited last during the Harvest festival. While the garden was studded with rosemary and sage, basil and fennel, the paths had flowers too. This particular line held rose bushes. As years ago, during autumn, the roses were gone. The hips remained and still, within these green corridors the fragrance of roses sat upon the breeze. The essence of it seeped into her and offered her a fresh taste of peace.

“I hoped to find you here. You love roses.”

Ford stood behind her. He had intuited she'd be here. He remembered such facts about her, while her husband had never given her a rose. Only daisies. She hated daisies.

“Will you talk with me?”

Could she simply just walk into his arms and never say a word?

She turned to face him. And oh, in the moonlight, he was an even finer vision than he had been in the dining room in the flickering candlelight. He loomed above her, her handsome passion, her one madness, the swain she had never forgotten and never wished to. “Of course. I long to hear about you. How you are. Why you are home so quickly since the peace. Did you not want to stay for the Occupation?”

He swept out a hand to the white stone chaise longue. “No. I had to come home to assume control. With David and Thomas gone, I am here to command the wheat to grow and the animals to carry their load and reproduce. I am here to become a proper earl.”

To marry. And have sons. She sat beside him, so close by necessity of the size of the

chaise, that their hips touched. And hers burned. “You will excel.”

He took in a sharp breath, leaned his elbows on his knees and shook his head. “You have great faith in me.”

“I do. And why not? You were the earl in all but name your whole life. You ran the estate. You knew how to lead.”

“How do you know this?”

“Your mother and my aunt are fond correspondent’s. I’ve learned of each of your successes, all your exploits. Famous Colonel Lord Barlow of the 95 th sharpshooters who treats his men so well.”

“You will give me a swelled head.”

“And justly so. You know how to lead by principle and example. No wonder that when you went into the army with your commission, you rose steadily in rank. You commanded your men with honor and discipline, and they respected you. Here, with those men and women who respect your name and your past leadership of them, you will once more impress your tenants with the same fairness you gave those in your regiment.”

He tipped his head toward her and chuckled. The smile on his lips was the glorious prize she won for her compliment. “You were always kind.”

“It is easy to be kind to one who is thus.” She pressed her lips together, looked straight ahead and considered the blunt brown ends of dead roses.

“Was your husband kind to you?”

She sucked in air. In many ways, yes. “He was.”

A moment ticked by in which silence said more than she had.

Ford took her hand from her lap to bring it to his thigh. “Look at me. Tell me the truth. I always wondered. It tortured me that I did not know. Please tell me that he was good to you.”

She nodded but could not look at him as she recounted the nature of her marriage. “Charlie was kind, yes. Considerate. He gave me an allowance to run the houses, the staff, and my own use. We entertained often. He attended Parliament, and he liked to have people in for tea and dinner and garden parties. I arranged it all and enjoyed the work. When he became ill, he amended my widow’s allowance and I have five thousand a year and the townhouse in Bath until I die.”

“I see.” He pulled at her hand. “But, my dearest, you say nothing of him.”

She yanked away. His endearment shot ripples of yearning through her blood. She would not reprimand him for it. God knew, she needed someone to call her dear words. Someone. This one.

She grabbed her courage to blurt out the truth. “He had affairs. He told me the night before our wedding.” After I had given you up. After I had lashed myself to my duty to marry him as Papa’s agreements demanded. “He informed me that he would not change his life for me. In fact, if I wished to jilt him, I could.”

“But you didn’t.” He put a hand with his rough calloused fingertips to turn her face toward him, and smiled in sorrow at her. “Why not?”

“You know the prices a woman pays if she is a spinster. You know my father wanted this marriage to make me truly English and keep me safe. Far from any French who



might want to take my life for the lives my father destroyed by his slavish use of his peasants. The family name of Fortin is still spoken of in France with damning words.”

He nodded. “After we fought and won at Toulouse, we marched to Paris through your family’s domain.”

That surprised her. “And?”

“The town is sparsely inhabited. The lands are fallow. Gone to weeds and grasses.”

“I am shocked. I always envisioned them as prospering. Happy to be rid of us. My father and his before him were greedy managers.”

“You do not wish to return?”

She shook her head. “Never. There is nothing and no one there I wish to see. This is my home. Safe. Serene. Quiet.”

“And what of love?”

She flinched. “What do you mean?”

“Do you love anyone here?”

You. Only you. “My Aunt Celeste. All the others in my family are gone. I am interested in seeing this baby tomorrow. If he is Yvette’s...” Her heart pounded at the prospect she might have a child to love and she pressed her free hand to her chest. “If he might be hers, I will take him. I have money. I have time to nurture him and...”

She shot to her feet. “I should go in.”

He stood and ran his big warm hands from her back down her shoulders and arms. He nestled her backward against him and put his lips to her ear. “You have not told me if you loved him.”

She’d had no one who’d held her with affection in so many years. Since last he had—and she could not forbid herself the pleasure of his embrace.

“Victorine.” He burrowed his lips into the hollow behind her ear and kissed her there. “Darling. Tell me. I have thought of only you for six long years. Where you are, how you are. What you do. Who you love. Did you learn to love him? If you did, I cannot be jealous. Not now. Not any longer. He is gone. Tell me.”

She tried—she really did—to suppress her sob. But she rushed toward all the truths about her husband that few knew. Few understood. Fewer still accepted. “He always treated me with kindness and honor. I had no quarrels with how he presented me, but?—”

Ford hugged her around her waist and sent kisses down her throat.

She was lost to him, his never-ending tenderness. But from a place where prudence lived inside her, she undid his fingers wrapped round her waist and whirled to face him.

In the moonlight, he gazed at her with a need that threatened to send her to her knees. His twinkling eyes, his silver-streaked hair drew her compassion and her fingertips to touch him. “My husband was a man any woman could respect. I accepted him as he was. He cared for me as much as he could. I lived with that. I had to. You see, he loved only men.”

### CHAPTER 3

Ford huffed and strode away from the house across the river down to the island. This morning he needed to see the Beeson brothers who ran the apothecary shop.

He'd bathed and dressed early, going down for breakfast in hopes of finding Vicky at the table. She'd left him abruptly last night in the garden. Yet there was so much more he wanted to say to her. This morning, she arrived in the breakfast room with her aunt. As a result, conversation turned on the details of today's festival activities.

The frustration only added to the banging of twelve-pounders in his ears. The incessant sounds of pounding canon had often driven him to alcohol or opium tinctures. But to be at par in battle, he'd learned to avoid both drink and drugs if he wished to remain awake, aware, and logical. Since he'd been home, the Beeson brothers had created a powder that lessened the noises. Yesterday, the tension of trying to revive his relationship with Vicky was exacerbated by his mother's attempt to foist that Wingfield girl on him. Add to that, Vicky wished to leave tomorrow. He had little time to talk with her.

He hadn't slept well after Vicky had left him last night. He'd walked the floor in frustration watching the moon fade as light claimed the garden where he'd held her once more. There he'd traced his fingertips along her delicate chin. Kissed beneath her ear and along her elegant throat.

But not her lips. She'd left before he had the chance.

He'd rushed her.

Dammit. He clenched his fists. The war had done that to him. Made him quick to act, fast to grab the chance, the shot, the opportunity before all was lost.

He cursed his failure. She visited for two more precious days which gave him little time to claim her lips and her heart before she left him. Again.

He could not let that happen. He had to get her alone again, but he doubted she'd allow it. She never wanted scandal...and avoided the possibility at all cost. But by God, he had to talk to her, make her laugh again, make her melt again, show her that he still wanted her and had never wanted another.

This time, he had advantages. Now that the war was over and Napoleon headed for some more permanent obscurity than an island too near France, Ford's life and Vicky's were changed dramatically. He was home, healthy, save for the roaring headaches that could bring tears to his eyes. But now he was the earl. He had a future. Had it here. Knew how to make Barlow lands more fruitful, more profitable. And now Vicky was free. A widow who melted in his embrace as she had when she was twenty-four.

A widow. With a need for love. His love. His affection. Because her husband Charles Edmund Alton Wright, Baron Wright of Hampton, had been unable to give her what she deserved.

That he had died—poor bugger—was a tragic thing. All deaths, no matter the cause, brought tears and sorrows for acts and words and thoughts done and not.

The Good Lord knew Ford had killed a lot of people. Brought them to their knees, their last breaths soundless, their eyes wide open, their shock so visible upon their faces. He wished to kill no more.

He was so tired of war and the perversities of what it had done to people. Millions

dead in nameless places. Millions of others, wounded, alive but not, yearning for home, hating it when they got there, trying to reconcile the art of killing others with the finer art of becoming tender and empathetic and loving. If ever there had been love in many soldier's lives, they needed it now in peace.

He'd had plenty of love in his. A doting father. An affectionate if domineering mother. Two older brothers who made him laugh, and yet made sure he realized as the third son, he should expect nothing from them. Not a house, not a penny, not a hope.

He'd tried to find another way to support himself. Trade was not for him. He knew nothing of products or shipping. The church was not for him, either. Being friends with Mr. Owen's son Thomas had taught him that counseling others about the triumphs and tragedies of life was not a role at which he could excel.

But he had always been friends and had playmates among the tenants' sons. As a result, he knew at a young age how to reach in to a cow's womb and turn a calf in breech position. He knew when and why to let a field lie fallow. He knew when to pick apples. And how to dress a pig for the smokehouse. But he also was a crack shot with a pistol. That too he had learned from his pals with whom he went hunting for rabbit and deer.

His choice to join the army was obvious. His decision to join the famous 95<sup>th</sup> Rifles was natural. All he had to do was demonstrate to the recruiter in Chester how he could hit a bottle in the air every time the sergeant threw it, and he was enrolled.

He had considered the army long before his mother announced she and his father would give a house party to which his mother's oldest friend, Countess d'Vaux, and her two lovely nieces were invited. Little had he known when he met her that Vicky was betrothed. If he had, he might have had the good sense to stay away from her. But she could not ignore the attraction either. Their affair was quick, their kisses

torrid and their one clandestine night together, unforgettable. Before he left her bedroom that morning, he had proposed. She had told him of her engagement. He was shocked. And in his naiveté, in his love for her, he had asked her to break her engagement.

She refused.

Two weeks afterward, he sailed off to his regiment in Portugal, a bitter man. He had not returned home until three weeks ago. His commission sold, his inheritance new and pressing, he had returned home to take up his duty.

When his mother told him that Vicky was a widow, he had asked her to invite Vicky and her aunt to the house for the festival. If his mother surmised that he intended to ask Vicky to marry him, the lady had countered by inviting a sweet young thing with connections, money and looks. But the chick held no candle to his first love.

No one did.

He stopped at the sight of Vicky crossing the market square toward the bridge and approaching Gwen Hughes' house. Ah yes, identifying the baby was this morning's agenda.

See him. Decide.

Then I will make my own case.

Vicky swung around, the prickle on her neck alerting her to Ford's eyes upon her. His attentions always did warm her skin and make her look for him. This morning, he stood in front of the apothecary shop, hands on his hips, staring at her. Rolling her eyes at him for his obvious perusal, she caught the delight in his silent chuckle and duplicated it.

His black brows darted higher, and his eyes with all those new crinkles at the corners widened in the sunlight. He silently asked her if she was angry with him.

Never.

How could she be?

He'd graced her with the tenderness she craved, the affection only he had bestowed on her.

She gave him a little wave of adieu, while passing townsfolk would think her silly for waving to her host. The farrier's workshop was attached to the stone cottage where Gwen Hughes lived with her father on the outskirts of the town. Last night, Gwen had mentioned she would be out all day, since she planned to take her portable forge to the market square to serve whatever walk-by customers had horses or small smithing jobs that needed her attention.

A cart stood before the open doors of the workshop, a horse between its shafts. A man was working in the workshop. No. Not a man. As Vicky approached, she realized it was Gwen herself.

"Good morning, Lady Wright. You're up early."

Vicky had been to the farrier's workshop six years ago and the smell of hot metal and dying ashes was just as warming now as then. "I thought I'd catch you before you left, rather than try to talk to you while other people are around. If you are busy, you go do as you must, I can wait."

Gwen wiped her hands on a frayed white towel and hooked it into the huge pocket of a brown leather apron that covered her tall frame neck to ankles. "I'm finishing an order of nails for the Vicar's new chicken coop before I take my portable forge to the

market square. Come in. Sit down. I have a chair against that wall which is safe from falling sparks from the fire. I promise to be ready in a few minutes.”

Vicky took the wooden chair and the opportunity to admire once more the industry of Gwen Hughes to run this business by herself. Gwen bustled about using tongs to pick up long black nails and let them cool on the ledge far from the forge.

“Gwennie! Gwennie!” An older man thrust wide the connecting door to Gwen’s cottage. His grey hair was wild and sparse, his pale face contorted in pain. “I’ve lost your mother. She’s not in the bedroom. She told me she’d not come home again! Gwennie, we must find her, you and me.”

“Da!” She rushed to the man’s side. “She’ll be home again. She’s just gone to the church for the festival meeting.”

Jack Wrath, Gwen’s suitor appeared in the doorway, and shook his head at Gwen in apology. “I took my eye off him for one second...” He stepped forward to take Mr Hughes’s arm. “Come, now, Griffith. Your tea is ready, man.”

Gwen shot a wild-eyed look at Vicky and shook her head in apology. “I’ll take you in and you can have your tea.”

