



The Duke (Daughters of Dishonour #2)

Author: *Ava Bond*

Category: Historical

Description: Miss Elsie Keating is the daughter of a vicar and a fallen woman, who harbours her own dark secret.

Nonetheless she bravely sets out to a new county, to alert the heir to a dukedom that he must come to Town, to fulfil his obligations to his family. She expects an elderly man who will be eager to accept his responsibilities, but Kit defies all of her expectations.

Kit Fitzsimmons is the heir to a cursed title, and believes no good can come from leaving Cornwall.

Having witnessed his familys bedevilment firsthand, the starchy gentleman is loath to accept his new nobility and the charming young lady who arrives unexpectedly on his estate, demanding he do as she says. The pair clash immediately, uncomfortable with the mutual attraction they feel.

Despite their class division and utter opposition of temperament, can these two learn to trust each other and escape their familial curses to find happiness?

Total Pages (Source): 24

CHAPTER 1

Mayfair, London, March 1813.

Elsbeth Keating, or Elsie to her friends and family, had reached London. The bright sparkling centre of the society. It was soon to be the start of the Season—the height of fashion for the whole world, the ton, the home of grand masquerades, and all things elegant. She had been a romantic for all her twenty-four years, so Elsie was excited about the possibilities of balls, an opportunity to sway on the dance floor to a melodic piece of music, whilst a handsome lord whispered sweet nothings to her. And failing that, at least she would be able to see some of the beautiful dresses the ladies of the beau monde wore.

One look at her older sister, Margot, told Elsie that this was not why they had come to London. But it was hard to remember such things when the carriage they were in rattled noisily past tall townhouses, their glass windows sparkling in the lights of the carriage, untold parties hidden away in them. Elsie felt butterflies bubble up inside her.

“It will be a great change from Berwick-upon-Tweed,” Elsie said. This was an understatement as nothing could be more different from journeying to a duke’s house, witnessing some of the Season in such contrast to their quiet, seaside hometown of Berwick-upon-Tweed, where they’d left their parents and younger brother, William.

“Indeed.” Margot sucked in her breath. She looked tired, and as much as she tried to hide it, Elsie could tell her sister was worried. This journey was doubly taxing for her—it had been revealed via letter that Vicar Arthur Keating, the man who had

raised Margot, was not her father. In fact, Margot's real father was Algernon Fitzsimmons, Duke of Ashmore. The duke had written, commanding Margot's presence in London, and Margot had arranged to go with Elsie as her enthusiastic companion. To Elsie's mind, Margot was her sister, regardless of who her father might be, and nothing would change that. It might explain why Margot was a good nine inches taller than Elsie's diminutive build. Otherwise, they both had brown hair, and a similar colouring, although occasionally Elsie resented Margot's green eyes compared to her own boring brown.

This was to be a great adventure, anything to get away from the predictability of home, arguing with their annoying younger brother, or worse, the possibility of being sent off to Edinburgh to stay with Grandmother Keating. As well as being a romantic, Elsie had an audacious streak, and to her mind, London was the perfect place. Margot had decided that they were destined for a spinster's existence. Her sister was set on that future for them, although why Elsie's pretty, clever, and sharp sibling wanted to limit her life so much was daft. As much as she fought against the idea, Elsie feared, deep down inside her, this would be her fate too.

"I think we're nearly there," Margot said. She too had been tracking the changing buildings and then looked across at Elsie, the nerves, the concern, and fear visible.

All Elsie wanted to do was reach forward and tell her sister that, if the old duke wasn't kind or decent and didn't honour Margot as much as he should, then Elsie would be happy to kick His Grace in the shins. Regardless of whether she would be thrown in the stocks or tower. It would be worth it.

On their arrival at Bolton Street, Elsie let Margot take the lead—it made her sister feel in control. Besides, Elsie reminded herself, she was there as support and could only attack the old duke if he was truly mean to Margot. But there was no sign of such brutality upon being ushered inside the smart townhouse, of which the style, to Elsie's eyes, was stunning. The home had everything—luxurious carpets, vibrantly

coloured wallpapers and richly appointed wooden furniture in every room. A sudden bolt of anxiety twisted through Elsie, a selfish one, that Margot would love this world more than the vicarage they had been raised in and leave her behind to become a ton - ish lady.

There seemed to be some surprise amongst the duke's household at Elsie's presence. What if they sent her away?

On entering the duke's study, Elsie was struck by how much older the duke looked. Ill and drained despite only being in his fifties, he looked at least ten years older, and dread seemed etched on his face. Given Margot's height, he wasn't very tall. His eyes darted between the two of them, and he frowned, seeming to be caught between which one he should be looking at, before settling on Margot.

During the following interlude, Elsie tried to stay as quiet as she could, leaving Margot to confront the man who was her father. The duke seemed rather caught on discussing "his" Julia—which was what he kept calling their mother despite Margot's request to refer to their mother as Mrs. Keating. To Elsie's mind, it was clear the duke still held a candle for their mother.

The interlude was a brief one, but they were informed there was the promise of an inheritance for Margot.

"I will tell you everything when I know you a little better." The duke's tone was final. "Dinner will be at eight o'clock. Tomorrow I will have my papers in order. You are dismissed."

Margot got to her feet. She could see her sister was done with the discussion, and when they slipped out of the study, Margot squeezed her hand.

There was a servant waiting in the hallway, who Elsie recognised as the butler. The

man said, “This way to your chambers.” Elsie felt another strange pulse of worry, never having the privilege of her own bedroom before. She had always shared with Margot, for all their lives, both at the vicarage and when they had gone to Edinburgh.

Margot gave her an encouraging smile. “We will meet for dinner.”

Elsie was led to her chamber, and once inside threw herself down on the bed, without even bothering to remove her boots, closed her eyes and willed away her troubles.

To her mind dinner was a dull affair, with the duke asking a few sparse questions before launching into his plans for Margot. She would receive a Season. Elsie sat up straighter, happy at the idea of what her sister might enjoy. It would be lovely if Margot might find someone of interest to her. Of all the men they’d seen in Edinburgh, not one had been right. For all her severe properness, Margot deserved some fun, and perhaps the duke was going to deliver on some of his parental responsibilities.

“Elsie needs to have one too,” Margot said. “If I am to be escorted by your chaperone and have these things, as well as posing as your goddaughter, then Elsie should have the same.”

It was a touching moment, and Elsie was about to refuse, but then the duke nodded, and Margot shot Elsie a happy look. Excitement danced through Elsie, and this agreement seemed to symbolise the end of the meal because the duke escorted them through the house, towards the stairs.

As they walked in silence, there came the sound of a raucous noise from a neighbour’s party.

Ashmore said distastefully, “Oh that is Langley, just another one of his parties. You had best avoid him when you’re out and about. He’s got a frightful reputation as one

of the fastest young men in Town.” With that, the duke waved them upstairs. Elsie wondered how on earth he could be so dismissive of such a scandalously interesting person.

Nonetheless, she returned to her bedroom where she fell into a dreamless sleep, but this was interrupted when screams woke her. Stumbling from her chamber, Elsie staggered down the staircase towards what sounded like her sister shouting, horror beating through her at what might greet her.

It was not a sight she could have ever imagined: the duke, a man she had barely met, lay sprawled out on the carpet, the butler propping him up.

Hurrying over, Elsie saw the injury, the pooling blood, and her eyes lifted to meet the butler’s. “Has a doctor been sent for?” Elsie’s voice was faint, and she slowly looked down at His Grace. The man was wan, his eyes frantic, and Elsie took his hand.

“My sister?—”

“She will find him,” the duke said, and when Elsie looked up, it was to see the butler nodding. Margot had gone after the attacker? Was she mad? Elsie tried to pull away, but the duke’s grip was tight. “Look after her. She is so like her mother. Tell her—tell her—I’m sorry for what I did to her.”

That look of his would stay in her mind for hours, and Elsie hoped her mother would not mind her saying, “I forgive you.” She squeezed his hand.

His gaze softened, and Elsie watched in distress as he slipped away from her before the doctor arrived. When the physician was present, voices echoed and bounced around her until Elsie could hardly think straight. She had never seen anyone die before, and when his unresisting hand was pulled from hers, Elsie slipped quietly away and found an armchair to be alone in. Tears burnt at the back of her throat, but

she stayed where she was, eaten alive with worry for Margot.

When her older sister returned, she was immediately ushered away to deal with everything, and it was not until Margot sought her out that Elsie felt a moment of solace. That was when the tears came.

The next day was a blur of activity to Elsie, much of which made little sense to her until she realised she was in the duke's study listening to her sister and His Grace's solicitor discussing the next best course of action—which apparently involved Elsie going to Cornwall on the mission of retrieving the duke's heir.

Hardly listening to the conversation between the two, Elsie's sadness, her shock at the death, and all those hopeful dreams of a fine Season in Town vanished, to be replaced with the miserable task of finding what sounded like an elderly cousin in the depths of Cornwall.

“This journey would be greatly beneficial to us all.” Margot's green eyes bored into Elsie. When she looked at the lawyer, Mr. Holt gave Elsie a rather dismissive shake of his head, clearly doubtful that she should go.

Mr. Holt's doubts were Elsie's motivator. “Give me the papers, and I will leave on the morrow. After all, I can be trusted to keep the matter quiet,” Elsie said, drawing herself up to her full height of five feet and one inch. She looked down at the pages the solicitor handed her, and the address—Tintagel Manor. It sounded ominous, and she thought it would probably have at least one leak, and perhaps several ghosts. If anything sounded as if it belonged in a gothic novel, surely it was Tintagel Manor?