“I’d like my tea, yes, I would.” He glanced at Vicky and pointed a palsied finger at her. “Ah, that’s that French girl. Hello! Celeste, yes?”

“Victorine, Da.” Gwen said as Mr. Wrath coaxed him backward to the cottage. “Celeste is her aunt.”

And the two of them disappeared behind the door.

“I’m sorry,” Gwen said, wiping her hands on her towel. “He is...My father has spells



when he is not aware of himself.”

Vicky put up a hand. “Please don’t apologize to me. He is aging. It happens to a few. My father was one it affected.”

“It’s...he’s getting worse.” She stared at the closed door and worked at that towel in a furious fret. “Please don’t say anything to others. I try to contain him, and Jack is wonderful with him. He’s harmless but others do not understand and?—”

“I do. I won’t say a word. But for now, I have a request. May I call you ‘Gwen’ and you please call me ‘Vicky’?”

Relief ran over Gwen’s tense features. “I would like that very much.”

“Makes this next bit easy. Doesn’t it?” She knitted her brows. “I hope so. I worry so about this child. Do you? You haven’t seen him yet, have you?”

“No. I haven’t had time. But I am glad we go together.”

“You miss Evan,” Vicky said because she saw the sorrow linger in Gwen’s eyes.

“Yes. But I console myself with his loss knowing that he and Yvette were happy together. I never had any letters from him, but I remember how he looked at her and she at him. That was love.”

“It was. I will be honest with you, Gwen. I didn’t think Yvette did the right thing to marry Evan. For both their sakes, I thought society would shun them for their choice. But Yvette did not care for what others thought. Though she had never seen a French mob attack her, she’d heard stories from Papa and Aunt Celeste and me of how brutal people could be to each other. She did not care that others might think Evan and she were not equals. She loved him and he, her. That was all she needed.”

Gwen hung up her apron on a large iron hook on the far stone wall and sent Vicky a shy smile. “I always swore that if I ever found a man who looks at me like Evan did at your sister, I would keep him if I can. Jack is that man.”

Brave Gwen. A woman who takes what she wants.

### CHAPTER 4

Gwen and she were escorted to the Vicar's parlor by Charite du Pessac. The young woman's overly courteous greeting displayed her careful regard of those who might be interested in the little boy's future. She had cared for eighteen-month-old Sam with a devotion few would give to an orphan, a child not their own. Charite had done it with grace and charm, so said many in the town.

"I'll get Sam and tell Mr. Owen you are both here," she said, hands clasped before her, trying to be bright and cheerful.

"Thank you, Charite," Gwen said to her. "Vicky and I are grateful we can both see him together."

"She is very protective of him," Vicky said to her when Charite had left the room. "She has come to care for him."

Gwen leaned toward Vicky. "And may want him for herself."

"All well and good to say," Vicky said on a sigh, casting about to feel comfortable in the cozy well-appointed little sitting room. She was testy herself, eager to have this meeting done and the question of the child's future settled for her own mind. "If the boy is yours and mine, what do you say to rearing him? You and I have not discussed it."

"If he is Evan's and Yvette's, I want to know. If you and I ever really can declare he belongs to us... If there is any way to verify that this child discovered near Toulouse

could possibly be my brother's and your sister's....

“So yes. If he seems to be ours, Vicky, I could not abandon him to be reared by strangers. He would be family... all I have left of Evan's. But to be quite frank—God forgive me for saying this—I cannot see how I could give him the care he needs. Jack says he will support whatever decision I make, and that he can afford to keep us all, while I build up the business to the success it used to be. It has not been doing well, with my father as he is. To be newly wed, caring for my father, and raising a child who already has a year and half... I reel at the thought. I will do it if I must, but between the two of us, I will make a better aunt to the boy than a mother.”

She met Gwen's darkened gaze with her own grim fears. “I have thought long and hard about the possibility the boy is ours. I have a house, money, time and friends who would accept him even though he has no formal birth record. I know some would shun him because he was born in France and perhaps, even a few would question his parentage though we have proof Evan and Yvette were married in Portsmouth before he sailed for Portugal.”

Yvette had written Vicky a letter with the name of the clergyman and the church with the date of their wedding. Vicky had told this to a very relieved Gwen as they walked over to the parsonage this morning.

“But if he is ours, Gwen,”—she could not help but wring her hands over this—“you would want to see him and enjoy his company from time to time. Wouldn't you?”

“I can't deny I would. I loved my brother and I miss him. You cannot know how often I think of him every day.” Gwen fished in her well-tooled little leather pocket that she'd hung over her shoulder. Out came a handkerchief, and she dabbed at her eyes. “I hate this mystery. I do.”

Vicky licked her lips. “So if he's ours, we must decide how we raise him so that he

knows both of us and benefits from our love and remembrances of his parents. I don't want to divide him, Gwen. Evan and Yvette would not approve. After all, their love, their marriage was in defiance of the social rules that said they could not love or marry. You and I must not act like King Solomon and divide the baby in half."

Gwen reached over and squeezed her hand. "No, we won't. If he is ours, he is Evan's and Yvette's gift to us that proves that love is the most precious bond of all. We will not deny it, you or I, ever again."

Vicky stared at her and tears filled her own eyes. "I will remember that."

"For more than just the sake of this child."

Oh, yes. Vicky swiped at her own tears with her fingertips. "For our own lives."

Childish burble sounded on the stairs. Close behind were the instructions of Charite urging the boy toward the parlor. "Two ladies want to meet you, Pip. Come along now. In here! No, Sam, not the kitchen. This way!"

Charite appeared on the threshold of the parlor, one hand shepherding along a little blond boy with the biggest smile on his pink round face.

"Let's say hello to these ladies, Sam." She herded him over to Gwen who seemed suddenly frozen to her chair.

"He's charming," she said more to herself than others. "Good afternoon, Sam. I am Gwen."

"Gerem," he tried to copy her, but grinned his way through the attempt.

Gwen held out her hand.

He took it, seemingly well-versed in the art of meeting a great number of strangers lately.

Gwen could not take her eyes from him. “You say, those who found him came here because he wore an amulet from our town?” she asked Charite.

“That’s true.”

Gwen held out her hand. “I’d like to see it, if I may.”

Charite studied her for a long minute, then reluctantly took it from a small leather pouch she held in one hand.

Out came the carved stone amulet dangling from a long chain. Charite held it, the amulet swinging.

The child giggled. “Mmmm,” he said and grabbed the sandstone in his chubby little fingers.

Gwen blanched. One hand to her throat, she gave a little cry. “Oh, my. Oh, my. That’s the chain I made for my amulet—the one I gave to Evan to give to Yvette.”

Vicky shot to her feet and watched the baby laugh. This child with big blond curls like Yvette’s. The round face of Yvette. The sapphire blue eyes of Yvette. The delicate chuckle of Yvette. This baby, this boy, this treasure was her sister’s child. A child of love.

She would take him home with her. Educate him. Teach him. Love him.

And then, she fainted straight away.

### CHAPTER 5

Gwen held tightly to Vicky's arm as they left the vicar's and crossed the bustling market square.

"You do not have to walk me back to Barlow Hall, Gwen. You have to tend your stall." Vicky would not be pampered. "I faint now and then when I get excited or overwhelmed. It's past."

Gwen patted her hand. "Still, I will walk with you for a bit. You look pale, Vicky."

"Oh, fiddle, Gwen! I don't want you to suffer lack of customers because of me."

"I won't. Now stop barking at me and walk."

Vicky gave in, allowing the delight of their discovery to overtake her. "Sam is charming, isn't he?" She could not get over how personable he was for such a little fellow.

"He is. I was shocked at his looks myself. He does resemble Yvette. No denying it. But I am glad this is done and we know he's ours."

"We'll need to tell everyone. Charite was so agreeable to talking about how to transfer Sam to our care. She was happy for Sam, I think, and a bit sad to part with him. But first you and I must talk about what we do now. Is tomorrow best for that?"

"Yes. I am so busy today with the festival. Oh, look! Lord Barlow comes out of

Beeson's."

He had a pouch in his hand. A purchase from the apothecary, Vicky supposed.

"Good afternoon, ladies!" He met them on the path and fell in with them. "Going back to Barlow Hall, are you, Vicky?"

"She is," Gwen piped up. "And she could use a strong hand, too, Ford. Apologies, Lord Barlow."

"Ford is the name you are used to. Gwen is the name I use. And as for why Vicky needs a strong hand," he said as he examined Vicky with narrowed eyes, "tell me."

Vicky opened her mouth to answer.

But Gwen was quicker. "She fainted in the vicarage, Ford."

"What?" He stopped in his tracks.

"It's nothing." She kept walking. The other two hung back.

But then Ford was at her side, one hand to her arm, the other around her waist. "Come sit down."

She dug her heels in and would not allow him to lead her to one of the benches on the green. "I will not. I am fine. Really. I had a moment in the vicarage."

Ford's silver gaze pierced hers. "What happened?"

She took a breath.



Gwen clicked her tongue. “Sam, the little boy, is ours, Ford. He belongs to Vicky and me.”

Vicky smiled at him. “It’s true, Ford. Gwen recognizes the amulet and the chain it’s on—and I see Yvette in him. He looks exactly like her. The hair, the eyes, the laugh. This child is my sister’s and Evan’s. I will take him home with me.”

Ford smiled at them, even if behind the joy Vicky detected fear. “I am happy for you both. Happy for the child, too. He’ll have a good life.”

“He will and there’s so much more to discuss,” Vicky said to both, “but Gwen must go back to her stall.”

“That’s fine, Gwen,” Ford said. “Do go. We are in fine fettle. I have Vicky in hand.”

Gwen bid them goodbye and trotted off.

Vicky rolled her eyes at Ford. “In hand? I am not some flibbertigibbet who needs a fainting couch at every turn.”

He tucked an errant auburn curl behind her ear. “Have you done it before?”

She considered his artfully tied stock. “Only when I get excited or overwhelmed and I was that today.”

“When did you do it last?”

“Why?” She grew perturbed.

“It’s a good thing for those who care for you should know. When did you do it last?”

“I am not ill, “she insisted with a stomp to her foot. But he arched dark brows at her and she sputtered, then swallowed the hard lump in her throat. “Very well. When Charlie died. The moment after... The moment after he took his last breath. I just could not bear it. He was kind. And I missed him already.”

“I see,” he said.

They walked on. Past other people going to the fair, they wended their way arm-in-arm. Ford said nothing as if he were trying to make sense of her care of the husband who had not loved her as a husband could.

“I am glad you told me,” he said at last when the crowd had thinned. “Fainting can be dangerous. Falling you could hit your head or break a limb. When it happens often to a person it could mean your humors are not in balance. There was a fellow in our regiment who’d get so excited before a battle, that he would faint at the first cannon barrage. Just melt to the ground, he would. We could not have him in the first line, but had to send him back of the charge where he could sit and faint at his leisure, recover, then come forward after an hour into the siege. Crack shot, that boy. Had to have him doing his best. But it took him awhile to recover, even after that. So, you,” Ford said with a little hug to his side, “will march with me at your arm and I will sit you in a comfortable chaise in your room and tuck up your feet for the afternoon.”

They walked in companionable silence for a while.

Then she said, “I want to dance tonight. I haven’t in years. Will you dance with me?”

He met her gaze and beamed at her invitation. “I live to make you happy.”

Vicky went to her aunt’s room just before a light supper was served to the Barlow household to announce that the child Sam was Yvette’s. Overjoyed that she had this little boy, a bit of her sister, Vicky regarded this as her opportunity to make up to

herself, if not to Yvette, for her rejection of Yvette's choice of Evan Hughes. Her sister was gone. But this child deserved the best she could give him.

Her aunt stared at Vicky in the reflection of her dressing table mirror. "You are certain that he is Yvette's?"

"You need only look at him, Aunt, to see the resemblance. He has the Fortin sapphire eyes. But more than that, he looks like Yvette. He is the image of her when she was young. And then, there is the amulet. Gwen identifies it as one she gave to Evan to give to my sister. It has the chain Gwen made for it. I hope you will accept my decision and bring to him the same love and affection you have given me these many years."

"I will indeed. If you say he is ours, he is. We will make him so." She pivoted on her little bench and dismissed the house maid who'd been assigned to her for the visit. When the girl was gone, the door closed, her aunt caught her eye again. "Who else have you told?"

"Ford."

"Why?"

Vicky met her aunt's cool demanding gaze. Why did she push her on this? "I want him to be proud of me."

"Did you tell Ford not to say anything to his mother about this decision of yours?"

"No." She tipped her head at her aunt's skepticism. "It's not a secret."

"The countess may have a few things to say about your desire to adopt Sam."

“She can say what she likes. Her views are irrelevant. The countess is not my family.”

Celeste bit her lip. “Why do you need Ford to be proud of you? Don’t you think he is already?”

She rubbed her forearms and admitted the truth aloud. “No. I have not been proud of myself. Now that I do this, and it is the right choice, I simply want Ford’s approval.”

“You base this on what happened in the past. Six years is a long time to consider yourself a failure. Especially when you are not.”

“Perhaps not a failure. But one who chooses the well-trodden path. One who does what she’s told. One who is...”

Her aunt cut the air with a hand. “Stop that. You did what you had to do years ago. You could not marry Ford. He was third in line for this estate. He had nothing.”

“Yet Ford gave his all to this family, this land. He was his oldest brother’s estate manager! Ford knew how many chickens they had and when the hams would cure in the smokehouse. He knew every rock, every blade of grass while his two brothers gambled and whored. Ford worked here because he loved the land and all in it. For all his devotion, they regarded him as a servant, and to reward him, they paid him as if he were their chimneysweep.”

“True!” Her Aunt grew red in her anger. “What his oldest brother gave him was no better than a girl’s pin money. Who could live on twenty pounds a month? No one. Mon Dieu, chérie, that is half what Vicar Owen earns in a week from his living!”

“And for it all, I loved Ford. Who wouldn’t? You see it now among those here. How well they regard him. How well they love him. For his earnestness, his kindness, his

regard for the land and tenants and his family.”

“I know you loved him at first sight, ma petite . Why not, eh?” Celeste took her in her arms. “But you were already affianced—and you had your own honor to uphold. You would not break your promise.”

I had no choice.“ Papa was determined to get for me an English name and title. He’d planned that for years for me. Then, after Yvette had run off with Evan and you and I left here six years ago, Ford left home and joined the Army because his older brother would not support him in his quest to marry me or anyone, for that matter. For that alone, Ford is bolder than I ever was. I am proud of him.”

Aunt Celeste shook her gently by her shoulders.“Now you must be proud of yourself, Victorine Fortin!”

Tears burned her eyes. “I have done nothing to merit it.”

“But you have. You take this child. But there is other proof of your character.”

She strode away. “Do not praise me, Aunt.”

“I will. You married, as you were told. You lived with Charles Wright, as you were bade. You never let on to the world how hollow your marriage was or what the emptiness cost you.”

Vicky sucked in air. She could not be surprised that her very perceptive aunt knew the reality of her fruitless marriage. She hoped few others did. Nothing would be so hard to bear as the pity others would bestow on her. She would rebel at that. Reject it. Few would understand that all she’d ever wished for was Charlie’s thanks for her acceptance of his preference. He’d taken it as his due. Living free as he pleased, he’d never considered the toll to her feminine pride or to her desire for a loving spouse and

children. “That’s done. Over. I will not discuss it now.”

“But you must recognize now in your own heart and mind that you were honorable to do your duty by your husband. That you were respectful of him and of yourself to stand by him. For all that, for those years you held to your principles, you must now praise yourself. You must call yourself brave.”

“I will promise you that when I leave here with Sam Hughes, I will live a different life. I will live for him. But I will live rewarding myself for my fortitude and my devotion to those principles I consider beneficial to a life filled with respect for myself filled with love.”

Her aunt chuckled. “Good for you , ma petite. About time, I say!”

The news that Vicky and Gwen had identified Sam as their own was met with silence at the supper table in the Great Hall that evening. Everyone in the house was dressed in comfortable attire for dancing round the bonfire and on the sawdust dance floor of the town gazebo. The fare tonight laid upon the sideboard was light because there would be so many specialties offered for sale by brewers and bakers and the butchers in town.

Ford, who once more sat at the far end of the long table, lifted his goblet. “I say, let us raise a round of good wishes to Baroness Wright who in her grace takes in this child who was discovered by chance, brought to us by devoted travelers, and who will have his place in the family God granted him.”

“Here! Here! Huzzah!” resounded round the old oaken walls of the hall.

Except for Ford’s mother, the table resumed their hearty conversation.

The older woman checked her son’s gaze, then that of her friend and guest, Celeste,

and finally that of her other guest, Vicky. “You are brave to do this, Victorine.”

Brave. The word she had craved. Yet Vicky’s actions were done out of love and respect for her Yvette’s decisions and for her orphaned child.

“Thank you, my lady. I am pleased we have such a certain resolution to this question of his parentage and his future.”

The woman only stared back at her—and Vicky wondered why.

### CHAPTER 6

“ I will stay only an hour, Barlow.” Ford’s mother, the Countess, had hold of his arm as they walked along the path to town. The two led the way for the guests and servants, too.

Directly behind Ford and his mother came Vicky and Aunt Celeste. “I will return with the countess,” Celeste said. “There is only so much of this revelry I can take.”

At sixty, Vicky’s mother’s younger sister was getting on in years and needed to sit to avoid the pains in her aching bones. “Tell me when you wish to leave, Aunt, and I will accompany you.”

“No, you will not,” Celeste said with pointed look in her blue eyes. “You will stay to dance. It’s what you came for.”

“Initially,” Vicky added with the satisfactory glow she’d felt all day.

“And why not. You are young, ma cherie . You should.” Her aunt tilted her head toward Ford who walked before them. “So should he. Both of you need a lot of gaiety in your lives.”

“I’d say you’re right on that.”

“Have you talked with him about his years away?”

“No.



“You should. In fact, now that you plan on keeping this child, you should stay longer to ease the boy’s transition. That will give you time to reacquaint yourself with Ford.”

“A good point, but I don’t?—”

“Don’t wish to overstay your welcome.” Her aunt squeezed her hand. “I understand, but your invitation from the Countess was a kind one. Think on extending your stay. The holiday would suit you, Vicky. Not only do you take on the rearing of a young child, but as a rule, you don’t do good things for yourself. It’s time you freed yourself.”

Vicky eyed the broad shoulders and lean hips of the handsome man walking before her. Her thoughts were the same as her aunt’s. Why wouldn’t she enjoy herself before she took on the care of her sister’s boy?

“I have similar thoughts, Aunt.”

“I hope you act on them, dear. It’s good for the soul to claim what you want.”

The fiddlers began the next set of country dances and Ford Barlow strolled away from the gaggle of town girls lined up by the hay stacks. He’d danced with four of them, and his feet hurt. Clementine Wingfield was also dancing with old Mr. MacDonald, the hatter. So for once, she was not staring at him, pining for the attention he could not in good conscience give her. And at the moment, he needed a chair, a large tankard of ale—and Vicky.

Where was she?

The last he’d spied her, she danced with Gwen Hughes’s beau, Jack Wrath. But he’d also seen her skipping down a line of a country reel with one of the Beeson brothers. Earlier, he’d even seen her cajoling old Mr. Warren to take to the sawdust floor with

her. To many people's delight the elderly fellow who owned the bake shop had done his jolly best to keep up with those four decades younger than he.

Ford rounded the corner of the bake shop and saw Vicky fanning herself as she braced her back against the wooden frame.

"Come join me in an ale?"

"Gladly. I could take a bath in one and still be parched."

He offered his arm and grinned that he'd have minutes alone with her.

She allowed him to lead her toward the brewer's stall.

"Did my mother go home?"

"She did. My aunt went with her. The two of them danced one part of the first country set, and they were ready to fly home."

He ordered from the brewer's daughter and put down his pence on the rough-hewn bar. Two mugs in hand within a minute, he lifted his jaw toward the bales of straw set up for dancers to rest on between sets. "Over there."

When they were seated and reclined against the large bales, he clinked mugs with her. "To you and Sam."

"And you and your success here."

He took a swallow and considered those dancing past him. Townsfolk, young and old, strangers who'd come to town recently, those who took up the local feud and those who had buried the hatchet in just the past few days. Of that, he was so pleased.

That old townfolks' dispute was so ancient few understood why they had to fuel it, if only for tradition. Many of the men and women dancing by with stars in their eyes were new to each other and romance. Gwen Hughes and Jack Wrath. The farmer, Martin, had found a mysterious lady asleep in his barn—and kept her on for chores and then more. His friend Thom Owen, the vicar's son, had taken a liking to the French girl, Charite. In contrast, his cousin Meg Barlow stood alone, her thoughts less than happy as her mouth drooped. Thinking no doubt of the physician she spoke to him about earlier—and his own mother's attempt to marry her off to another fellow.

Then there is me. He winced. He wanted to take Vicky to the dance floor and have her look at him as if she could never let him go. But she had another fellow on her mind these past few days. This child. Her sister's boy.

He was happy she had decided to take this boy. He didn't blame her. If his brothers had sired children, he would take them up in a moment and promise to rear them and love them. But now, because of her choice to take Sam, which was something he'd never put into his plan for this harvest holiday, he had a new problem. His mother, having learned about Vicky's adoption of Sam, was now adamant that Ford court Clementine Wingfield.

“Forget Victorine,” she had said to him this morning when they sat alone in the breakfast room. “She has decided to take this boy. And who is he? How can she be sure he is Yvette's? She cannot.”

“Forgive me, Mama, but that is not your choice to make.”

“It is if you are set on marrying her!”

“I have enough money to rear one child.”

“And Victorine?”

“She has money too. Sam Hughes will have a good life and a sound education.”

“But Victorine has no children of her own!”

“I don’t understand why...” But then his mother’s reasoning dawned on him. “I won’t continue to discuss this, Mama. Vicky and I have not talked about her marrying me, and all this is unfounded, if not downright premature.”

“Not if she plans to make Sam Hughes your heir.”

He had stood up. “That’s enough, Mama. Sam can never be Earl Barlow. He has not the blood recorded in the parish records.”

“But you can give him land. Our unentailed land could be his.”

“You fantasize, Mama.”

“I forbid it. Victorine cannot give you children, but she can foist Sam Hughes on you.”

His mother would never know why Vicky had no children by her first husband. Perhaps she would not by her second, either, if she accepted his proposal. But Sam Hughes would have a good life, regardless of his mother’s objections. “I leave you, Mama. The festival awaits. And you need to cool your heels on that sawdust dance floor. Or in your room. By yourself. Never displaying this pique of fit to anyone. For your own sake as well as Sam’s, Vicky’s, and mine.”

She had shot to her feet and flounced from the room.

So now, before he ever dealt once more with his mother on this matter, he had to make certain Vicky cared for him. Wanted him.

He made another try at it. “Don’t go tomorrow, Vicky.”

She sat, examining him. “I’ve thought about it. I have. I just...do not wish to be one of those guests whose stay outlasts their laundry.”

He snorted. “Hell. Remain as long as you wish. Borrow my clothes.”

Her blue eyes twinkled in the starlight. “Your shirt perhaps?”

They both laughed. She had years ago when they had spent the night together and modesty demanded she acquire some covering from him as they talked and kissed and never stopped the urge to lay their hands on each other.

“I have plenty. I may even have that one!”

She gave him a long look. “I doubt it fits you, Colonel!”

“It will fit you,” he said with all the longing he’d kept locked away all these years. “Stay. Not just for Sam. But for me.”

“If I do...”

“If you do, we can talk like this on more moonlit nights. Dance, too.” He motioned toward the revelers. “Finish your ale, and we’ll go show them how it’s done well.”

She worked hard at trying to refuse him. Her reluctance and shyness in the way she bit her lips, looked away, then back at him.

“I am not certain I should stay, Ford. I doubt your mother approves of me. Of my decision to adopt Sam. I don’t wish to irritate her, and so I think it best if I leave tomorrow as planned.”

“I doubt that’s good for the boy. He has grown attached to Vicar Owen, Charite and her aunt and Thom. You can’t just pick up the child and run. He’s good natured, but he won’t understand. You’ll have a baby bellowing all the way to Bath.”

“I know. I have to return and stay longer. Perhaps I can stay with Gwen. Although I hate to impose. She and Jack are getting married. Did you know?” Her gaze drifted to the pair as they glided around the floor with a few others in their set.

“To look at them, you can’t but see how much they mean to each other.” And I want the same for myself. It’s what I promised myself after every damn battle I survived. “They deserve happiness. So do you. Vicky.”

“I agree. I do. But so do you. And I wonder what would make you happy. I’m not sure I know you anymore. Six years is a long time.”

He took her free hand. “Do I look different to you?”

“Oh, my!” She laughed, suddenly a shy but ebullient girl, years younger. “Of course, you are. Look at you, sir. You were big and broad and luscious before. A young girl’s dream. And now, you are ever so devastating. The warrior. The hero. The man whom all admire and they should.” She put her hand to his cheek. “Last night at dinner, I could not take my eyes off you. Dashing Colonel Lord Barlow. If there is anything I would change about you, my darling man, I’d take this vicious scar away.” She traced her fingertip down the length from his temple to his throat. “I’d take the lines from around your silver eyes.” She traced those too. “And dye the grey from your bold black hair.” She sank her fingers into the waves at his forehead.

He caught her hand and brought it to his lips. "I'd change not one thing about you, my darling. You are perfection. You always were."

She locked her gaze on his. "Perfect, no. But I am trying to become so."

He put down his mug and drew her near with both hands. "You need never prove anything to me. I know who you are, what you are."

"No, I?—"

"You are the woman I loved years ago. At first sight. The woman I never forgot. The one?—"

"The one who refused you six years ago. The one whose rejection drove you to join the army and risk your life! Oh, Ford! I am not proud of that."

"You had no choice. I had none either. But hear me on this, Vicky. I knew long before you came to visit us and I fell in love with you, that I would have to leave my family and the estate. I was not valued. I was not rewarded for my efforts. The only other Wrath I had to anyone was my ability to shoot a flying target at top speed. I had to go. My brothers were not going to give me good pay or even build a wing of the house for me if and when I wanted to marry. I knew it. I had heard them talking about 'what they could afford me' long before you came. It was nothing. Nothing! Wanting you, falling in love with you, showed me even more vividly that they were selfish. I was their slave. I had to go to the army. It was the only way for me to make a life. And now that I have, I find my two brothers who denied me a decent life with them, have none of their own."

He swallowed and looked away. "I work at not hating them for what they did. I try not to hold a grudge."

“And your mother? What was her opinion then?”

He felt some peace fall over him. “She argued for me then. To them, she argued that I should have more for all that I did. But they would not listen. Today, she grieves that her two oldest children are not alive, but she is thrilled I survive. And frankly, so am I.”