Elsie slipped from the room with the task of repacking her bags and the promise from her sister of exchanging correspondence whilst she was away. To Elsie's mind, this seemed unlikely. After all, she would be arriving in Cornwall to almost immediately turn back around with the errant heir. She barely had time to meet Mrs. Bowley, her

sister's chaperone for the Season, before the duke's carriage was prepared, and the following morning, Elsie found herself making slow progress towards the vehicle.

Pushing her feelings aside, Elsie waved out of the window to her sister, before turning to look at the maid who'd been sent as her companion, Samson.

"I ain't never left London, miss," Samson said rather mournfully, her youthful face making Elsie feel suddenly old.

"Don't worry," Elsie replied as the carriage rattled them through London and out towards the wilds of Cornwall. "I am sure it will be quite fascinating."

The two journeys could not have been more different. The one from the north to London had been filled with nervous excitement. This journey towards the manor house and the new heir, without her sister, felt fraught with danger. As much as she clung to the knowledge that the private carriage was far superior to the public, she was still exhausted, and poor little Samson cried at night, which did not help matters. All in all, they made a rather sad pair as they journeyed down towards Tintagel Manor.

On leaving Exeter, there was a delay with the carriage, and when they eventually set off, thick grey clouds had flocked in, and all too soon heavy drops of rain were pelting their carriage. Having decided that this journey was simply going to be difficult, Elsie set about attempting to cheer Samson up. It did little good. Her maid remained nervous and sullen. After a little while even Elsie fell silent.

"What's that noise?" Samson's question jerked Elsie out of her reverie. At first, given Samson's anxious character, Elsie assumed that it was probably nothing more than the wind. As she listened to the whirling sound of rain, the beating noise of the storm against the side of the carriage walls, and the horses' whinnying, she knew there was something else mixed in there too.

Leaning forward in her squab seat, she pushed the shutter open to better see outside. At least, that had been her plan, but in truth, it was hard to see. The thick wall of oppressive rain made the darkened outside look as if it were the gloomiest and drabest setting that Elsie had ever seen. Having been raised so close to the Scottish border, Elsie had assumed nothing would compete with the bleakness of Scotland—she was learning something new looking onto the moors of Cornwall.

“There it is again,” Samson said. “It sounds like a wolf. Are there wolves down here?”

Elsie stopped herself from sighing and said, “The last wolf died in England over a hundred years ago.”

“Then what’s that sound?” Samson was right. There was a whiny noise, which blended with what sounded rather like a baby crying.

Glancing outside the window again, Elsie thought she saw some movement. Someone or something was trapped out there. It was perhaps one hundred and fifty feet from her, close to an outcrop of trees and what appeared to be a rock formation—a darting flash of white. Elsie was sure she’d seen it even if it was just for a second. So, she pounded on the roof of the carriage and was pleased when the vehicle drew to a halt.

“What are you doing?”

“I think there’s a creature in danger out there,” Elsie said. “I mean to help.”

Samson made a half-hearted snatch at Elsie, which Elsie ignored as she scrambled out of the carriage. It was hard to move and talk, but she made her intentions clear to the driver despite not fully understanding his yelled response. She set off, away from the relative safety. The bracken caught at her dress, and the wind whipped against her face, half blinding her and slowing her progress down. Beneath her feet, the ground

was made up of dense moss, wet mud, and slippery grasses. Stubbornly, Elsie continued. She had not made a difference to the poor dead duke, but now she would.

The brambles and thorns caught at her, pulling at her old travelling dress, the bog catching at her stride. At least she could now see with utter certainty there was an animal there on the rock. It was a dog, its wet fur tangled in the thorns. The animal's crying was louder and more desperate.

"I'm coming," Elsie muttered as she hurried over the wet rocks towards him, a jarring pain shooting up from her ankle as she felt her foot twist beneath her. If anything, the rain seemed to increase its tempo in an attempt to stop her progress.

On reaching the dog, she found him to be damp and slippery. It was too dark to make out his breed. Elsie set about trying to free him from the thorns. The animal was far too excited, jumping and licking at her face in gratitude despite still being trapped.

"Calm," she yelled into the wind, but the dog took no notice. Desperately, Elsie searched around the animal's body, finally pulling his little body free. Out of the brambles, the dog leapt on her, causing Elsie to stumble backwards, landing painfully against the wet stones.

Her anguished cry echoed before it, too, was snatched up by the wind.

"What the hell do you think you are doing?" A harsh masculine voice cut into Elsie's attempts to stand up. For a moment, she thought it had to be the driver, but when she looked up, staring through the heavy rain, she could make out the dark shape of a man on a huge horse. His face was obscured, so all Elsie could see was his imposing black outline against the stormy background as his furious question echoed around her.

CHAPTER 2

There were few things in life that brought Christopher Fitzsimmons joy anymore. No, his life was chiefly one of anxiety, occasional physical pain, and regret. One small pleasure that remained was riding across the Cornish moors. But this was not why he was out in the storm. He had been meeting with his steward and misjudged the weather on the return journey.

He would admit that perhaps this ride back had been a way of tempting fate—a means of seeking out danger. Kit liked to feel as if he were daring the world to see what else it could do to him.

But this thunderstorm was setting in on him, with a gusto that caused Kit to kick his heels in his mount with more rigour, a muttered curse uttered under his breath. He needed to reach the relative safety of Tintagel Manor. It was too dangerous to stay out here for long, and he did not want his little sister Flora to have to bury him too.

He was angry. Not solely because of the weather, although he acknowledged it simply added to the burning emotion churning inside him with an unpleasant, barely contained fury.

The pathway back towards the manor was slippery, and Kit's vision was blurred by thick sweeping walls of rain and the occasional sticky leaf that would fly up and hit him in the face. This meant he could not race back in his normal way.

“Whoa,” he called out to his mount, forcing the horse into a more sedate pace. Which was just as well since when he rounded a corner, he found a carriage blocking his

return to the manor, and two rather wet, miserable, and slightly hysterical servants, both yelling at each other.

It took several moments to understand what they were shouting about, and where they were headed, and even longer to understand what the maid was telling him, about the sole female who'd headed off into the bleak stretch of moorland.

"She's out there," the girl shouted. He briefly caught her London accent before the wind claimed it. She was clinging to the edge of the carriage door, her free hand pointing behind Kit and out onto the moors.

Glancing over his shoulder, Kit could make out the small shape of a woman, huddled down close to an outcrop of rocks and trees. God knew what the madwoman was doing. Perhaps the carriage had dropped something she deemed valuable, and the passenger had gone after it.

"Get back inside," Kit ordered, before wheeling his horse around and heading out towards the rogue woman. Figuring it was easier for him to get over to the woman than the carriage could. Heavy wind and rain beat down onto his face as his resentment swelled alongside his fear. Off from the beaten track, the terrain was uneven and prone to wet stones, uneven surfaces, and the easy risk that she would fall and disappear amongst the brambles forever.

"What the hell do you think you are doing?" he shouted his question as soon as he was close enough to be heard, although he could barely make out a thing about her. Besides the fact she was sprawled on the ground. He had assumed she would be an elderly lady, the sort who needed a young maid to care for her.

But she wasn't.

Despite the downpour, when the woman righted herself into a sitting position and

turned and looked up at him through a cloud of damp hair, and a dripping hat askew, he could see she was far younger than he expected. Clapsed in her arms was a lively-looking, chocolate-coloured spaniel.

“Lord above.” She gasped, struggling to her feet, the dog wriggling in her arms. With a contemptuous gaze, Kit took in her damp clothes, which clung to her small frame, and the half-hearted attempt she made to push the hair off her face. “The dog was trapped.”

Without consciously realising what he was about, Kit found himself off his horse, twisting the rein around his hand and moving closer to her. “Give me the blasted animal.”

“Is he yours?” She was staring up at him, her question baffling him, a frown puckering her little face. God, he realised she was tiny. For a wild moment, he could almost believe she was part of the fairy kingdom that his sister had loved as a child. The woman before him better resembled one of the fey people. Or rather like a creature from Arthurian legend so popular in these parts. In a temper at such absurdity, he reached for the dog she held, but she clung on to her rescued hound. “He needs looking after.”

“Well, none of us will get to that if we don’t get out of this storm quickly,” Kit snapped. This time, instead of reaching for the dog, he leant down and grabbed her arm, pulling her forward, so that she was sheltered against the frame of his horse, the rain lashing them in a sideways motion now. “Come back to the carriage.”

“I—” her gaze had turned towards the carriage in the distance, and Kit saw much to his disgust that apparently the driver had had enough waiting, or more likely the horses had spooked, because the vehicle had set off at a rattling pace .

“Get on the horse.” Kit moved closer to his steed before grabbing her around the

waist, the squirming dog and the soaking wet clothes all wrapped up in a bundle, and hoisting them onto the saddle. As she spluttered and wriggled there, Kit slotted his foot into the stirrup and climbed up behind her. Hastily, his arms came around the woman's middle as he reached for the rein.

"What are you doing?" Through the half-light, he could see all too clearly the surprise in her eyes. Great, round orbs looked back into his face, alight with confusion as she watched him.

"Hold on to that dog as I won't stop if you drop him," he snapped, feeling her wriggle, but she clasped the hound closer, and at the same time nestled farther into him.

For one brief moment, the movement of her curling up close to him surprised Kit with its intimacy. There was something titillating about the gesture even in the midst of this downpour, although he was sure it was naively intended. Where did that strange idea come from? With a shake of his head, he spurred his horse onwards, after the retreating carriage and towards his manor.

There had at one time been a welcoming appeal to Tintagel Manor and the memories it invoked. In the last four months, this had faded and what remained, was the cold, dreaded aspects of a lonely, far-flung old house, past its prime, its structure old, dated, and better suited to the fourteen hundreds when it was built. Against the raging storm and pounding wind, the faint lights scattered across five or so of the windows looked close to giving up hope of salvation. The stone construction seemingly eager to simply sink into the ground, rather than welcome Kit or his soggy collection of unwanted guests.

"Slow there." He stopped his horse and scrambled off his seat, away from the confusing feel of the young woman. The thirty minutes of accidentally holding her had not provided any further clarity, nor had it reduced his anger in the slightest. And

worse to his mind, the nagging, pleasing sensation of titillation had grown and festered every time she'd shifted. It had been far too long since he'd bedded a woman.

From the left-hand side of the outbuildings emerged several servants, asking worried questions, clasp up the reins and leading the carriage into the shelter. Kit spotted Mrs. Clarke, his housekeeper, and his butler, Peterson, approaching the unwelcome guests.

Kit descended from his horse and headed for the comforts of his home. However once inside, he found he had been followed by the young person and her wet dog.

In the shelter of the hallway, she yanked off her ruined black hat, and finally lowered her hound to the floor. In the light of the dozing fire, Kit could make out a little more of the young woman. She was slim, small, and her hair appeared to be black, although that might have been because it was so wet. As he had suspected, her face was fairy-like with curious eyes that tilted at the edges, a small, pointed nose, a rosebud pout of a mouth, and what looked like it might be tiny freckles that danced over her cheeks. She was exquisite, a pocket Venus as the expression went.

In disgust at his own animal interest, Kit moved away from her, drawing closer to the fire, and pulling off his great coat and throwing it over the nearest stag head to dry. His bad arm was sore, made worse by the ride in the rain, especially since he had the weight of both her and the dog held tight against him for the ride, and he felt the muscle stretch awkwardly as he walked.

Unabashed, the woman followed after him, the dog now at her feet trailing in her wake. "You didn't answer my question, sir."

"What was it?" He hadn't heard her ask a thing, but between the noise of the storm and the sound of the servants, it could have easily been lost outside .

“Where are we?” she asked. Seeing he had removed his coat, she set about loosening her own, tied together with ribbons. “You see we, that is the carriage—I was trying to get to Tintagel Manor.”

“Why would you want to go there?”

“Oh.” She looked rather taken aback by this response as she slowly tried to fold up her damp cape.

“Here, give it here.” Her clothing would hardly dry like that. He snatched the garment out of her hands and hung it over a smaller trophy, where it started to drip. Kit turned back to her, unable to keep the annoyance out of his voice. “No one in their right mind would wish to go to Tintagel Manor. It is not somewhere desirable. You must have heard the rumours about the place?” Kit shifted away as the damned rescued dog propped himself up next to the fireplace, enjoying the warmth.

“Well.” She paused as she removed her gloves and then proceeded to try her best to press at the waves of her hair, letting great drops of water land all around her. The pair of them needed towels, Kit thought, and probably a hot bath and warm meal. Which meant he should ring for the house staff, although something was keeping him from going across and pulling the cord.

The strange elfin girl continued to press and play with her hair, and suddenly a vivid image of this woman slipping those damp articles of clothes off her body as she slid into a tub flashed through his mind and he tried his best to immediately forget that idea. But it continued dancing through his mind, making his pained body all the more aware. “You are correct, a good few people seemed sceptical of our desire to travel down here...”

“You’re here with your husband on business?” That would explain the use of the term our .

“Not exactly.” She shivered, and Kit knew he was being a terrible host. “I mean...” She paused, seeming to remember where they were, as well as the false intimacy they had shared on a horse that hadn’t actually meant any sort of real knowledge of each other. “We haven’t been introduced.” She strode closer despite the frown that Kit gave her. “I’m Miss Elspeth Keating.” Then she offered him her hand to shake. “I know this cannot be far from Tintagel Manor, the locals said...” She paused as she looked down at her own hand and then slowly lowered it as Kit hadn’t taken hold of her fingers. “Well, is it close to here? Perhaps you could tell me where?”

Elspeth .

He played that name around on his tongue, wondering where that it had come from. Perhaps Irish, he thought, or maybe Scottish. There was a poetry to it, a Gaelic inflection that embedded in his mind the fact she was definitely part fairy or from some Arthurian legend. It galled him to think that it suited her. Mystical, quaint, and alluring.

Now she was staring at him as if he were quite, quite mad, and Kit realised that he was just looking back at her and hadn’t spoken, but he doubted he wanted to know what business she had with him or Tintagel Manor. Whatever it was, the outcome meant she wouldn’t be leaving, and that would be a problem. It wasn’t safe here, not for anyone, and certainly not for an outsider who had no idea of how merciless this place was.

“No one can have business with Tintagel Manor,” came his gruff reply. He turned away and peeled off his inner coat. If he didn’t have guests, he would remove his wet shirt, but he didn’t think that was appropriate. Could he scare her away? “It’s cursed.”

“Yes, that’s what several of the locals said too.” She gave a strange little laugh, but when he looked back at her, she was staring at him with a serious look. “But I don’t have anything to prove such talk.”

“Yet.”

She wrinkled her brow, considering his sceptical remark. “Life is rarely that exciting. I certainly never saw anything that would justify curses, or such outlandish claims. There are enough bad people in the world to explain away the horrors that happen without getting the mystical involved.”

“You clearly haven’t been in Cornwall for long enough.” Kit’s own voice was ribald with cynicism, but he hoped, despite this, the naïve chit believed him. To his annoyance, Miss Keating looked far from convinced.

He moved to the nearest door, pushed it open, and stepped through to the adjoining library. A grateful wave of warmth greeted him, and he was pleased to see the fire had been lit, and was roaring away, adding heat and a burning golden light to the room. A simple fare set out on the table close to it. This meant he did not need to bother any of the servants.

“Sir, if you could please...” She had followed after him into the library, with her damned wet dog close to her heels. At a second the annoying dog gave a shake and Kit watched as the spaniel sprayed droplets across the carpet.

“Pets should be kept outside.”

“He’s hardly a pet—he’s a rescue. If anything?—”

Kit turned towards her, having reached the sanctuary of the fireplace, but having received no comfort from it. He fixed the intruder with an angry look, to which she gave him an undaunted smile and said, “Can you tell me where Tintagel Manor is? You see, I need to speak to the owner. I do hope it is not far. It is very urgent. One might even say the matter is of life and death.”

“You are not very subtle.” Kit was normally a darn sight more polite. Or he had been at university. At parties. At social events. Now words felt rusty in his throat, and being forced to speak, to talk to this intruder, was not something he desired to continue.

“Well, you’re abrupt, and at risk of being rude,” she replied. “We cannot have everything in life.”

“No indeed.”

“But I will have to know where Tintagel Manor is. The sooner you tell me, the sooner I can be gone from here.” It was clear she would like nothing more than that, to leave him and be gone from this crumbling and ancient site.

Deciding he’d had enough of this silly debate, Kit growled. “Unfortunately, I must inform you that this is, in fact, Tintagel Manor.”

“Oh.” She took a step closer and frowned as she studied him. To his surprise, she said, “No, that won’t do. You’re too young to be Lord Phileas.”

Realisation dawned on Kit that the demanding little madam had presumably been seeking his father. However, since the man was dead, there was very little that could be done to solve that particular issue. In truth, no part of him wished to reveal such details to a stranger. “My age has nothing to do with it. If you are seeking Tintagel Manor and its owner, then that is me.”

“You are Lord Phileas?”

“No,” he finally said. “I am his son. I am in charge here.”

“Oh.” She swayed a little. “And Lord Phileas...”

“Is dead.”

For a moment, a brief one, compassion bloomed in Miss Keating’s eyes, and he saw her hand twitch as if she were about to reach out for him. Then she must have caught a look at his expression because she swallowed and nodded. “I had no idea, my lord.” She bobbed the smallest of curtsies. “This is for you in that case.” She closed the distance between them, drawing up to him, and it struck Kit that she was very slight. In contrast to his own height. He lowered his eyes and saw she was holding out a letter. From the insignia on the envelope, he recognised it as his relative’s, the Duke of Ashmore’s seal.

“His Grace employs women now?” Kit took the letter but did not open it. He had no idea what his uncle might want. The man had not even bothered to attend his own brother’s and sister-in-law’s funeral five months ago, so frankly Kit felt the duke could go hang. He was about to voice this opinion when he saw that sad, soft look on Miss Keating’s face again .

“It is all rather complicated, but I regret to inform you that the Duke is dead. He was...” She trailed off. Clearly, she had more to say, but was suddenly shy or loath to voice too much, which was strange given her previous verbosity. “It will all be detailed in the letter.”

Slowly Kit examined the letter, playing with the edge and pondering whether he should open it. He expected the girl wanted him to show some remorse from his dead uncle, but having never met the man, it was hard to feel too much sadness for the unknown man. From everything his parents had told him of his uncles, who had taken it in turn at being duke, Kit had the impression of idleness, a reckless streak of self-absorption and a casual disregard for the feelings of their female employees, who were regularly taken advantage of. It had not warmed him to his illustrious and titled side of the family. As the son of the fifth son, Kit might be noble, but he was very distantly connected. There had never been any expectation that the main branch of the

family would ever reach out to him, or even remember his existence. His uncle had been expected to marry and beget heirs, and kept away from Kit accordingly. None of which, of course, explained this woman's presence in the library or why she had been sent to the wilds of Cornwall to seek him out.