She ran her fingers through the shock of his hair. “Thank you for telling me that.”

“Shall we dance now, Baroness?”

“Indeed, we shall, my dear Earl Barlow.”



## Page 7

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### CHAPTER 7

She had not danced in years, and the euphoria of frolicking over and over took her breath away. She had to stop, one hand to her chest. "I'm not used to this."

"No matter. We will rest." He took her wrist and led her off the sawdust floor. "You fainted earlier today. I don't want to have to carry you home!"

She sputtered in delight. "You're such an old man now. You'd sprain your back."

"Is that so?" He plunked his hands on his hips. "Who says?"

She pointed to herself.

Suddenly, she shrieked. She was off her feet in his arms and choking in laughter. One hand around his shoulders, she cupped his bristly cheek. "You are the most wonderful creature. I never forgot you."

A few noticed that the earl had his arms full of the lady who visited him.

He strode with her like Galahad through the throngs.

"Put me down, Ford. They're watching."

"Let them."

He wended his way past the last of the revelers and set off down the lane toward

Barlow Hall.

“You must put me down or you will hurt your back. I am heavy.”

“Canon, my dear, are indeed lighter.”

She grabbed the collar of his waistcoat. “You exaggerate.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Really. Ford! Put me down.”

“No.” The lane was dark, secluded, bowered by old fir trees and ash trees, their limbs swaying, their leaves bristling in the night air.

“You are going to hurt yourself.”

He grunted and took steps off the lane toward the cover of the ancient forest. Then he let her slide down his torso and pressed her to the trunk of a tree. Hands up on either side of her head, he lowered his own. His marvelous mouth was a breath away. “Kiss me.”

She opened her mouth then snapped it shut.

“Kiss me.”

“That’s dangerous.”

“Prove it.”

All her reserve drifted off in the breeze. “If I do, I might not stop and?—”

His eyes, aglow in the moonlight, flashed wide. “Then what?”

The devil tempted her at that moment because she said, “I’ll want more tomorrow.”

“Let’s see if that’s true.” He brushed his lips on hers. He tasted of ale and all the promises of happiness she’d needed but never heard from anyone.

For all the years she had lived celibate and uncomplaining, his claim was her vindication. His mouth was warm and searching. His desire sweet and at once scorching. His hands were at her back, along her spine, then one to her derriere the other crushing her every curve to his every plane.

“I adore you,” he said in the space between one set of kisses. “I never forgot,” was another.

“Let’s go home,” she managed as his lips took a path down her chest.

“I like you here.”

“Too cold,” she managed between the second it took him to inch down her bodice and expose one cold begging breast.

“Too far,” he said as he licked her nipple, and she sagged against him.

“Not standing up.” She remembered the things he could do to her if she were prone and he were between her legs.

His fingers worked at her skirts.

“Not here!” She pushed him away.

He blinked. His black hair dangling in his eyes. “You’re right,” he beamed and grabbed her hand. “Come on, my girl. Nothing like a good run to stir your blood before we have fun!”

She groaned. “You are an ogre!”

“I’m about to prove how bad I really am!”

She barked in laughter and jogged with him down the dark path to home.

Up the front steps, inside in a rush, they paused in the front hall. With the family butler down at the festivities, they cocked their heads to listen to the rhythms of the house.

His mother and her aunt must’ve gone to bed.

A rustle in the far servants’ stairs had them turning to each other, brows up in question.

“A mouse,” he whispered.

“Ouuuu,” she shivered.

“Tomorrow we’ll set a trap. For now....” He pointed toward the great hall and tugged her to follow him.

They ran through the massive medieval room and into a small alcove.

“What are you doing?” she whispered.

He pushed open a panel in the carved wooden wall. “Opening secret stairs!”

“Oh, joy!” She hurried behind him and watched him close up the wall. “Who used them?”

“Kings and queens and my brothers with their ladies!”

At the landing, she sobered and yanked at his coattails. “I’m not one of yours, am I?”

He frowned. “One of my what?”

She arched both brows.

“No, Vic.” He patted the end of her nose and pulled her hand to hurry her up the steps. “If you will just pick up the pace, you will be my only lover.”

In two steps, he thrust open an old door that creaked so loudly the two of them froze with the screech of it. “Come, come!” he urged her.

They took two steps.

And voila ! They were behind a sturdy door, kicked closed and loudly locked.

He had her once more pressed against a hard surface. He was even more delectably hard.

Her sexual experience was only of that one night they’d shared. Those glorious hours, she thought she remembered so well. His hands searching and kneading her arms, his fingertips stroking and caressing and holding her breasts. His lips following all the sweet little touches with hot wet kisses. The enormous gasps of joy he could elicit from her.

The ecstasy of seeing him, his broad chest in the moonlight. The rack of his ribs. The

contours of his hip bones as he dropped his breeches and she gasped at the fullness of him.

His length. Standing tall. Pointed at her. Seeking what she'd give. Giving what she desired.

How could that be? That joining. That mutual gift of love and caring.

He was naked, all dark skin and sculpted muscle. While she still had on her gown, though it was down around her waist.

"Let's get this off," he said, his fingers darting for the laces while his lips found skin he'd not yet licked or nipped or sucked.

With much tugging and cursing and pulling, she was free at last. Naked to him, an offering to match his.

"Lovely!" he declared, hands on his hips. Then he upended her, flung her over his shoulder and marched past his sitting room to his bedroom. In a whoosh, his big, soft, comfortable bed was at her back. Like a creature of the night, he crawled over her and kissed her quick. "You are going to marry me."

The words thrilled and challenged. Might she do that now that so much had changed in their lives? "That Wingfield girl has a different idea."

He lifted her chin. "My darling, she is wrong. Always has been. Here on a lark. My mother's."

She winced. "Let's not disc?—"

"We won't." He slithered down her torso to settle between her legs. "Now then. To

this business.”

“Business?” She lifted her head to see him grinning up at her from over her mound.

“That of making you my wife.”

“You need a license and Owen for that.”

He spread her thighs wide and blew cool air on her most private parts. “This is our private ceremony.”

“No witnesses,” she said in sighing satisfaction.

“Mmm. Intruders on the proceedings. No. Now do be quiet.”

“Lie back, shall I?”

“Yes, darling. Think of?—”

“The king?”

“If you wish.” Then he applied himself most diligently. Got to work, as it were. Long minutes later, he kissed her lips as he prepared to become part of her. “Have a suggestion for me to think of while it is my turn to become...uh...patriotic?”

“Of course.”

“What is it?” he asked as he inserted the hot slick length of him inside her.

She had absolutely no idea.

### CHAPTER 8

Dawn broke with the patter of rain upon the panes. Ford stirred to kiss her awake.

Her gown in such tatters she could only clutch it to her, Ford draped one of his white shirts over her. Just as that morning long years ago. Yet unlike that morn so long ago, she wore a smile. So did he as he gave her one of his banyans and took another for himself. Then he whisked her down the dark hall to her room in the east wing and scooted her inside.

“Sleep, sweetheart. You’re not leaving today. Tell me you’re not.”

Her euphoria drifted away. “I should. I must. It’s best that I get the house in Bath ready to receive Sam.”

The light in his eyes died. “It’s best if you get this house ready to receive a new mistress and a baby.”

She stepped around him. “One night with you is not enough to build a life.”

He caught her arm and whirled in front of her. “One night with me is enough for you to run away again?”

She sucked in a breath. “I didn’t run from you. We could not have each other. There was no way forward. I had to marry Charlie.”

“And now? There is no reason to leave.”



Grateful he had not repeated the insulting word 'run', she stood her ground. "Yes. There are many reasons to leave. You are the earl, the heir to a family proud in its tradition to care for this estate and its people. You are the man who will be respected and sought after to solve the problems, tend the wounds, heal the sick and care for the dying. You need an heir. And I? I cannot give that to you."

Gentle Ford took on the mien of the Warrior Colonel, dead set on conquering his opponent. He grasped her elbows. "Did your husband ever bed you?"

"No." She shook back her hair, embarrassed and defiant. "No."

"Then you do not know if you are capable of bearing a child."

"You and I made love six years ago. I was a virgin."

He nodded, but his silver eyes beamed brightly in anger. "You were."

"And we made love...twice."

"No. Not entirely."

She blustered. Her memory was not bad. "We did!"

"I was inside you, but never gave you the substance that could make you bear a child."

She blinked, trying to recall the specific details of their hours of intimacy.

"You were a virgin, true. Untried. And not knowing everything about the getting of children, I see you did not realize that I never came inside you. I did not wish to ruin you completely. I only wished to love you to the best of my ability. That you were

not pregnant from our mating was what I wished—and what I had some presence of mind to ensure.”

That flabbergasted her and she stared at him.

He circled his arms around her.

But she inched away. “You still need an heir and I am a poor candidate for that.”

“Why?”

“Because I am thirty years old. Long past good age to breed.”

He growled. “Many women bear into their forties. You cannot fob me off with that.”

“Still...” She put out her arm to hold off his attempt to embrace her. “We do not know.”

“You could have my babe within you now.”

She caught her breath.

“I was not as careful last night, I regret to say. I am not as diligent now as I was then. And I want you badly, Vic. You are my only love.” He reached out a hand to caress her cheek. “Don’t you love me?”

She swallowed wild sobs. “I do!” She sniffed back hot tears and gazed at the ceiling. “I love you now as I did then.”

“ But ?” He was so angry. She had never seen a man so wounded.

“I love you, my darling. But I will not ruin your life, your future. If we marry, what is there for us if there is no child?”

He swore so loudly it reverberated off the wooden beams. “No mornings in bed together? No dances at the harvest festival? No kisses in the garden or holding hands in sickness and in health?”

“Oh, Ford!”

“Darling mine, I do not care if there is no child. I want you! ”

She backed away from him.

But he tracked her. “Not convinced? Very well. What else is there in this argument of yours, eh? What else keeps you from me?”

“Respect. Who will respect that you married an old widow?”

“Oh, please. Is that all you have?”

“If you bear no heir, who will the title and lands go to?”

He waved a hand. “Some cousin. I have a few. You see, we Barlows are prolific breeders.” He bared his white teeth.

“This is not funny.”

“Don’t I know!”

“Stop this. I have to think of Sam.”

“Sam will have a good life with you. And us.”

“If I marry, I lose my dowry. I will have no money to raise him! “

“I have money. I earn money. It may not be equal to yours, but what is the price of your happiness?”

“How can I ask you to raise a child of my sister’s?”

“If Yvette had wed any other man than farrier Evan Hughes and they had both died, would you not take in your sibling’s child?”

“Yes, but?—”

“Are you saying you do not think I would accept him?” He was now bellowing.  
“Because he is the farrier’s boy?”

“No!”

“You had better believe that, my girl. I fought with men who had never had an education, could not read, could not write, and many never had a trade. So, you had better not think that I valued any man less because of his lack. Or because of his trade. Or his religion. What I saw in a man was his devotion to his king, his country, me and his comrades. After that, he had better be a damned good marksman and destroy anyone I chose in one kill shot.”

“I cannot ask you to raise a boy who is not yours.”

Fierce as he was now, Ford circled her round and round. At once he stopped and pointed a finger at her. “If you had come to me with a boy of your own, would you not ask me to raise him?”

“Yes. Yes, but that would be different.”

“It is not. You walk around this problem, Vic.”

“I do not!” She fisted her hands at her sides. “I want to marry you. Bring Sam. Live here. I want to give you all those things a woman can give a man. But I have no hope I can give you the one thing you need of a wife.”

“The one thing I need of a wife is to love me. Kiss me in the morning. Laugh with me at noon. Hold me as darkness draws nigh.”

She swiped at the tears cascading down her cheeks. “I have no hope I can give you the one thing I have wanted for myself! All these lonely years since I first fell in love with you, the only thing I wanted was a child. Someone to love and care for. I have no hope left for that.” She broke into sobs.

He swept her up into his arms and took her to a big chair. There he wiped away her tears and tucked her face against his shoulder. “Cry, my darling. Cry it all away. One thing I brought home with me is hope. A treasure trove of it. I had it every time we faced a battle. Each time we saw the enemy run at us. Each minute was an hour filled with the hope to survive. To endure. To return to home and hearth and someone to love. You. Only you.”

He urged her to look up at him. “I have enough hope for the both of us. Marry me, Vic, and let me give you my hope. Mine is so bountiful, I can share it. With it, together we can thrive, we can struggle and endure. We can find happiness. Marry me, my love. We can do all things together and do them best only with each other.”

She kissed his jaw and snuggled closer. “You make sense.”

“Thank you. I thought so myself.”

She cuffed him.

He chuckled.

Noises of people walking the halls signaled those in the house were making ready for the day.

She sniffed back her tears. “I think we may have awakened a few people.”

“Good. Time they were up. There is much to do here today. We’ve a wedding to plan.”

She clutched the sleeve of his banyan. A new terror hit her. “We must tell your mother.”

He stroked her hair back from her cheeks. “She’ll be thrilled.”

“She’ll need whisky.”

“A lot of it, too.”

Vicky gasped. “She does not want me, Ford.”

“I do. She will accept us with open arms especially if she would like to live out her days invited to birthdays, harvests, Christmases—and christenings.”

“I pray there will be many.”

“There will be and not for lack of practice.” He picked up the muslin at the collar of his shirt she wore and moved it aside so his lips could brand her between her breasts.