Come on you fool , the idea danced through his head suddenly clear . She had to be the old man's mistress. It was the only explanation. Although it still did not ideally fit. That would be why she had darted off from London so quick—keen to find Lord Phineas and declare him the duke. Although why the lawyer had trusted her was beyond Kit, unless she had seduced the solicitor as well.

"I'm quite certain you have a great deal of questions." Miss Keating seemed flustered, and she pulled at her damp dress in a vague attempt to straighten the folds. "I will do my best to answer whatever questions I can." She sucked a breath and then added, "You really should read the letter."

"I know. "

His answer seemed to annoy her, but she stayed looking up at him. Her face twitched and then she said, "You must see the need for our departure. Immediately. To Town."

"Our?"

"I will come with you back to London." She paused and then added, much to Kit's horror, "Your Grace."

CHAPTER 3

The man seemed to be in a state of shock. Which did not remotely excuse his general attitude or bad behaviour. Nor the surroundings in which they were located—he had not lied when he said the locals they’d passed had been dubious about the manor. The constant talk of its dilapidated condition, or rumoured haunting, seemed entirely possible now that Elsie had waded into its midst. The dark, foreboding furniture was ancient, at least a hundred years old, black in most cases and worn. There was even a layer of dust and cobwebs covering most of the hangings and drapes. In the myths she’d read about Tintagel, it had been romantic, chivalric, but this wasn’t... She wouldn’t be surprised if a ghoul eased itself out from behind a curtain rather than a knight.

And as for her host...

Beneath the heavy discarded hat, there was an equally unruly wave of black hair, not to mention the dark clothes the new duke wore, added to this image. All in all, it was rather hard not to see that he fit neatly in with the sinister and bleak surroundings.

Still, Elsie tried to think brightly, her host could in some ways argue that he had rescued her from the thunderstorm less than an hour ago. And despite his grumbling, His Grace had taken the dog up onto the horse with them. Nonetheless, he was not very gracious about this interaction—a rescue poorly done was hardly a proper rescue. Elsie, who had been raised on the tales of how her parents met, involving a crashed carriage, strangers compelled together through dramatic circumstances, and a vast shining moon high above, had always thought a wayside interlude terribly romantic, but now she was less sure. Besides, this accursed man was far too

intimidating and grizzled to remotely sit within that category. Whilst he wasn't as elderly as Margot has said, Elsie had been looking forward to meeting the elderly lord...

Elsie had tried earlier, drawing closer, eager to see if there was any warmth or sadness in the man. Instead, she was met with a ferocious look that made her think of a wild animal. Nor did he appear pleased about his newfound title.

Even from the murky shadows he stood in, she could make out the distaste that seemed to strike him. Which was bizarre—most men on such a discovery would be delighted to learn they were now a duke.

Should she be suspicious? Or even scared? Part of Elsie was, but not for the reason that she doubted him. For this new duke to be guilty of murder, the man would have had to rush from London with more haste and speed than she had. Whilst Elsie thought it might be possible physically, she could see that this new duke was shocked by the news. Either he was a very fine actor, or he had not been to London in the last week and certainly hadn't murdered his uncle.

“Why did he send you?”

“The lawyer, Mr. Holt?”

“No, my uncle.” He seemed to struggle with the word, as if it sat uneasily on his tongue.

Deciding enough was enough of her lingering near to him, but also growing uncomfortable staring up into his face, Elsie moved across to a nearby armchair and sank into it. “He didn't. I barely knew the man... His Grace, I should say.”

“Then why are you here?” his hand was drumming impatiently on the mantelpiece,

and Elsie suddenly felt terribly weary as the last few hours crept upon her. Shouldn't a proper host suggest they talk again once she was dry and rested in the light of the morning? The weight of her dress sat on her, damp and heavy. She should change or risk a cold. Hadn't she proved who she was by giving him Mr. Holt's letter?

"I must admit. Miss Keating, I'm somewhat confused by your presence here. Are you perhaps related to Mr. Holt?"

"No," Elsie said. It would have been easier if she could have claimed to have been.

The idea of explaining how Margot was in fact the illegitimate daughter of this man's uncle and, therefore, his cousin but also that Margot was Elsie's sister, suddenly seemed a great deal too complicated. Nothing was going to plan.

He was supposed to invite her to retire. His housekeeper was supposed to show her to a delightful and comfortable chamber. She was meant to dry herself and discard her wet clothes, curl up in a warmed bed and sleep despite the fact she was clearly in a haunted manor house.

He was meant to read the letter, and in the daylight—well, everything would somehow be easier. A picture appeared before her of how it was meant to be, and none of that would be possible currently. It struck her that poor Margot was actually related to this man and hoped to win him over... That was going to be a challenge. The idea that this man had a good nature to appeal to was an absurd idea.

When Elsie lifted her tired eyes up to the new duke, she saw no sympathy there. No patient kindness or common courtesy that a majority of people treated Elsie with. It rankled. Since he was supposed to be a gentleman—why didn't he act like one?

"I would appreciate a cup of tea," she said. "And if it would not be too much trouble, some food. It has been a long and arduous journey."

“No one compelled you to come down here.”

“No,” she agreed, annoyance was mounting within her, an emotion Elsie was not used to feeling. Generally, she found herself and others to be agreeable. People often said what a pleasing temperament she had. It seemed that this host was determined to disabuse her of this temperament. “But circumstances being what they are, I am here, nonetheless.”

“That hardly answers my question.”

“Ring the bell for tea and give me one of those sandwiches, then I would be happy to explain all.”

For a moment, Elsie wondered if the man would refuse. He was gazing at her in the manner of some looming predatory hawk in no mood to agree. But then to her surprise, he sighed and moved forward to the rope bell. His movements were awkward, and for the first time, Elsie saw him walk and he seemed stiff and uncomfortable. She wondered whether he might have been injured when helping her and the dog today, and a wave of guilt lapped up within her.

Minutes ticked by, and when the door to the library opened, a rather severe-looking woman in her late fifties entered. She was dressed in a plain gown of navy and wore a bob cap of clean white. Her sharp eyes moved from the duke down to Elsie, who gave her a friendly smile.

“Mrs. Clarke, thank you for coming. We require some more refreshments, both tea and if the cook can be woken, then more sandwiches. I suspect”—he glanced outside at the unrelenting blackness of the night— “that some rooms must be prepared for two servants, and a guest room for Miss Keating as well.”

For a moment, the housekeeper did not move. Her eyes were blank as they took in

Miss Keating, utterly unable to account for her presence in the library. The silence stretched awkwardly until there was almost a texture to how uncomfortable all three of them were. At least that was how Elsie felt, and she could not vouch for the inscrutable duke.

Finally, Mrs. Clarke spoke, a creeping note of uncertainty to her voice, “Miss Keating?”

“That is right,” the duke said. “She is down from London.”

The housekeeper finally showed some emotion, surprise darting over her face. “London?”

“That is right,” Elsie cut in, starting to feel annoyed at the housekeeper’s reaction. “I brought His Grace’s letters from the London lawyers. The previous posts had not been responded to.”

“We had received none,” the new duke said, his voice quiet. “As you must have noticed, we are somewhat cut off down here. Post when it arrives—if it arrives, it is seldom prompt.”

“You have a newly delivered letter right there.” Elsie pointed towards the still unopened envelope clasped in the duke’s hand. “It is from Mr. Holt, who details the death of the former duke. And commands you to come to London. Most quickly. Time is of the essence.”

She felt it was too early to explain about Elsie’s sister. The priority was getting him ready. It was what Margot needed, wanted. A supportive relative who would ensure she was given her annuity, as well as protection and respect as the supposed “goddaughter” of the late duke. Dubious though Elsie might be about the generosity or good nature of the duke’s heir, surely, he could not refuse a relative or a request

from his late uncle. At least she was hoping that was the case. Distantly, she felt a looming threat that Margot and she would end up back home as spinsters forever, or worse, up with Grandmother Keating.

To this outburst there was a slight shuffling of the housekeeper's feet, but Elsie paid her no mind, her attention entirely focused on the noble before her. His face was unreadable, but when her eyes dropped to his large hands, she saw they were tense, a muscle flexing in his right hand.

Before the new duke could speak, there was a small cough and Mrs. Clarke said, "I will get that all arranged for your guests, Your Grace."

The sound of the door closing was the only sign that the two of them were now alone again. It was then she caught the muttered curse from the duke. Elsie wondered if he had a ridiculous aristocratic name too. It must be a family tradition. And if so, what might the new duke's name be? How she wished she could ask. Nothing too flowery, he was too austere for that, so it would not suit him. In appearance, he was much like a wild man with his beard.

"I wish you had kept that particular piece of news to yourself," he said, interrupting Elsie's wandering thoughts. He walked forward and to her surprise reached for a globe, which when opened revealed it contained a bottle of what looked like whisky. He extracted the bottle and then offered her a glass.

Now he was away from the shadows, and the blaze of the fire illuminating him a touch more clearly, Elsie made out the jut of his nose better, and the shape of his brows. She studied him. He was not quite so wild, and with a neat haircut and a visit from a valet, perhaps he would actually be a good companion to protect her elder sister in Town. "Well?" he prompted.

It was clear he did not know enough good manners to know that a gentleman did not

offer young ladies glasses of whisky. Although Elsie was hardly conforming to the rigid rules that had dictated her life for the last five years—perhaps she was not really a lady anymore. The idea should have worried her, but instead she found herself smiling at the thought.

“Yes.” She moved forward, curious to taste the masculine drink her father declared was hearty, although he was not a heavy drinker. After tonight’s storm and this particular interaction, restoration sounded heavenly. “Thank you.”

He poured her a generous glass and one for himself as well.

She took a hearty sip. It burnt as it slid down her throat, hot, sweet, and intense. When Elsie lowered her glass, she found it had brought a slight smile to her lips. Her companion however did not look remotely restored, if anything he appeared even more strained than before, and just as inclined to silence as ever.

“You do not trust your household staff?” She asked, returning to his wish that she kept quiet about his newly inherited dukedom. It struck her as odd, surely someone in his position should have been well aware he was the heir. Wasn’t it the dream of a great deal of young men, that a relative die and leave them a fabulous estate? It certainly had been Elsie’s impression of the bucks she met in Edinburgh, each of them eager to escape the drudgery of their lot whether in the army, navy, or church.

But this did not seem to be the case for the towering and grim-faced man before her. No, he gave her an exasperated look, one which creased his black brows and thinned his lips. “I did not say I did not trust. Merely that...” He trailed off, as if he was not sure how to explain something so obvious to someone as dense as her. “The very walls have ears.”

To such silliness Elsie could not help but giggle. He was being absurd. To her response he moved away back to the shadows, his shoulders hunching as he looked

down at his own drink, seemingly set on ignoring her.

Tension built through the eerily quiet room. Elsie wondered whether she and the dog should ease their way out, but as she finished her whisky, newfound confidence surged through her body, and she thought she would try again.

“You know there would have been no need had you read the letter I gave you. Everything should be neatly laid out before you by Mr. Holt.”

“Do you, Miss Keating, always have an answer for everything?”

Elsie knew all too well this remark was meant to render her mute, to put her in her place, so she paused, pretending to give it proper consideration, before replying, “I do try to answer any questions or issues posed to me. But as the middle sibling, I often find it is my brother or sister who reply more quickly. ”

“That I find hard to imagine.”

“Your Grace does not know me well enough to make such assertions on my character.” She hoped he took her quick reply in a friendly manner, but when the duke turned around, he did not seem to know the meaning of the word friendly. Or even cordial. No, instead there was what looked to her to be an awkward, almost sinister smile on his face, but she was probably being fanciful.

Before he could speak, there was a knock, and gratefully, Elsie moved away from the duke. Being near to him, even though they were separated by several feet made her feel acutely aware of her breathing, the dampness of her dress, how she was not herself. Yet the blasted man felt comfortable making judgements of her character.

In the doorway was the housekeeper, she nodded at Elsie. “Your room is prepared. I took the liberty of sending up some food. Your servants are likewise taken care of.”

Before Elsie could speak, the duke called out from behind her, “Has my sister gone to bed yet, Mrs. Clarke?”

“No, Your Grace.”

“Rather than the cold cuts in her chamber, perhaps our guest would like to freshen up and then meet the family, whose tidings she has rushed down to impart most urgently.” The duke had drawn closer, and Elsie could sense rather than see the press of him not far from her.

It felt like a test, although Elsie was not sure why. What barrier or issue would there be in informing the duke’s sister of his new title? Surely the young lady would be thrilled. If she were old enough, it would mean a Season in London and a dowry.

“I should be delighted.” Elsie straightened her back and looked around at the duke. “I will escort my rescued pet to my chamber, freshen up and be ready I am sure before the food.”

“This way, miss.” The housekeeper opened the door wider, and Elsie clicked her fingers at the hound, hopeful it would work. Thankfully after the third click, the dog raised his head, and seeing Elsie was about to leave, let out a pitiful whine, and dashed after her, his floppy ears bouncing up and down.

Then they were free of the library and in the wake of Mrs. Clarke, who moved with agility through the dark hallways, a single lantern to guide the way. She was not talkative, and after several minutes Elsie could stand it no more.

“Does the manor normally sound so?”

“The storm has made it worse.” They reached the staircase, and Mrs. Clarke set off, with Elsie following close behind her. “Darkness normally would not fall this early.”

“Most unseasonal,” Elsie guessed.

“It changes,” came the unhelpful reply. The housekeeper was so sure-footed despite the darkness, that Elsie’s concentration was rooted chiefly on not slipping over, then forming an adequate response. “Here you are, miss.”

The housekeeper opened a chamber door, ushered Elsie inside, nodded at her guest and then left.

Inside the bedroom, there was a lit fire and several burning candles to illuminate the old-fashioned bed in one corner. Ancient dark furniture dotted throughout the room matched the aesthetics of the bed frame, and finally, the room was hung with heavy, rich tapestries that looked, even from where Elsie stood, as if they would be moth eaten. It was gloomy and lonely, and from somewhere deep in the manor house, she could hear the noise of what sounded like someone yelling but at a great distance from her. Were it not for the dog at her heels and her promise to her sister, Elsie would have been tempted to run down to the stable and back out in the storm.

CHAPTER 4

Kit had to admit, when the child emerged downstairs an hour later, he was mildly impressed. In truth, he had half thought she would cry off. Surely, further exploration of the manor would put off the most hardened of women, and if not, then the old house's general noises, atmosphere, and staff should have done the trick—but she was still here.

Slowly he got to his feet when Miss Keating entered and made a slight bow of greeting. She had changed out of her wet travelling clothes, and in the soft light of the fireplace, he saw she now wore a simple evening gown of soft blue. It was not quite navy, nor royal, or pale enough to be periwinkle—but it suited her better than the sombre outfit she had been in previously.

Raising his eyes to her petite face, he saw her smile at Mrs. Clarke in some vague attempt to engage the housekeeper—a naive effort on Miss Keating's part. It would be more helpful to try to charm the child outside.

Mrs. Clarke departed, leaving Miss Keating and himself, with a large stretching table between them and the two-footmen setting out the food.

“Good of you to join me.” Kit sank back into his seat, indicating that Miss Keating should do the same. She was a great distance away from the flickering candles and an array of hastily prepared food was scattered haphazardly over the table. There were some cold cuts of meat, beef he thought, and rather more tempting was vegetable and chicken soup. From somewhere bread rolls had been found and a bottle of claret. It was not the stuff that London would have deemed “fine” by any stretch of the

imagination, but his staff had tried to prepare dinner for guests, but he doubted it was what Miss Keating was used to.

“Of course, as my honoured host...” Miss Keating began.

“Would we go that far? After all, I don't have much choice in the matter. You are an uninvited guest to all intents and purposes...”

“Would you prefer to throw me out?” He saw a flash of a challenge on Miss Keating's face as she settled more comfortably into her seat. She certainly had a flair for the dramatic which, although he was hardly immune himself, Kit did not know if he appreciated in her.

He sucked in a breath before continuing, “No indeed, but I would have preferred a little warning. I do not believe that to be unfair.”

Any sort of notice would have been nice—a letter from his uncle stating he was ill, a notice from the lawyer... anything. It was not every day that someone learnt they were a duke. Now most men of Kit's acquaintance, when he'd had a social life at university, would have been delighted at this turn of events, but having never desired such a “blessing,” Kit could not muster a thrill at the news. Especially since he knew the sordid nature of his family's modus operandi, and being forced to step into such a gilded cage left him dubious at best and at worst, angry. The title was not the gift most would view it as.

“This is delicious.” Miss Keating was smiling at one of the footmen, her face between the candles illuminated a gracious smile, one that caused a dimple in her left cheek. “Please thank your servants for their kindness.”

“We rarely see anyone down here, miss,” replied the footman, Creed, bobbing his head to her as he stepped back.

“Can’t say I blame anyone for that particular choice,” Kit said. “Your Mr. Holt could not bring himself to come down here...” Kit had dutifully read the letter in full, confused by the vagueness of the missive from a supposed man of business. His uncle was dead—that much was clear—but why it would be this opinionated, tiny female who the lawyer had sent down here baffled Kit. Finally, to add to the mystery, Mr. Holt’s letter gave no mention of Miss Keating. So, what she was doing in his manor was another matter entirely.

“He is hardly my Mr. Holt,” Miss Keating said, primly as she sipped her soup. “I only know the man because he works for my godfather.”

Before Kit could think of a suitable reply, there was a crashing noise from the dining room, and the side door swung open.

Into the chamber stumbled Kit’s younger sister, her hair wild and flowing, her dress ill-fitting and stained. She looked far younger than her seventeen years. The impression his sister gave, presumably to their guest and footmen, was of a staged version of Ophelia driven mad. His sister certainly fit the role. From her trailing, tangled locks, the spring flowers might be seen braided through her ringlets. However, the handful of twigs and dried mud would not be seen in such a romantic light.

Kit looked down the table at Miss Keating to see that the chit had gotten to her feet and was watching his sister with wide eyes.

With a forced grimace, Kit said, “This is my sister, Lady Flora.”

“Lovely to meet you, my lady. I am Miss Elspeth Keating.” Miss Keating gave his disordered sister a warm smile. As his sister swayed back and forth, her wide, staring eyes darted nervously around the room. “We have just started dinner. Would you care to join us?” Miss Keating indicated the table, although it had only been set for the

two of them.

The suggestion landed flatly, and Kit tried his best to think of what to say to Miss Keating. What explanation could he give for his sister that would make sense to a stranger? When he himself was not sure of the answer, and neither were the doctors he had hired, none of them knew what was precisely wrong with her.