She sighed, relieved, and let him have his fill. “I think this time I will lay back and think of Prinny.”

He guffawed. “Good luck with that, my love. I understand the man is a terrible lover.”

She caught his silver gaze. “I want only you.”

He stood, caught her up in his arms and strode toward her bed. “And so you’ll have me, madam. Banns, I think. Four weeks.”

“No special license to get married sooner?”

“Oh, no,” he said as he dropped her on the mattress and climbed near. “Before that, we’ll be too busy.”

She shoved her hands beneath the silk of his banyan and took the robe away. “What will we be doing?”

“This,” he whispered as he sent his hands over her breasts and sank between her thighs. “This.”

### CHAPTER 9

Four weeks later, Vicky took the Barlow traveling coach down the lane toward the island and the church where so many waited for her wedding to Ford. Beside her rode her aunt Celeste, happy for her and her soon-to-be husband.

“He loves you. You deserve this joy, ma petite. Yvette is happy for you, too. You do her the kind service to bring up her son, Vicky.”

She accepted the felicitations of her aunt, believing every word she said. “It took me much to get here, but I could not have chosen better.”

A new gown of Prussian blue silk pelisse flowed over her figure well. With long billowing sleeves caught in spangled cuffs, the dress was easy to wear. Vicky appreciated that because she’d missed her monthly two weeks ago and had developed a new anxiety about wearing tightly fitting clothes. She’d told Ford, and he had whirled her about, then said whatever happened, he adored her.

This morning, Vicar Owen would preside over their wedding. He’d been a busy man this past month and had a few more marriages to perform in the coming weeks.

This morning, ten minutes late as she was for the ceremony, all the guests awaited her inside. Clutching her bouquet of late autumn wild flowers Ford had picked himself this morning, she took the footman’s hand to step down and lead her into the church.

Aunt Celeste turned at the doors and grinned at her. “You once told me you thought people did not change, Victorine. Some don’t. Most do. You have, my sweet niece.



You were always an obedient girl. A young lady who did her duty. A wife who endured. But with this marriage, you have shown that a woman who is responsible, can also be brave. Life demands it. Love enriches it. I leave you to your future, my dear. Your years will be glorious.”

Vicky watched her walk away and prepared herself for her most happy wedding. She stepped to the threshold and the congregation rose for the bride. At the front of the church stood the vicar and Ford. Her groom, who grinned at her, had imbued her with hope that urged her forward toward all their bright tomorrows.

How she loved the sight of them all who’d come to see her wed her darling Ford. Standing before him with a smile she would not tame, she winked at him and turned to gaze upon the congregation.

In the first pew sat Vicky’s Aunt Celeste. Beside her sat the lady who was now her mother-in-law, Countess Barlow.

Yesterday, that lady had retired to the Dower House two miles away from the Hall. The conflict between her and Vicky was more than resolved. It was forgotten. Ford had made it plain to his mother that no other woman would ever become his wife.

“I take the title of earl because it simply comes to me,” he had told his mother in Vicky’s presence the day after the harvest festival. “I work the land because I learned early how to make it prosper. I marry Vicky because she is the only woman I have ever loved. I ask nothing more in life than to do the work I am good at for the happiness and prosperity of the woman I love and a future we create together.”

That her son was happy was the most important thing in this world to the lady. She showed it as she smiled and nodded at Vicky.

Next to the older ladies sat Jack and Gwen Hughes. Gwen held Sam in her lap. The

little boy had come to live with Vicky and Ford in Barlow Hall a few weeks ago. She, Gwen and Charite had worked steadily at the transition. Each day all of them had visited with Sam. Each day Vicky and Gwen had taken him up to the Hall and shown him the house, the garden and his nursery bedroom. He had wooden toys that many in the town had carved for him. A small riding horse that Thom Owen had crafted. A new small bed with rails made by Jack Wrath and Ford together. When Sam came to live at the Hall, he was ready to go. He'd hugged Charite when she bade him goodbye. Lately, encouraged by Ford's mother, Sam called Vicky 'Mama.'

Vicky loved watching Gwen and Jack who minded Sam but paid attention mostly to each other. Hand in hand, they had little regard for the buzz of conversation around them. They were, as usual when together and at leisure, absorbed in one another. Even the most traditional of the belledames who criticized the couple for ignoring the God-ordained order in their household—for Jack not only looked after the house and Griffith, but had taken the name Hughes—could not resist a sign of envy at the couple's manifest love for one another.

A row behind them, she saw Thom Owen and his bride Charite smiling at her and Ford. Charite visited Sam often but just as often came to see Vicky, consulting her on how to deal with some of the more prickly members of the Mill-School committee. Yesterday, Charite had confided that she might be enceinte . She wanted and deserved a child of her own. Vicky could not be happier for her friend. Behind them sat Meg Barlow and her betrothed the physician, Adam Wagner, the Beeson brothers, and many in the two families who had for so many decades argued with each other, but no longer did.

Vicky smiled at them all. So many of them had changed.

Even me.

“Victorine Anne, will you repeat after me?”

She considered the handsome face of her husband. The man who had argued with her and who had promised to love and honor her. The man she would honor and adore for all the days of her life.

“Victorine Anne? Will you repeat after me?”

She nodded to the vicar. “I will. I most certainly will.”

THE END

### CHAPTER 1

December 16, 1818

London

“ B ut Gabe, you must come!” His oldest friend grinned at him. “Third time is a charm!”

Gabriel Shaw did not put any stock in superstitions. He had the successes of hard work to his credit and little in this world had come to him by serendipity. So when his second cousin died in September and the family solicitor sailed to him in Venice to announce that Gabe was the tenth earl of Darby, he laughed first, drank excessively second, and wrote to his Assistant in the City of London third.

Life did not come at him in threes. Usually only in ones. One directive by his grandfather, the eighth earl, to improve the old family import business alone. One bequest by his dying father of one hundred pounds sterling to save the business that had been decimated by the wars of the little Frenchman. Followed two months later by one order from his uncle, the newly minted ninth earl, to leave England and never show his face there again.

Frowning at his friend whom he'd loved since they were at Eton, Gabe shook his head at the man's invitation to attend his and his wife's Christmas festivities. He chose his words carefully, despite their camaraderie since age six. Barrington's Christmas ball five years ago had seen Gabe in his first pickle with a charming girl. Barr's ball the following year had been the second with the same irresistible lady. It

had also been the very event he had attended that precipitated Gabe's quick banishment from good society. "I have not danced in years."

Lord Barrington, the sixth earl of his family, lifted his brandy and wiggled his long pale brows in jest. It was ten in the morning in their London club, but Barr was toasting Gabe's change of fortune. "I do not expect you to waltz, old man."

"I gather Dora is short on single men for the holiday?" he teased. Gabe liked Barr's wife. Always had. A second cousin of his own on his mother's side, Dora possessed a gaiety that was not only natural but enduring.

"We need you. Besides, you must go north to inspect your estate sometime. Sooner would be best and you know it. Come. We will make your days pleasant. You will not be drawn down by old memories."

Gabe savored another taste of his brandy. The best memories he had of Barrington Priory were two Christmases long ago. The first, five years ago, found him in a broom closet with a giggling girl. The second, one year later, found him in a butler's pantry with that same lovely creature. It was also the event when both of them were discovered by her fiancé that had inspired his uncle to exile him. "Irony, isn't it, how life can play tricks on you?"

"In your case, Gabe, yes. You've had more than most. But your luck is turning. Come to Yorkshire for Christmas. Dora wants you. I do. So do the boys."

"And does Dora's best friend attend?" He locked his gaze on Barr's, fearing his answer and wanting it in the affirmative all at the same time.

"She does."

She was the very reason he should not go. Exile to all the marvels of Cadiz and

Casablanca, Florence, Venice and Athens had not dashed her from his memory.

“She has been with us for four months now,” Barrington said. “After her father and her brother Malcolm died in July, she lived in a small tiny cottage in Bradford on one of their unentailed properties. Dora invited her with us because we need help with the boys.”

Both of the lady’s relatives had been severely injured in the same carriage accident. Upon reading the news in the London Times , Gabe ordered his man of business in the City to get all the details from the family solicitor.

“Malcolm lingered longer than his father,” Barrington said and drained his glass. “But he could not overcome the pain of his injuries.”

Gabe had never gained anything without observance of logic. “She is in mourning still, Barr. She won’t agree to celebrate with you.” Or me. Definitely not with me. I was the cause of so much of her suffering.

“Dora insists on it. Says she needs a happy Christmas. As do you.”

“Oh, Barr. Please. I am the new earl of Darby, tenth of my less than noble lineage. Rich beyond my expectations or my station. In trade, for God’s sake. What right have I of happiness?”

“Every right. You’ll make a damn sight better earl than ever the last three of your family. Trade, be damned, or in your case, applauded. You’ve earned your right to claim the land, the houses, and title. Justice that you have it all, I say, it is. But you will have your hands full. If rumor is true, your predecessors were thieves of the profits for gaming hells and actresses. Now no arguments. Write them at Darby Park to open the doors and windows to a new day in your house. Then come to Christmas at Barrington Priory.” His friend winked at him. “Third Christmas is the charm!”

### CHAPTER 2

Wednesday, December 22, 1818

Ripon, Yorkshire

“Reginald! Come back here this minute!” Alyssa darted after her eight-year-old charge. “You’ve left your scarf!”

“Auntie Al!” cried Thomas, Reggie’s six-year-old brother. “He took my skates!”

“Grab his, Thomas. We’ll catch up and get yours. Not to worry.” She snatched up her own skates, caught his little hand and urged him along the nursery wing toward the stairs. “If we want to have a good long time at the pond, we’ve got to hurry while the sun is out.” Besides, your mother is in a tear to get there soon.

“Alyssa!” Her friend Dora called up to her from the second floor. “I’ve got Reggie in hand. Let’s go!”

“We’re coming, Dora!” She scooped up Thomas in her arms and took the hall at a clip. “Your mother wants us to get there quickly and have a good turn round the pond before the sun goes down.”

Why that should be today of all days was a mystery to Alyssa. The four of them had gone skating every day for the past four and Dora hated to ice skate.

“Mama said she’d give us extra pudding tonight for going to the pond again!”

“Indeed, she did. Aren’t you thrilled?”

Thomas mashed up his charming mouth in a pout. “Pudding, yes. But skating. No. It’s cold, Auntie Al.”

True. “Mama wants you to have a bit of fresh air. Good for you.”

“I want to stay here and ride my horse.”

Alyssa took the stairs like a woman on fire. “I understand.” I’d prefer to stay home where it’s warm and let you ride your horse, too.

“Ah, here you are!” Dora greeted her at the second landing and tugged on her gloves. “Let’s hurry.”

I am!

“What,” Alyssa asked as the four of them left the front steps and rushed along the snow-covered pebbled drive toward the carriage, “is your new fascination with skating?”

“I like it.” Her lovely pal pushed up the collar of her scarlet Spanish mantle and grinned at Alyssa with excitement akin to a schoolgirl.

The two boys jostled each other to climb into the seats, Reggie elbowing his brother in a torment older brothers reserve only for their younger siblings.

“Since when?” She had a suspicion Dora had a new project up her sleeve. Dora never did anything with frantic energy unless she had a master plan. Skating the past four days was her newest magnum opus .



“I always have. Just this year the ice is so perfect.”

Alyssa suppressed a shiver, settled into the squabs and huddled inside her fox-trimmed pelisse. “Perfect for Highlanders. Not for those of us with the coast and salt in our veins.”

“Bah!” Dora settled into the squabs next to Alyssa, then knocked the roof for the coachman to drive on. “You know you like the fresh air.”

“Riding,” she grumbled. “Not skating.”

“Don’t be a noodle. You used to like skating.”

“I did.” She remembered the day, the hour and the circumstances when she no longer enjoyed gliding on the ice. She also remembered the man who saved her. “Until I broke my leg.”

“You were ten.” Dora rolled her big blue eyes at her. “You healed! Look at you now. You walk. You run. You dance.”

“I skate only because I want to keep up with Reggie and Thomas.”

“And me.”

Alyssa inhaled. “And you.”

“I think I may have found a new governess,” Dora said at last, shoving her hands in her coat pockets.

“Here in Ripon?” Alyssa was surprised because Dora was very particular about instruction and care of her two boys. Since dismissing her last governess five months

ago, she had interviewed two applicants from a service in York and received a pile of recommendations from an advertisement she'd taken in a London newspaper. The very reason Alyssa remained at Barrington Priory with Dora and her husband Barr was at their special request to help care for Reggie and Thomas. Alyssa welcomed the company. Living alone in her little cottage in Bradford was not what she had planned for herself. But circumstance had intervened and she was, at twenty-three, the spinster she never imagined she'd be.

"She lives in Canterbury."

"Good heavens, Dora. She'd come all this way just for an interview?"

"She needs a position. So, yes. She would."

"And if you don't like her? You'll send her back?"

"I told her I would pay for her fare."

"Good of you." Dora was nothing if not fair. "Does she come soon?"

"Tomorrow."

"My goodness! The day of your ball and mere days before Christmas. Has she no family?"

"None. That's one reason I thought it fit to bring her on. Give her a happy holiday."

"I hope you like her. It would be sad to turn her out afterward."

"I've few doubts. Besides, I want you to meet her, too. Before you go home. You are so instinctive with people. If you like her, I know she will be a proper fit."