Lady Flora's mouth opened, and her large eyes bored into his, so that she resembled a distressed, gaping fish desperate for air. Kit knew that look all too well. Flora would start to shriek, then at best run, or at worst, sink to the floor and require medicine to regain her equilibrium.

Before she could do any of this, Miss Keating had moved forward. Stepping towards Flora, and reaching out a hand to take the dirty, wavering fingers of Kit's little sister. "I understand the news of today must be overwhelming." Her tone was soft-spoken, gentle, and so quiet that Kit could not hear it, all Miss Keating's concern was directed towards Flora.

Again, his sister's eyes swept around the dining room before they focused on Miss Keating. Despite being the younger by at least six years, Flora was tall for her age and towered over Miss Keating. A frown creased her brow as the younger girl tried to make sense of the woman before her.

Leading Flora towards her own chair, Miss Keating encouraged Flora to sit, and proceeded to hand her a piece of buttered bread from her own plate.

"Is it not quite delicious?" She asked as she passed the slice to Flora.

To Kit's surprise, Flora took the bread and slowly raised a chunk to her lips, before taking a tentative bite, and then nodding in reply to Miss Keating's question. A strange sensation occurred in Kit's belly at the sight despite her wild exterior Flora

was acting almost normally. It dawned on him that it was the first time in months since their parents' deaths that Flora looked like herself once more. There was even in the corner of her mouth the tiniest glimmer of a grin—a normal occurrence for her. She had always liked her food, but recently Flora had grown too thin. Perhaps Kit thought as he looked towards Miss Keating, someone vibrant and young like her, with tales of London would brighten up his poor sister, would offer the distressed younger girl a chance to see and look to the future.

The earlier intrusion seemed soothed, even when Creed brought a chair for Miss Keating to sit in, and she sank into the cushioned squab, and began cutting herself some cheese.

Kit copied her, his movements slow as the energy in the dining room seemed to quieten, to return to a sense of normality.

“You must send my compliments to your cook, Your Grace,” Miss Keating said as she finished her mouthful. Her smile was gracious and for a moment Kit returned it before his gaze turned to his sister.

Flora had swallowed down her bread, and was looking between the two of them, fear making her eyes widen as she jumped to her feet, setting the contents of the table close to her spilling this way and that.

“Duke?” even in the one-word query Flora managed to imbue an anxiety to her question as she stared at Kit. Words were rare for her, infrequent now, but even though it was an accusation she levelled at him, Kit was pleased to know she could form them still.

One of the doctors had suggested Flora might have been mute, after the accident. Her eyes tightened urgently, and it was clear to him that Flora wanted to know if he had inherited their uncle's title, and reluctantly he nodded. It was not in his power to deny

this inheritance. Hell, he was not even sure if he could. Flora moaned—an unpleasant sound that echoed through her shaking body, her eyes moving to Miss Keating accusingly.

Flora had never been moved to violence, but for one worrying moment Kit feared she might. He closed the distance, striding down the length of the dining room, and coming to stand between Miss Keating and Flora. Taking hold of Flora's hands, he whispered in what he hoped was a soothing and reassuring manner, "It will be alright, I swear to you. I will protect you. There is nothing you need to fear."

I will succeed where our father failed. You are safe.

Words failed her, and Flora mutely shook her head. Emotions darted this way and that across her face, uncontrollable and beyond Kit's comprehension, and he felt her thin frame shake as she struggled to formulate the right response. She gave an almighty shake of her shoulders and body, and Kit feared she was about to have a fit.

"Leave us," Kit snapped, pleased to hear the servants slip from the room. When he glanced to his side, he saw that Miss Keating was still lingering close by, watching Flora. She did not seem afraid, simply concerned.

Before Kit could find any other words to warn her, Flora had rushed away from the table, her feet carrying her towards the roaring fire, and grabbed at the side door that lay ajar. Without a backward glance, she ran from the dining room, too overwhelmed to stay a moment longer.

An uneasy silence took hold, one in which Kit tried his best to focus on his surroundings. To see it through the eyes of his guest, whether it was the faded handsomeness of the room, the pleasant dishes laid before her, the heat of the fire, or even the departed form of his sister. Anything rather than dwell on his sister's wellbeing, and how he had no idea of what he could do to help her.

None of the inanimate objects present in the chamber worked as enough of a distraction, so he turned to his side, to look down at the diminutive Miss Keating. “I think,” he said dryly, “you can now see why I am reluctant to leave for Town.”

Briefly Miss Keating looked as if she might agree with him. There was a thoughtfulness at play over her features, but when she sucked in a breath and turned her elfin face to his, he saw he was mistaken.

“Your Grace, perhaps your sister might even benefit from a trip to London.”

“With all those staring eyes, and busy gossips, yes I am certain London is the perfect place for my vulnerable little sister.”

“I did not mean to cause offence, but more than that, she would be able to access the most skilled physicians money can buy.” For a moment, Miss Keating looked as if she meant to add more, and Kit wondered if perhaps she wished to add that removing Flora from the mausoleum of the manor might be beneficial.

“Indeed,” Kit finally said, his response dry. He didn’t move away from Miss Keating and nor did she step back and resume her seat.

“It is not merely for your sister’s health,” Miss Keating continued.

“No, of course, as I would imagine you had no idea of her existence until now.”

“I did not. But very little was told to me of you either,” Miss Keating replied. “After all, I thought I was here to retrieve your father. I quite believed from what Mr. Holt had told me, that the duke would be in his dotage.”

“I am sorry to disappoint you.”

“No, you do not. That is...” Miss Keating looked befuddled and slightly embarrassed. “I was sent down here, as the current occupant of your uncle’s house is in need of support.”

To his surprise, Miss Keating fixed him with a stare and then said, “I have come on my older sister’s behalf. She has been left in charge at your uncle’s townhouse—managing it all. I should say it is your townhouse now of course. As the late duke’s goddaughter, my sister needs you to be in Town to help her... There are a great many affairs, matters I should say that require your presence.”

It sounded too strange to Kit’s cynical mind. Too many dots that did not join up to his head. Immediately his thoughts turned to everything his father had always told him—that Kit’s uncles were of a highly libertine persuasion, and that their numerous bastards cluttered various parishes. Perhaps the Misses Keatings were in fact, relations of his. Still if that was the case, why did the younger Miss Keating not simply say so?

“Are you related to the late duke?” For some reason, it suddenly mattered a great deal to Kit that he would know for sure whether the younger Miss Keating had any biological connection to his uncle. He told himself it was merely to ensure she was not in fact his cousin or his uncle’s mistress—either position would need a change in his behaviour.

He needed to know she was not related to him.

Miss Keating looked a little surprised at his question. “No, there is nothing untoward in my relationship with the late duke. I hope you are not implying anything improper in either of our behaviours. I can assure you I am an honourable spinster.” As she spoke her voice gained strength, and Kit was pleased to see the earlier spark colour her cheeks. “I am here for my sister’s sake. You may rest assured that His Grace was no relation to me.”

Perhaps it should have sparked some kind of shared familiarity in Kit—Miss Keating loved her sister, the same way as he did Flora. But he was too deep into his own embittered emotions to wish to hold on to this bond.

With a small curl of his lip, he drew away from her and from the table. His entire body ached from the storm, from the added complication and, he supposed, from the expectation that he must be the one to solve it.

It was important, he reasoned, to clear his head and to set out what he meant to do next. Ignoring Town for a long period was not a possibility, and yet venturing out tomorrow was also unlikely given tonight's storm—he had only briefly seen the devastation. As someone accustomed to the Cornish environment, Kit knew that many of the roads would be flooded and unpassable given the strength of the storm. But that meant he would have to make Miss Keating welcome in the manor for a considerable amount of time. This realisation was a rather confusing one for him—most men would have felt pleasure, no doubt, at having a young, pretty female who was to all extents and purposes trapped with him. This turned Kit's stomach. Better to be dead than like his late uncles with their rakish ways.

Looking around at her, Kit gave her a brutal appraisal, hoping to fully establish his own distaste with her presence and person. "If you are done with the food, I will bid you goodnight."

"My Lord—Your Grace!" She made to follow after him. "You have not given me an answer on when we will travel to London."

"You can leave as soon as you are able." With that Kit left her alone, pleased to have rendered her speechless with his curtness.

CHAPTER 5

Outside her chamber, Elsie could have sworn the world was being flooded. Overwhelmed and seized. Perhaps even the entire manor house was simply engulfed. It probably was not best practice, but when the little spaniel climbed up onto the bed with her, she wrapped her arms around him, and held on to him tight. He made a soft whining sound and licked her nose, and relief bounded through Elsie's chest.

How was she to explain any of this to her sensible sister Margot? It would sound utterly macabre if she tried to put the series of events to pen and paper. But how could she convince the rudest and most obstinate man she had ever encountered to come to London? She doubted anyone would ever be able to convince the new duke of anything he did not wish to do. To her mind, it was madness to stay in such a windswept and dangerous location, and as for poor Lady Flora, she needed all the help she could get.

Curling up closer to the spaniel, she pulled the rough blanket over the pair of them, trying her best to shield them both from the sound of the windows rattling and whatever else was echoing around the house. As for poor Samson, hopefully, Elsie's little maid had found somewhere to bed down as she doubted the girl would wish to be inside the actual manor.

Elsie stroked her hand over the dog's coat. She wanted a distraction. Why not name the pup? But every time she let her mind quiet it turned back to the inevitable presence of the duke.

The heir who she'd been sure she could sweet talk and convince to come with her up

to Town. She had assumed he would be of an age with the previous duke, but no this person was younger, more energetic, more... well, something. She could not put her finger on precisely what the new duke of Ashmore was, but whatever it might be, Elsie was not comfortable about it. Compelling, she thought for a moment before dismissing this idea as too much of a compliment.

There was something about this man which made her extremely aware of the breath within her chest, the hair on her arms, and how she was standing. She had never considered herself to be self-conscious before, but around His Grace, Elsie wanted nothing more than to shrink away from him, and that was before he fixed her with his unnaturally pale-blue eyes. It wasn't right for someone with dark hair to have such light-coloured eyes.

“What shall I call you?” she whispered to her rescued pet. She needed something appropriate, a name which would somehow purge the memory of being fixed with those perceptive, all-knowing eyes and drive the memory out of her. “Lancelot?” It was humorous she reasoned to call the dog this name, given she had been the one to rescue the hound. But somehow it seemed to suit the little pet. And to this suggestion the spaniel nestled in closer, and Elsie let out a sigh.

Rolling over, telling herself to sleep, although as she tossed and turned, she came to a disturbing realisation that even with her lids sealed shut the duke's domineering stare, continued to chase after her. Even when she finally fell into a restless slumber, the blasted man followed her through her dreams.

There came a knock at her door, and Elsie forced her face out of the pillow, hair sticking to her mouth. From a partly open curtain, faint light poured in, and sadly, even from here came the definite sound of rain. Presumably, the blasted duke would therefore think it wasn't worth them leaving the manor, and the idea of having to stay another night in this strange, lonely place?—

The knock sounded again, and this time there was the sound of Samson's voice. "Miss... Miss Elsie, are you awake?"

"Yes, yes." Elsie struggled out of the sheets and bedding as the bedroom door opened, and Samson pushed it wide. Her maid slipped into the chamber with a tray balanced in her hands. Elsie fully expected the girl to be as scared as she had been the previous day, but surprisingly Samson smiled broadly as she set the tray down.

"Isn't it a strange little place?" She asked as she looked over the bedspread at Elsie.

"I would hardly call it little," Elsie said. There was an awful lot of bizarreness about the manor. "I do hope we will be able to depart back to London shortly."

"Oh no miss, I heard them talking in the kitchen that the weather is dreadful. That's why there's that crying noise—it is the wind. Doesn't echo so? One of the footmen said, the main road is even flooded and all the side ones too, no one could get through. He was amazed we managed it." Samson almost looked impressed at the sheer scale of the problem. "He said it would take days to clear. It happened before, in November..." Here Samson stopped. She looked as if she wished to add something else but couldn't find the right words.

Elsie smoothed down her nightdress and then set about righting her hair. Everything it seemed was going to annoy her—whether it was the frightful house, the unpredictable weather, her host. Wholeheartedly she wished her mind did not keep snagging on him. Turning a forced smile to Samson, she looked down at the tray the girl had brought up.

"Thank you for seeing to my comfort with the breakfast."

"Of course, miss." In a confiding manner, she leant closer and said, "I hear the duke's sister... that she's mad. Is it true that you saw her?"

Moving closer to the tray as the sweet scent of the chocolate wafted over to her, Elsie took hold of the cup and sank into the nearest available chair, which happened to be a rather moth-eaten but comfortable red velvet. As she sipped the drink, she dwelt on what to say... or even whether it were her place to comment. She certainly didn't want to stir any rumours, or gossip about poor Lady Flora. Yes, the girl had seemed very unpredictable, but perhaps with the right care and attention she might recover. Lifting her gaze up, Elsie said, "I did not see Lady Flora for very long. She is a young girl. Perhaps she has read too many gothic novels. I would imagine she has been isolated, perhaps between us we can talk to her about London and encourage her to journey to Town with us."

To this suggestion, Samson did not look remotely convinced. "Clary—that is our driver—he overheard one of the maids saying the lady hasn't been the same since last year after the accident. He told me that the servants here say before the crash she was..."

What accident, Elsie wondered. Could it be recent? Where did His Grace's injured arm come from? As much as Elsie would love to know what rumours the servants had overheard, as in her experience the staff were normally the ones who had the right to it. "We must endeavour to care for her ladyship."

With a slight gesture of annoyance, Samson pulled the cover off the tray and Elsie was rather pleased at the array of sweet pastries that lay before her. Thick round white rolls, yellow butter, and colourful marmalade would make for a delicious breakfast. Even if the manor was cut off, at least the food left nothing to be desired.

"Oh," Samson said, her attention snagged by Lancelot. She bent down and ruffled his ears affectionately, any of her fear of what he might be gone now that she could make out his shiny eyes and some of his coat. "Who's a good boy?"

"Indeed," Elsie said, both annoyed and relieved at the change of conversation. "This

is Lancelot. I thought if you could this morning, we might try to give him a proper wash.” Elsie had patted the dog down, and presumably rather a lot of his muck had ended up on the bedding last night, but at least this task would give her something to occupy her time.

“Certainly miss, although a lot of the staff have been called away.”

“All of them?”

“Well, Clary and all the men, they’ve gone with the master—His Grace, I should say—to see what can be done about the roads.”

The idea of staying cooped up in the lonely house, with only Samson and Lancelot for company, did not strike Elsie as especially enjoyable. She lowered her cup and said, “Perhaps we can take the puppy down to the stable and find some way of cleaning him ourselves?”

A bit reluctantly, Samson agreed and set about getting Elsie ready and into one of her two day dresses, this one was her favourite, a cheerful buttercup yellow. Then the two of them made their way, with Lancelot in their wake downstairs and towards the stable.

The journey through the house reminded Elsie of all her original discomfort in this place. For whilst it was a touch brighter now, and it was daytime, there lingered throughout the place the heavy unpleasant smell of dust, and even through the parted curtains, the light hung in a dull quiet haze. She was grateful when all three of them stepped outside .

“Here, miss.” Samson snatched up an umbrella, a rather faded old looking one, and lifted it over both their heads. “You think we’ll have a tub outside?”

It had been Elsie's hope, and besides, she reasoned if it wasn't, then at least she was outside. Despite her uncertainty about the place and the heavy wave of rain, there was a crispness to the air, a familiar saltiness that reminded Elsie of home. "We can but look. Besides"—she pointed towards Lancelot who was frolicking about in the puddles nearby,—"we may not even need it."

Happily, Lancelot pranced this way and that, hopping and splashing his way through the small pools of water. His brown fur was soon wet, and Elsie noticed there was some white fur mixed in there too. Whilst she watched the dog Elsie did her best to ignore how quiet the stable were, and yet there was the feeling from somewhere close by that they were being watched. When she raised her eyes, she scouted along the windows, looking for who was following them. Yet she could see no sign of a person despite the hair raising on the back of her neck, which made her want to run.

A desperation took hold of Elsie. She couldn't linger here; she needed to move. "I swear I can smell the sea. Can't you, Samson?"

Her maid seemed confused, her wide-eyed, perplexed expression was no help. "I've never been to the sea before, miss. But," she added helpfully, "the butler said there was a sea cove close by, and one of the maids said..." She giggled at the mention of it.

"What is so humorous?"

"I don't have the right of it, miss, but they were saying there's a cottage in the cove or by it, I think, that apparently affairs... or assignations used to occur in."

A vivid image of the new duke leading some willing lady, or tavern wench to this forbidden cottage flared through Elsie's mind... Did His Grace indulge in such affairs?

“Isn’t it amusing being here,” Samson added, her face bright in heavy contrast to the previous night .

“I would have thought you were keen to leave here?” Elsie asked her maid quickly.

“I don’t know what you mean.” Samson blushed, and Elsie had a sudden idea of what might have occurred that had softened her maid to their surroundings. Either she had met someone down here, or the driver had caught her fancy.

“Which way is the cove?” That urgent sensation was still holding on to Elsie, and she could not shake it. She had to get to that cove, whether it was a mile off or a great deal farther—clear, wet air and then the scent of the seaside would help. Bring back the memories of home and chase away the sheer oddness of this manor.

Again, Samson looked uncertain. “I think that way.” She pointed out the stable, her hand gesturing towards what looked like an unbroken stretch of wildflowers and sky-reaching grasses that reached an out group of trees merging into a wider forest. “At least the men went the other way. I assumed the cove wouldn’t need clearing so…”

It was a good step of logic on Samson’s part, and Elsie nodded. “You’re correct. Let’s go.”

“Oh no miss, I wouldn’t want to get lost.”

“I’m sure it’s not far, just past those trees.”

But Samson looked stubborn, so Elsie shrugged, patted her damp skirts, and called to Lancelot, before hurriedly leaving the stable, heading with purpose towards the trees.

“Hush, boy,” Elsie said affectionately as Lancelot bounced along next to her. Clearing the manor house and stable did bring a sense of relief. A warm, cosy feeling

to put space between the building and her.

Lifting her arms as she walked, Elsie hugged herself. It seemed no matter where she went, no matter her optimistic attitude, she never could find somewhere she felt at ease. Mayhap she was reading too much into it, but after London and several Seasons in Edinburgh... Even though she hated to admit the idea to herself, in her home in Berwick-upon-Tweed, there was that sensation of not being entirely comfortable. If she was being honest with herself, it was that she was searching for something or someplace she could find that elusive fulfilment.

Striding onwards through the thickening grasses, Elsie swiped at the wildflowers, gathering blooms to her, a futile gesture at being more ladylike. The pretty purples of the wild blooms, with their little white centres filled her hands but Elsie only gave them a cursory glance, before continuing onwards to the tree line. The scent in the wet air was growing stronger, the smell of the sea. High above her were the branches of the trees, and Elsie walked through the forest, keen to be nearer the water or the cove, whichever awaited her.