The reminder that she had decided to go home after the new year made Alyssa shiver a bit more. She liked her visits with her cousin and her little family. It gave her a glimpse of home and husband and children, all which she might have had...if she had found a better man than those three whom she had rejected.

“Ohhh! Look, Alyssa!” They had rounded a copse of tall snow-capped firs to gaze upon the shimmering ice of the local pond. Reggie and Thomas clamored to get out. The boys spied their two closest friends, two little girls who glided over the ice, sending up to the crisp air the chirps and calls of children at play. “The Darby girls. Company!”

Alyssa was used to seeing the girls here and she welcomed their presence. Reggie and Thomas were well-occupied with them about. The girls, orphaned daughters of the late Lord Darby, lived far down the road in their manor house near town. They usually came by their coach, that stood apart today by the copse. They also usually came accompanied by their governess, a Miss Perkins of pursed lips and narrowed lids. But today the girls glided around the pond, calling to each other, and waving to Reggie and Thomas, escorted by a dark imposing man.

Alyssa blinked at the vision. He was...

A tall, elegant form in inky black great coat and fine top hat. He stood to one side of the pond, his gloved hands clasped together at his waist, as he waited silent and serene while the Barrington carriage rolled to a stop before him.

He was more man than she remembered. Why would he not be? It had been four years since last she saw him. In a butler's wine cellar. The light of one candle highlighting the ebony waves of his hair and the lush sweep of his lips. The air humid and intoxicating, full of the angel's share of whisky and wine, and the devil's appeal of his woodsy cologne. The night dangerous with its promise of a marriage proposal for her, but not from him. No. From him, a kiss that buoyed her heart with longing

she might escape the dreaded fiancé and instead claim him as her beloved. He of other kisses in a broom closet the previous year. He of other Christmas balls when they were young. He of her hopes. He of her vain desire for him because he was a second son of a second son and no match for her father's intention to get her at least an earl. He of all her dashed hopes. He of the flashing grey eyes that focused on her now.

He did not move. He did not smile. He did not even seem to breathe.

At once, Alyssa understood what was happening here. "He is why we've come to skate today."

Dora grinned and shivered, triumphant. "Of course, he is. He wondered if you'd remember him. You do. I told him and so did Barr that you had never forgotten him."

"How good of you," she managed to say though her heartbeat was too rapid to stop her from clasping her hands together too tightly to indicate nonchalance. "You arranged this."

"We did. He did. Home from his travels, he is. For good, too, now that he is the new earl. Aren't you delighted?"

What was he doing here? Ha! Acting like a love-sick boy, yes! To his shock. Where was the man who could have a Tuscan contessa as his paramour for the summer or enjoy the invitation of an acclaimed Parisienne ballerina without regret?

Yet he could not take his eyes from the vision who beamed at him.

He had no rights to try to redeem himself in her eyes. He had hurt her. Worse. He'd destroyed her. Yet here she was, smiling at him as if it were five years ago, or four even, and nothing disastrous had befallen her. She climbed down from the carriage,

her lovely face alight with welcome.

This ripe creature coming straight toward him was overjoyed to see him. Her cousin was chatting on about how wonderful this, and how superb that , as he gazed like a besotted child at the woman he'd always fancied and fought for words that might not sound trite.

Today, she wore a blue green woven wool that replicated the uniqueness of her eyes. Her face was a perfect oval, and her cheeks were plump above hollows that gave her a sophistication she'd not yet claimed at eighteen. Her hair, still that irrepressible cloud of burnished blonde, escaped her blue silk bonnet. The rest of her was more rounded and, dare he say, more delectable than he had ever predicted she might become. Her breasts alone inspired in him a hard response which would make skating damn impossible.

“You’ve come to Darby Park for Christmas,” she said as she left her hand lingering in his. He noted she did not call the Park home . Smart girl. She knew better. But went on with, “Oh, you do look well. I see your nieces are enjoying your company, a boon for them, I am sure. Plus Dora and Barr are thrilled you’ve come north. Dora has told me so just now.”

“You did not know before seeing me that I’d arrived, did you?”

She shook her head. “Though I expected you’d come eventually to your domain, today I evidently was meant to be surprised.” She cleared her throat and feigned a rueful look at Dora. “The ruse succeeded and I am surprised. But very pleased to see you, my lord.”

“I will turn and march right away, Alyssa, if you continue to my lord me.”

“Then you will be Gabe to me. As ever you were.”

He lifted her gloved hand and kissed the back. “As ever I wish to remain.”

A frisson swept through her. What was that about? Had she heard intonations in his words that implied all the sentiments he had never voiced? He was so full of regrets, so eager to make amends to her for all that had gone wrong for her after their last rendezvous in the wine cellar, that he was not surprised. He probably wore a sign on his great coat that listed his many sins against her.

“Shall we skate?” she asked with both brows in a gleeful arc he remembered so well. She was still the imp with whom he had spent years of his youth learning how to dance and letting her crush every one of his toes.

He rubbed his hands together. “Nothing better, Al, my girl!”

She threw back her head to laugh at his use of her old diminutive name and took a look at the new blades that he’d slung over his shoulder. “Come along then. To the bench! Tie them on!”

Impetuous. He’d always been so with her and no one else. It’s what had gotten her in trouble and him driven away. Spur of the moment choices were not his usual mode. Prudent actions were his forte.

When he left home four years ago, he had only three wishes. He wanted to lift the family company from bankruptcy to singular superiority. He wanted to show those who thought him less than he was that he would acquire the name and fame of a man of the world—and in the process, he would forget the young woman who’d taken his arm and run with him into the shadows of closets and cellars for the raptures of decadent kisses. He had easily achieved the first two. Never the last.

Now by the grace of all that he had accomplished in this life, he was here to improve his fortunes further. At the urging of his friend Barr, he’d returned to the Park and

gotten the few remaining staff up to snuff. He'd acquainted himself with his nieces , poor sweet chicks who needed mothering and fathering to keep them in tow. Before he'd left London to come north, he'd even armed himself with fine winter tailoring and ordered this new pair of skates. Which he now had to don.

All the others, children and Dora and one of his grooms included, had taken to the ice. Alyssa and he warmed the wooden bench.

Getting his skates securely tied was a trial. He was all fingers, his mind on how she smelled of roses and fresh soap. "I think the shoemaker made the wrong size for me."

"Let me help," said the woman who could not seem to stop smiling at him as she went to one knee in the snow before him. Her position had him sucking in his breath. She appeared to be his, his alone, and bent over in such a way that his physical delight in her jumped to uncomfortable new heights.

"You're binding them too tightly," he complained with a laugh. "My blood will stop flowing." In truth, all of it's already gone to one particular part of my anatomy.

"They have to be tight, Gabe. We must hurry. The sun will be down soon," Alyssa said as she yanked at the leather straps and wrapped them around his trouser legs. "There you are. Stand up now."

He winced, grateful for the fall of his coat over evidence he wished to do other things than skate. But he stood and dubious of his ability to hold his balance, he sailed off with her right at his side.

"You do well, sir. One would think you've been practicing."

"I've had other things to do that kept me from this."

“Business.” Her blue-green eyes flashed as they took the pond in a slow circle. “I’ve heard. You’ve done well. Worked hard. So there’s been no time for fun?”

“Very little.” He did not wish to discuss what he had done for enjoyment. He’d pensioned off his contessa months ago and the liaison with the Parisienne had been nothing more than a week’s brief interlude.

Their silence stretched out. That was his fault. If he wanted more communication, he would have to encourage it by sharing more than he had.

“I worked hard at building the company. We had agents stationed in port cities, of course. But many were so old, or so discouraged by Napoleon’s customs men, they did nothing. I had to pension off most of them and replace them. Luckily, many who were qualified and who wished the positions were our original agents’ sons and daughters.”

She skated closer to him, her gaze on his full of surprise. “You hired women?”

“Of course, I did. Why not? Women can strike a deal sooner and often with better profit than men.”

“I would agree! I hope to do the same.”

“Oh?” How? “You want to come work for me?” He could dream of that.

“I would if I could, Gabe. But I know nothing of trading goods.” She lifted her shoulders and skated on, her lips pursed in contemplation. “I will use what I do know to build my own business.”

“What would that be?”



“A book shop. I will open one this summer. By then, I will have acquired stock enough to open.”

“A shop! That’s superb. Where?”

“Ripon. I must find a space I can afford to rent and repair to my needs. Just to start and then as I earn enough, I will buy the space and live above.”

If she were to run a shop in nearby Ripon, he could see her and visit whenever he came to Darby Park. That filled him with joy...and a need for her company he hadn’t acknowledged in a very long time. Four years, in fact.

“Why do you wait to act on this idea to open the shop?”

“Money, of course. What else does anyone wait on, eh?” Her cheeks pinked in embarrassment. “I will have saved enough by then to live for a month or two. By then I will also have bought enough books to stock my shelves. People love to read. It’s healthy for them to sit quietly and enjoy communion with another person’s ideas and experiences.”

“You are buying books with savings?” That was a conclusion and intrusive to ask, but he was horrified that she was reduced to scrimping her own means to fund her worthwhile project.

“Yes, of course.”

“Why?” He halted in the middle of the pond and caught her hand to make her stop and face him. His question was forbidden. No one inquired about the finances of another. Yet he would learn this about her.

“It is the only way.”

“Your father left you no means?”

She rolled a shoulder, squinted at the horizon, then faced him. Her lips were drawn flat, her eyes dazed. “My father left me two thousand pounds.”

That was all? The man had offered her fiancé a dowry of ten thousand and two acres of land on the edge of the town of Ripon. “Why not grant you the ten he would have given to whatever his name was?”

“Talbot. Lord Talbot. Eight thousand went to him.”

Bastard. “As recompense for his so-called ‘pain and suffering’, I would guess?”

She nodded her head once, then broke away.

He pushed off and caught her around the waist. “Tell me the rest.”

“No,” she bit off, gazing straight ahead.

He slowed in time with her measured glide, but with his hand to hers, urged her more dearly against his side. He felt her heat, her supple body in flow to their syncopated dance over the ice, and his desire flared like fire to hold her against him face-to-face, breast to his chest, hip to hip, her luscious thigh to his own.

One glance at her face and his heart wrenched. Tears glistened on her lashes.

“What happened after you broke it off with Talbot?” Barr had written that after their discovery in the wine cellar her father had demanded she retire to his smallest estate in Cornwall. She had remained there until weeks before her father died last year.

She came to a stop on the edge of the pond. “I lived at one of Papa’s holdings outside

Truro in Cornwall. A good life, it was, quiet and peaceful. Few knew me or of my reputation. Papa had told me when he banished me, that he did not wish to hear from me. I did not communicate with him, even when he wrote that he was ill and dying. I could not forgive him for his treatment of me. But on his death bed, he wrote once more and begged me to come to him. I did go and saw him before he took his last breath. He asked for my forgiveness for what he'd done. I gave it. Who does not on such an appeal? Yes, well. He said he had made reparation for his harsh treatment of me. He gave no details. But the next morning, a bare hour after he had passed, my cousin, Papa's successor, the newest Lord Margrove, invited me to the reading of the will." She inhaled and shook her head, her blue-green eyes hard as stone. "But there was nothing in Papa's last testament that could be construed as reparations for me from him. I was granted only the two thousand he had told me was left after compensating my former fiancé, Lord Talbot."

"Sweetheart," Gabe whispered and pressed her close to his heart, one hand to her nape. Dora would not ridicule him or Alyssa for this. One of his nieces, however, stopped skating to nudge her sister and point to them. He would talk with her later. "Men can be so cruel."

"To women," she said, pulling away to stare into his eyes with a solid determination. "And to other men as well. You had the same done to you."

"We were each cast out."

"For kissing each other," she said in a melodic whisper on the wind. Her lashes fluttered and she beamed at him. "I never regretted it. Not once. "

"I owe you?—"

She slanted two fingers across his mouth. "No, Gabe. You owe me nothing. Your kisses showed me that I could never have married Talbot." She squeezed his arm.

“Now enough of the past. I see Dora waving at us. She and the boys are ready to go home. I would guess you are coming to dinner tonight, too. Are you?”

“I have been invited, yes.”

She tipped her head and grinned at him. “Well, for goodness sake, come along then! You must tell me tales of Venice and Rome and all the lovely old places a lady only reads about in books.”

“Only if you come ride with me in my coach up to the Priory.”

“An offer I cannot refuse,” she said and hugged his arm as they called to the girls to join them. The youngsters giggled and elbowed each other, knowing they joined a man and woman interested in each other.

As the four of them took the short drive up to the Barringtons’ house, Gabe marveled at the surprises that could be positive and change one’s life. So rare, so welcome. Like the surprise of sitting and watching the love of his life across from him, happy to see him, forgiving of all that had passed between them.

What he reminded himself he needed foremost was to stick to a healthy dose of reality. To wit, the lady before him, might have kissed him years ago. She had lost her fiancé and reputation because of it, too. But she was older and wiser now and her kisses, he was quite certain, were not on offer.

For if his kisses had once showed her that she should not have married Talbot, that did not mean they had ever proven that she should have married him.

### CHAPTER 3

“What was your assessment of the condition of the house, Gabriel?” Barr asked him as the footman served the dessert.

Alyssa noted this was the first such question to Gabe about his new situation.

They sat at the candlelit table. Sconces on the walls flickered with the glow of more candles throwing mellow tones across the faces of the four dining. Gabe’s nieces, Rosalind and Marie, were dining with the boys up in the nursery. The four adults could enjoy their frank conversation without hindrance.

“The manor house is in poor condition. The roof needs new shingles. A leak has ruined the servants’ back bedrooms on the fourth floor. The floors have not been scrubbed or waxed in years, I’d say. And the window dressings are in tatters. If the house were not so close to town and to the tenants’ cottages, I’d shutter it up or let the wild boars have at it. My cousin, God rest him, gave no thought to the place.”

The sound of children laughing came through the floorboards.

Gabe frowned. “Nor did he fill his two children with the care they have needed since their mother died.”

“They’ve come here,” said Dora, “to play with Reg and Thomas.”

Gabe cast her a loving look. “For that, I am grateful. They need to feel wanted.”

“Everyone does,” Alyssa added on impulse. “Losing one’s mother leaves an open wound in one’s heart.”

“I cannot be their mother,” Gabe said, twirling his wine glass, then taking stock of Dora, Barr and her. “But I can provide a comfortable home and a fond uncle’s guidance now that I am here.”

Dora nodded. “I know you will do more than that, Gabriel.”

Barr shook his head. “You must call on us if we can provide any help. I understand four of your tenants have left for York. Two of them were handy with carpentry and stonework. We have two such men with those skills here and I would happily send them to you.”

“The same,” added Dora, “for your house staff. My housekeeper told me last week that your scullery maid has left and so too your upstairs maid.”

Gabe cleared his throat. “My butler tells me they departed because they did not wish to serve me.”

Alyssa recoiled at the news, angry for his loss. “Better that they go.”

He stared at her with those bright grey eyes. “Agreed. I have enough work to do to straighten out the house and improve the estate’s crop production without having to play sycophant to those who believe me capable of seducing innocent women.”

“Many,” Dora said, “have forgotten.” She didn’t elaborate, but the looks that were exchanged round the table told the tale. A few did remember the scandal that had resulted in Gabe being sent away and Alyssa’s broken engagement and banishment.

“I have no need to curry anyone’s favor,” Gabe said, a sting to his tone that would

warn anyone away. “I’ve too much work to do. Tenants, animals, land all need to be nourished. Like all else I own, I will give them my fullest attention.”

Alyssa knew the challenges he faced were enormous and would make a less determined man pale. Yet Gabe would prevail because he had the dedication to urgency and excellence.

“Have you any thought,” asked Barr, “how to juggle that with the management of Shaw Imports?”

“I did not set foot on the ship for home before I had secured the company’s future. I left my man of business in charge in Leghorn with orders to tighten the reins on all our offices along the Mediterranean. When he believes he may leave it to operate efficiently at a distance, he comes north to London, to me.”

“You sound as though you’ve thought of everything,” Barr said.

“So I do hope you have it in mind to enjoy yourself here.” Dora lifted her glass in a toast to Gabe. “We’ve invited half the shire for tomorrow night’s ball. I’m sure you will remember many of them.”

Alyssa bit her lip. Perhaps he does not wish to.

“I will do my best, Dora.” He lifted his wine glass and sipped, more gracious about this topic than Alyssa. “Four years is a long time. I had no time to gauge anyone’s reactions to my uncle’s decision. I left the next morning for London and beyond.”

“You are not angry,” Alyssa said with shock and delight.

He settled his gaze on her with a serenity that she applauded. “A useless emotion now that circumstances have changed my life entirely.”

Alyssa applauded his resilience. His expression in the glow of candlelight afforded her a renewed appreciation of his striking black hair and sun-kissed complexion. The turn about the ice had added a healthy red to his cheeks. As for his lips...

Well. She took a deep breath and forced her gaze to her plate.

His lips had always been a special point of her desire. They were generous. In a complementary line to his wide jaw, his lips were firm. But when he spoke, they formed perfect words given forth in a heartfelt baritone. And when he smiled, they went wide with glee. When he kissed, his lips turned kind. And demanding.

Ravenous.

That was the word that set her breasts to tingle.

Ravenous.

That was the thrill she relived over the past four years every time she closed her eyes and...

"Alyssa?" Dora called to her. "I say! Are you ill?"

Her eyes snapped open. "Not at all. Don't mind me. A moment's memory of a past Christmas. I am so excited for tomorrow night's ball. And happy to be here." She threw a smile at Dora and Barr. A glance at Gabe told her he considered her with narrowed circumspection and a heat that told of old desire. Well, yes. The man knew her too well.

"I'll walk you down to the foyer, shall I?" Alyssa had to have a few minutes alone with him. The evening conversation had been more than friendly, convivial really, but she required more specifics about his immediate plans. Tomorrow night would



give her nothing in that regard, either. One look at the newest Earl of Darby in a formal cut of black attire, and the local maidens would drool to be presented and happily hand him their dance cards. Alyssa would stand no chance of a few minutes of frank conversation.

The four stood in the family parlor. Dora had indicated she would roust the children from their play and get the girls to come down.

Barr, too, was ready to retire. "A late night tomorrow."

"I look forward to it," Gabe said to his friends and bid them good night. To Alyssa, he offered his arm.

They took the stairs, the old butler waiting patiently for them at the door.

Gabe allowed the man to assist him with his greatcoat and thanked him for his service. "I will speak with Miss Waring," he said and the man bowed himself away.

"You'll save a place for me on your dance card tomorrow night, I do hope?" He gave her the lift of that wicked dark brow and put his hands to her upper arms.

"All my dances will be open. Pick any one you'd like."

"I'll take them all, Al."

He was too charming. She tipped her head and grinned at him. "To the shock of the neighbors."

"To hell with them," he bit off and lifted her chin. "I come tomorrow night only to dance with you."

“You will disappoint every young thing for miles around.”

“I wish to gain only your favor.” He brushed his thumbs across the arch of her cheeks. “Will you dance with me?”

So full of the enchantment of him, tears welled in her eyes. “If I do, we’ll create another scandal.”

“Third time’s a charm, Barr told me last week.”

She sniffed back tears and swallowed loudly.

He gathered her against him, his lips in her hair.

She clung to him shamelessly. “I never thought to see you again.”

“Nor I you, my darling.”

His endearment brought out a sob and she clutched him closer. Her cheek against his warm hard chest, she ventured, “Do you stay in Darby Park for long?”

He was suddenly speaking against the lobe of her ear. “As long as it takes to right all past wrongs.”

At his words, she wanted to rub herself against him like a cat. Instead she fought to be wise. “The crop failures have been devastating. Bountiful yields could take years.”

“I give it months here, then south to London. I commit to coming back and forth. I’ll not see my business fail because I devoted myself exclusively to this. But I wonder,” he said as he lifted her chin, “how long you remain here.”

“After Christmas I return home.” She should leave soon to save herself heartache at losing him once more.

“Might I persuade you to stay longer?”

She must not. To stand near him, to admire him, to want him so was more dangerous than ever it had been. He was older, more virile, worldly, and she was more smitten by him than she’d thought possible. To even gaze upon him this close was to melt into the euphoria of wanting him. Still she could be foolish enough to ask, “How would you do that?”

“I’d kiss you in the middle of a grand foyer against all our precedents.” He grinned, his mouth brushing across hers in soft waves of pleasure. “How successful would that be?”

“Very. No one is left to part us.”

“Or send us away.”

The patter of little feet upon the marble had her lowering her forehead to his chest. The next sound was Dora clearing her throat as she descended the stairs.

“Tomorrow night,” he whispered and stepped backward.

In another moment, he and his nieces vanished into the blustery winter night.

### CHAPTER 4

She climbed the stairs and went to her bedroom, deriding herself for her naiveté. She let Dora's maid help her out of her dinner gown and dismissed her. Like a sleepwalker, she went into her dressing room and picked at the bodice of the ball gown she'd wear tomorrow night. Four years old, the dress was still pretty. Of French gauze over a pink silk slip, the gown fit her only because she'd sewn gussets into the side seams to accommodate her larger bosom. Given her meager circumstances, enlarging the dress had been the only option for her if she wished to attend Dora and Barr's ball. Before Gabe's arrival, she hadn't minded that she would be so attired. But now, she would not attract him. Others would. Could.

She was foolish to want him. Silly to think that now when he'd made his fortune and the earldom had also come to him that he could want her. His affectionate nature was an offering he'd always given her. His embraces, his delicious kisses he had always conferred upon her in sequestered spaces. Never in open regard. She understood why. The restrictions he lived with had painted him into the margins of his family's and his social class's order. Years ago he had no titles or earnings—and by all, was considered to have no prospects. He was a spare's spare. One of the forgotten men of a family whose nobility should have granted him more than the honor of bearing their presumably respectable name. He had been unfairly and damnably discounted.

While she, too, was held in as little regard. A female of no consequence. Without desires of her own or ambitions to improve her station, save to be anything more than some man's wife, mate, in charge of his house, his servants and hopefully his children. She had a dowry then. At ten thousand pounds, it was a goodly sum that mere whispers of its size, set bachelors aquiver with expectations of financial

liquidity. A few even condescended to speak of acquiring her for her comeliness or even her intelligence. Talbot, the one man whose proposal had met with praise by her father, had proudly offered her his dead mother's dower house. "To live in, year-round," he had notified her the day her father approved his offer. "My mistress prefers the manor house."

That woman was now spending Alyssa's eight thousand. For many years, she did curse the woman's very name. Alyssa had given up her anger the day her father died. She decided that no longer would she allow resentment of Talbot and his doxy to destroy the serenity of her days.

Tomorrow she would welcome Dora's choice of governess for Reggie and Thomas. Tomorrow night she would enjoy the musical ensemble Dora and Barr had hired to play at the ball. She would dance. Once with Barr. She always did at their parties. Perhaps once with Gabe.

Then the day after Christmas she would go home to her comfortable cottage four miles away and prepare for the new year. In it, she promised herself to open her bookstore and look into offering her books in a lending library. Perhaps teach in the village church school to earn extra money.

Her life was rich. She had promised herself that. And she would make it so.

December 23, 1818

Darby Priory

The next afternoon, as Rosalind and Mary rose from the dining room table, so did Gabe. The girls were agog to be invited to Priory to celebrate the Barringtons' annual Christmas ball with their friends, Reginald and Thomas. Because the dancing would continue to the wee hours, the girls would spend the night. As Gabe, too, had been

invited.

He had prepared in London for this Christmas after Barr's invitation. Though at that point, he had not met his two charges since they'd been toddlers, he wished to give them gifts to mark the occasion of their new relationship. Their mother had died three years ago. Their father, his cousin, had not been a generous man and Gabe feared what the girls might have learned from him about the nature of men and family affection. Whatever calibre his cousin's displays of affection had been toward his daughters, Gabe knew the problems his own sire's indifference to him had generated. He wished not to emulate the man.

As the girls' legal guardian, he would be responsible for them until their marriages or their twenty-fifth birthdays. He wanted to endear himself to them and mark a new life for them and himself. He'd brought to England with him for each of them a fine porcelain doll from his own supplier, an expert craftsman in Naples.

For the adults, he had other gifts he'd claimed from his storage factory near the East India Docks. For Dora, three yards of Morone peony red silk from Lucca. Barr was to have the finest cheroots from his tobacconist supplier in Amsterdam. A gift for Alyssa had been more difficult to select. He did not wish to be forward or lacking in etiquette, and so he could not give too personal an item. Not creamed soap from his man in Karlsruhe or scent from his perfumer in Grasse. Not an item too impersonal such as the royal purple skeins of wool from a mill in Edinburgh. Nor the much-too-suggestive four-foot-length of ivory Chantilly lace from his friend north of Paris.

On a whim to wrap up all of them and give everything to her, he found himself sitting in what had become his favorite chair in the old walnut-paneled library. Drumming his fingers on the arm of the leather chair, he sipped a good Armagnac from his friend in Bordeaux and pondered what to give the woman he loved for Christmas. Here amid the items that infused his lonely childhood with those who had become his erstwhile champions, kings and rogues, knights and mythical heroes who fought

against fierce odds, he had valued courage. He had learned to savor the sport of a strong challenge and to demand of himself the subtle art of the shrewd victory.

At once he was on his feet. Here from this shelf, he picked Julius Caesar. There and there and there were multiple copies of Aristophanes' plays. And where...? Where was the one that would make her laugh and cry and throw her arms around him? At least one copy of the poor girl who attracts a prince at his ball had been here. He remembered a very old tattered copy of Cendrillon that the girls' mother enjoyed. It had to be here still. The frayed red leather, a collection of...yes! The Frenchman Charles Perrault's perfect little tales.

He'd wrap them all up in swaths of the Pomona green silk from Lyon. To bloody hell with etiquette. He'd give her all! Give her anything. Everything. If only she might give him the one thing he'd never thought to desire. Never before had he had the right to ask to possess.

Her very self.

### CHAPTER 5

Alyssa had not attended Dora's and Barr's Christmas balls for the past three years. Unwilling to appear in public after Lord Talbot had decided not to marry her, Dora had constantly urged her to attend. Insisted even. Only last year had she given in. Tonight she had a different challenge. Earlier in the evening, she had taken Gabe's hand in a set of country dances and now she had to stand by and appear unfazed by him dancing with every sweet thing in the shire.

"I've never been to such a ball." The new governess whom Dora had hired today confided in Alyssa. "I do feel out of place."

The young woman had appeared after noon when the family coachman had brought her from the village carriage inn. Dora had interviewed her and hired her, then insisted she attend tonight's gala.

"Please enjoy the evening, Miss Harlan. Lady Barrington means only to welcome you to the house and the neighbors. Everyone here knows Lady Barrington's Christmas parties include all her staff who come for as long as they wish. Most stay for a few minutes, then return below stairs."

"I have no ambitions to capture a beau here." She cast a covetous glance at Gabe, belying her intentions. "I want only to work for a good and proper family."

Alyssa smiled at her, understanding how Gabe could appeal to her, so well turned out was he in formal black coat and trousers with blinding white stock. "You will have a very happy family to work with here at Lord and Lady Barrington's."



Miss Harlan licked her lips and tore her gaze from Gabe as he ended the latest dance and took his partner to her parents. “I wonder how often Lord Darby visits here.”

Alyssa’s heart squeezed in want. “Often, I would wager. He is very good friends with your employers.”

“Do you visit often?”

Was Miss Harlan gauging Alyssa as her competition?

“Not in the future, no.” I cannot bear the torture of watching him dance with another, let alone watching how other women will pursue him. “I have plans to open my own shop. That will keep me quite busy.”

“How lovely that you can find means to do that,” Miss Harlan said with envy and a bright twinkle in her pretty blue eyes. “What kind of shop?”

“Books,” said Gabe who suddenly appeared at their side and had eyes only for Alyssa. “Isn’t that right, Miss Waring?”

“Indeed. A wonderful little place where patrons will find Gulliver and Pamela and Childe Harold .” She had to keep reminding herself of her goals when he stood so close and remained so very far out of her reach.

“A lending library too,” he added for the governess’s sake. “But that is for the future. For now, Miss Waring, come dance with me.”

She considered his hand out before her. A second dance with him would inspire tongues to wag. The daring Miss Waring who’d once been found in a butler’s wine cellar kissing the very man who now stood before her. “Of course,” she said because she could never refuse the chance to be held in his arms. “A second time they will

have to accept.”

“Who are ‘they’,” he asked with a grin on his face as he led her out, “to deny us the pleasure of each other’s company? Unimportant.”

She took to the chalked floor like one in a trance. This would be the last time she could stand beside him and bow. The last time he’d put his hand to hers, lead her around the square, and put the flat of his hands to hers as he smiled at her. Never again would she sashay down a column of dancers and meet him, face to face, and admire the breadth of his shoulders and the grace of his form. No more would she call him the fellow she had first loved when she was eighteen and he had caught her hand and hid with her in a broom closet to escape one persistent beau. Nor was he the one who had rescued her from a life of subservience to a self-righteous cad by running with her to the butler’s wine cellar and showing her that his kisses were more intoxicating than any other man’s could ever be.

As the music died and Gabe took her toward Dora and Miss Harlan, Alyssa could not bear the despair that welled in her chest.

“Excuse me please,” she choked out to them. “I feel unwell. Good night to all of you.” And she turned away, skirts high, to escape the lure of the man she could never claim for her own.

She made the second landing of the stairs on her way to the next floor when he caught her by the wrist. “Why do you leave?”

She flinched away from his grasp, yanked her skirts higher and continued her climb. “I’m tired.”

“How could you be?” He followed, his long legs eating up the steps two at a time to her one.

“Go back.” She stopped for a moment to face him. “I’m coming down with some malady you do not want to catch.” Then she raced onward.

“What is it?” He caught her at the top of the floor and turned her to him, back to the wall. “Nerves?”

“Don’t be silly.” She pushed him away and tried to go round him.

He cut her off. “Don’t want to watch the ton gossip about us together?”

“Absurd.” She tried to go the other way round him.

“Exactly my thought.” He let her go.

But she’d gone only a step before he circled his arm around her waist and pulled her backward. Then in a thrice, he had some door open, slammed closed, and they were in darkness. With the smell of soap and starch drifting up to her nostrils complemented by the fragrance of his sandalwood and lime cologne, she noted she could not see him. A good thing. But oh, my. She could smell him and...

When he cupped her face and put his lips to hers, she could taste him and savor him and swoon in the aromas and textures of his embrace.

“You mustn’t kiss me,” she objected even as he took her mouth between his chuckles.

“Of course, I must. You are the woman who keeps escaping my grasp.” He pecked at her lips. “I won’t have it any longer.”

“I won’t, either,” she said as she wrapped her arms around his broad, sleek wool-clad shoulders and kissed him back at her leisure. After all, no one was here to see them or hear them. To badger them or banish them. She could, with impunity, kiss him all she

liked, for one last luscious time.

“I want you to marry me,” he said with that mellifluous baritone that soothed her soul and lit her heart on fire.

“Oh, Gabe. They’d never allow it.” She ran her fingers up through the satin waves of his hair. She’d fantasized about doing that, touching him so, and here in the dark, where no one would ever know, she could enjoy herself.

“They have never done anything for me. Nor for you, either. They do not matter, my darling. Only you and I. And I ask you to marry me. Soon. Will you?”

“My...shop. I must have it.” Wonderful, Al. The man wants a wife. You want a shop.

“Have one everywhere.”

“What?”

“Have a shop. Have one in Ripon. One in York. London. Rome! Wherever you are, there am I and there should be your book shop.”

In the windowless room, her heart picked up a lively tempo. But she frowned at him.

“You are quite mad, you know.”

“For you. Yes.” He gave a bright laugh. In the close confines of wherever the hell they were, his joy filled the tiny space and jolted her awareness. “I am.”

“And you want to marry me?” Could that be true?

“I do. I want to be the one who kisses you at every Christmas, every birthday, every harvest dance, for all my days to come. I have always wanted you. For years and

years. Since first we found ourselves surrounded by a collection of brooms.”

“Hmmm.” She liked this conversation. The darkness. And his sentiments.

“And later,” he said and nuzzled her neck, his kisses little tickles along her skin, “when we inhaled an angel’s share and found ourselves kissing in the butler’s cellar. I loved you more then. But I loved you most the next day when you did not marry that foolish man. I loved you every day since then and today, I love you most of all.”

He lifted her chin and pushed tendrils of her hair around her ears. His lips nibbled along hers. “I love you, my darling. And I think you love me, too. So it is only right you marry me and let me love you forever. Don’t you think, hmmm?” He took her mouth in a kiss that robbed her of breath and gave her hope. “What do you say?”

“Oh, Gabe. I do love you!”

“That is the woman I adore!” he crowed. “Shall we go tell them?”

“No!”

“No?”

She snuggled up to his warm muscular goodness, and held him tight. “First, I want more kisses.”

“Thank god.” He gave her one long lingering example.

She tore her lips from his. “But I do have one question.”

“What?” He huffed, sounding impatient and miffed.

“Where are we?”

He was silent. Finally, he ventured, “Do you care?”

“Actually, yes, I do. I’d like to tell our children that brooms and wine and...whatever this is, have something wonderful in common.”

“I see. Sounds logical. Do you wish me to open the door and find candles?”

She ran her hands up his throat to frame his marvelous jaw and said, “No. Not just yet.”

Long minutes later, after he helped her rearrange her bodice and she helped him do some justice to his cravat, they emerged. Gabe found a candle in the hall and lit up the room. Shelves floor to ceiling were filled with milled soaps and bundles of dried lavender, ironed sheets, towels and cotton furniture drapes.

They gazed at each other and chuckled, “The linen closet.”

### EPILOGUE

December 24, 1819

London

A lyssa stared down at the latest shipment of books from Athens in the crate at her feet. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry or haul them out to the alley and burn them. "How many people in London want to read Plato in the original , Lucy?"

Her assistant winced, crossing her arms and shaking her head at the wooden box that consumed so many square feet of space in the shop's tiny storage room. "Last year, we had four."

"So we definitely cannot find twenty-six more," Al said and winced at the efforts of her husband to keep her shop filled with the odd, the unique and the definitely unloved tomes of authors of centuries past.

"My lady, I like your husband, I do. The earl is a good-hearted man. But we still have not sold last year's nine copies of Cicero's Orations, w hich the earl recommended to his friends."

"They'd rather read their own illustrious words rather than a dead Roman's."

The living man of whom they both spoke pushed aside the purple velvet curtain that separated The Twig Bookshop from its storage room and feigned disaster at overhearing their words. "I know my friends consider themselves so clever that all

their geese are swans. Good afternoon, my darling,” the tenth Earl of Darby kissed his wife on the cheek. “Hello, Lucy.”

“Swans!?” Miss Lucy Malvern , who was the Baron Greyhurst’s third daughter and a bluestocking who read Greek better than many a Cambridge don, pushed her spectacles up her nose. “My lord, I read your friends’ speeches in the Times daily and I submit they cannot even speak the King’s good English!”

Al hugged her husband as he swept an arm around her waist. “We are taking your lovely offerings and casting aspersions on them.”

“Meaning you cannot sell them.” Gabe sighed and shook his head, unfazed by their dismay. “Ah, well! We can hope for a new generation to study hard and do them proud.”

Al eyed him. “While we wait years for that to happen, my dear, they clutter up this room. I shall have to offer them up at a reduced price.”

“Why not teach a class, offer them up for free?”

Al caught Lucy’s eye and they turned to stare at him.

“ What ?” he said and threw up his hands. “If you can’t sell them, give them away!”

Al lifted her chin and nodded. “Why not?”

“Why?” Lucy persisted and shook her head at Gabe. “Your friends won’t come.”

“They can’t be saved, Lucy. Why try? Make the offer to young boys...” Gabe caught Lucy’s evil eye on that statement, “and young girls, who want to put a feather in their caps.”



“And offer the class for a fee,” said Al. “A fine idea.”

“And just who teaches this class?” Lucy asked with her hands on her hips.

Al and her husband stared back at her.

“I think you are both mad.”

The shop bell over the front door ting-a-linged and Lucy huffed and left to serve their customer.

Gabe pressed a lingering kiss to Alyssa’s lips. “That’s better. I’ve gone too long without the taste of you.”

She pressed the flat of her hand to his greatcoat and chuckled. “The last was only hours ago.”

“A man needs his sustenance.” He winked at her.

“So does a woman.” She confessed to the man whose very breath charmed her. “Did you collect your gift?”

He’d been secretive about a few Christmas presents he’d been collecting while they were in town this month. “I did.”

She patted his shoulders and ribs, his arms and drew him near her again. “You have nothing on you, sir. Where is it? What is it?”

He tortured her like this each Christmas. The first holiday they were married to celebrate nearly one complete year of wedded bliss, he’d had the old family parure of diamonds and sapphires reset for her. Six months before she had miscarried their first babe and he wanted to proclaim that she was and would remain the only woman he

would ever love. The second Christmas, for the birth of their first child, their daughter Rose, one month before, he'd imported from southern France cuttings of a new breed of white roses. Last year, to commemorate the birth of their second girl Lily, he'd brought from Spain young plants of climbing purple lilies. This year, she'd not become pregnant...and the lack left her fearful she might no longer be capable. She was not yet too old. And her failure to conceive was not because they were less in love. No indeed, they were as joyfully—as scandalously—intimate as they'd been from the day they'd married.

He wiggled his brows. "I have it in the carriage."

"You wouldn't bring it in here to show me?" She arched a wicked brow. They both joked that their two daughters had been conceived in this tiny storage room amid the copious words—usually unsalable—of Caesar, Aristotle and the like.

"I want you to see it. Only you."

His sweet regard brought tears to her eyes. "Oh, my darling husband," she whispered and cupped his jaw. "Before we leave for home, I must give you your Christmas gift."

She'd suspected for weeks now that she might be able to say this to him. To give him the present he always valued above all else she ever purchased for him.

He crushed her close. "I do love you in tiny rooms, my sweetheart. They bring out the minx in you."

"And the mother."

"Yes," he said and kissed her with the fervor that she knew would lead them both straight to a fabulous night in their bed. "Again."

“You knew!” She laughed and threw her head back in glee.

He swept one hand against the side of one breast, then slid it down to her thickening waist and on to squeeze her derriere. “How could I not? I know your body as well as mine.”

“What do you have in the carriage? Herbs? Cacti? A jungle?”

“Oh, ye of harsh attitude. Let’s get your coat, madam, say adieu to your truculent assistant and get in our carriage. Our children await!”

“And does your surprise gift,” she said as she did as he requested, closed the front door and stepped through the snow up into their town coach.

“Ohhh,” she breathed as she saw in the seat opposite the marvelous creation that he’d had carved by the master carpenter in the shop two doors down. “He’s so lovely. Bright. And his red saddle is so grand. Fit for two girls to ride together. Or perhaps three.”

“Three. I told Mister Winslow I wanted the seat big enough that children might share it or grow into it as they did.”

She sat, her husband’s arm around her shoulders, admiring the handiwork of the carpenter and the thoughtfulness of the darling man she’d married. “You know, I think we should name him.”

“Caesar?”

She snickered and tickled her husband’s side.

“I thought we’d name him something more in keeping with our love affair.”

“Such as?”

“Charm.”

She wrinkled her brow at his smiling face. “Because?”

“Third time is a.”

The following Christmas, when he came to the Twig to fetch her home two days before Christmas, he had in the carriage another rocking horse, a twin to Charm. Well-loved as that horse was, the wooden creature was often argued over and cried upon as well as vigorously—frantically!—rocked.

“What would you name this one?” she teased him as she put her hand over her rounded form, soon to be their fourth child. Perhaps a fourth daughter or a first son, they would learn in April.

“Fourth.”

“Ah. As in Sally?”

“Exactly.”

April tenth, Sally was baptised as Sebastian.

THE END