The overhanging arches of the trees created a lovely, lush canopy high above, shielding Elsie from the downpour. Inside the woodland it was quieter, and finally that sensation of being watched left her. Lancelot and she made excellent progress, and with each step, Elsie told herself that she was getting nearer to the cove.

Quite why it mattered so much was beyond her. But it did. Having the reassurance of something she could count upon, perhaps, when her sister and parents were so far away. She was not her normal self—quite why that would be could hopefully be explained by the strangeness of the setting and had nothing to do with the new duke. The memory of his gaze, his presence, the flex of his jawline, the injury or when he'd stepped close to her at the dining table. It had felt intimidating but in the clearer light of day, Elsie was not sure if that was his intention—she wondered if he was, in fact, trying to warn her.

Light from the edge of the forest emerged from behind dense greenery and Elsie quickened her step.

The cliffs at the end of the forest were sheer, but magnificent. The views of the cove below showed a jutting cut into the land, which was filled with shallow sea water. Despite the overcast skies, the water far below still looked appealing as it washed over the sands. The sand rose at one point, giving way to higher ground and then changing to rocks. Placed atop of this outcrop was a cottage, accessible if one did not mind wading through the shallow waves to reach it. If it were sunny and the tide was out, Elsie could easily imagine this would be picturesque.

The question was how to get down into the cove.

Carefully, Elsie made her way along the cliff's edge until the natural incline of the cliffs led her down slowly towards the water. Beside her Lancelot was making excited noises. The pathway was not the smoothest, but Elsie ignored any worries, she was too eager for the refreshing feel of the water on her toes.

"Yes, I will be taking off my shoes," she said, partly to the dog and partly to herself, and laughed as her rescued hound barked back. "Yes, Lancelot lets go have a look."

The last few steps were the hardest but when Elsie reached the sand, she felt triumphant as she stared around the cove, taking in the beauty of high cliffs, dotted with greenery, and hard chalk. If nothing else could remove the memory of feeling overwhelmed by the duke, then surely it was the greatness of nature.

Lancelot took off along the seam of the water's edge, giving the wholehearted appearance of a dog laughing as he darted in and out of the water. His evident joy raised Elsie's spirits.

"I won't be bullied," she told herself, dismissing yet again the memory of the duke.

She would enjoy herself as much as Lancelot. In defiance of propriety, Elsie bent and undid both of her boots, eased her stockings off too, and spread her feet into the welcoming cool sand. Lifting her skirts up, Elsie felt the rush of water over her toes, and giggled at the coldness.

“Come on, boy.” Elsie slapped her hand against her day dress. Lancelot rushed back as Elsie waded farther into the water, her intention to explore the distant little cottage despite the uneasy feeling someone was watching her once more.

CHAPTER 6

Having spent the morning helping remove some of the blockage from the main thoroughfare, which had been completely covered in mud and several fallen trees, Kit supposed he was mildly pleased to return to the manor. The clearing seemed to go well, and as he went inside, he spotted his younger sister through the window. Flora might not have been occupied in many of the habits of younger women be it needlepoint, the pianoforte, or watercolours, but at least she wasn't rolling around in mud or attempting to climb trees again. All in all, Kit felt grateful for these small mercies.

None of that would quite explain the nagging sensation that burnt at the back of his mind as he made his way through the manor, heading towards his library. Perhaps it was the dread of being confronted or chased after by the tiny Miss Keating, whose diminutive prettiness belied her will of steel. Through his mind, he played out all the names he might call her as she berated him for the bad weather—virago, shrew, harridan...

His library was empty when he entered it, save for a plate of sandwiches. With a hunger built on manual labour, Kit set about demolishing them. Perhaps, he thought idly, Miss Keating might have vanished or flown off rather like the fairy she appeared to be. Mayhap she might have been reclaimed in the night by her magical brethren.

A tentative feminine knock interrupted his vindictive imaginings, and with a sigh, suspecting who it might be, Kit called out, "Yes?"

The door swung open and to his surprise there were two people he did not know. The

man looked like one of the folks who'd helped the staff clear part of the road, but Kit hadn't asked his name. The girl stood uncertainty next to him, looking close to tears. Both were dressed in servant's garb, but Kit was sure neither was employed by the estate. He wondered whether they were mad enough to want employment here. Surely if they were locals, they would have heard the rumours...

"Your Grace." The manservant stepped forward and then glanced to his left. "I am sorry to bother you. My..." He indicated the girl beside him.

"Who are you?" Kit cut him off.

"Oh." The man flushed a little. He had to be in his early twenties, of middling height but with pleasant enough features and a strong jawline. His accent said, clear enough, that he was from South London. An inkling of an idea of who they both might be was forming in Kit's mind, but he heartily hoped he was wrong. "We're from the Duke of Ashmore's London home, and we journeyed down yesterday with Miss Keating?—"

"That's what we've come about." The girl suddenly stepped forward. Her face was tear-stained, and she looked even younger than the man. "My mistress—Miss Keating—she's missing."

Kit shifted farther forward in his armchair, disregarding his plate with a tiny amount of annoyance. "She cannot have gone too far as the bad weather would prevent anyone from?—"

"Your Grace," the maid cut him off, ignoring entirely the rules of society as she moved forward, "we talked this morning?—"

"There we go then. She cannot have wandered too far. "

"She heard about the cove and expressed a strong desire to go there. I thought it was

fine, safe even but then..." She looked in fear at her fellow servant. "Clary said the men warned him about the tides."

At the mention of the cove, Kit was on his feet. A strange, nervous energy beat through him. All the local inhabitants knew about the quickness of the tides into the cove, how it could appear shallow and easy to access, but within thirty minutes the place could be underwater—the waves surrounding anyone silly enough to enter. Far too many people had drowned there over the years, and there were even rumours of shipwrecks having met their fate against the lethal cliffs. Kit moved closer to the maid. "What's your name?"

"Samson... Elinor." She added her Christian name in a rush. On closer inspection the maid looked very young perhaps around no more Flora's age. "I'm sorry my—Your Grace I should have stopped her."

Stopping himself from saying that he doubted anyone would have the strength to gainsay Miss Keating, he focused instead on asking her maid the following question, "When did she leave? What time?"

"I—"

"Nellie, just tell His Grace," the manservant said.

"Over two hours ago."

"Heading towards the cove?" Kit asked. He was moving over to his discarded jacket and snatching it. The material was still damp with rain, but it had ceased to drizzle now, so it would dry.

Samson nodded.

“Saddle up a horse,” Kit told the manservant, “whichever comes to hand—I know the quickest route. But you go to my butler, Peterson, and rouse the rest of the men from this morning.” It wasn’t much but at least it would be a start. Kit hadn’t been down to the coves since last summer, and he couldn’t predict how the weather would be today—but a horrible image was playing through his mind, of finding Miss Keating’s body—of Elspeth floating face down in the water. “Go now.”

The manservant left. Kit turned to Samson. “Is there anything else I should know?”

“I don’t think so, Your Grace.”

“Make sure you get some hot water and food ready.” With that order, he was gone from the library, striding towards the stable.

Around him, there was a blend of chaotic servants calling and talking excitedly to each other, but Kit paid them no mind. He saw a saddled horse and scrambled up into the seat, turning and whipping the mount into action. Urging the horse forward out of the stable, and through the open pasture at the rear of the manor. A quick dash from his horse carried him towards the forest, the dew flying up around him as Kit tried to formulate the next best course of action in order to find Miss Keating. He could take the longer route around, encircle the cliffs, and descend slowly, more gradually. Of course, if the tides were now high, he wouldn’t get very far. However, if he went through the woods, and tried the more direct approach, and the tide hadn’t come in yet, he might be in luck and spot her.

“Damn it,” Kit swore, turning the horse into the forest. Trusting his luck hadn’t gone well for him in a long while, but perhaps he could place it on Miss Keating and hope for the best.

On reaching the edge of the cliff, Kit was relieved to see the tide had not reached as dangerous a level as he feared. Yet one look down into the tranquil inlay told him it

was not long until it would be flooded, cutting off the pathways. His eyes swept over the cove as he tied the horse up and hurried down the uneven pathway, searching for the blasted chit. Why couldn't she just stay inside and sulk? Probably because you pretty much told her the manor was haunted, you bloody fool—Kit scolded himself.

A sudden streaking rush of brown and cream darted into the waves, and Kit froze watching below him as the rescued dog played. She was down there with the pet. With a yell, he raised his hands over his head and started waving frantically as he hurried roughly over the pathway. His bad arm spasmed as he moved it. He must present a rather ridiculous image to the dog and girl below, but Kit was more focused on the sounds of the tide, and the ever-increasing suspicion that those noises were rising, and he wouldn't reach her in time.

His anxiety must have shown, even at such a distance, as he saw Miss Keating's movements cease in their leisurely pace and hurry forwards over the sands. She snatched up her skirts in response to his shouts, and once he was down on the sand, Kit was pleased to hurry towards her figure. If he could get her back onto the pathway, that would be something. It was not a comfort to note that the sand was already covered in a good two feet of water.

Miss Keating slowed her pace. Either she was tired, or she too was starting to notice they were in a basin that was rapidly filling with sea water.

"Hurry," he yelled, his arms still raised. She was thirty feet from him now.

She bent and scooped up the dog in her arms, dropping her skirts as she did so. Her head looked towards the rocks and the cottage, but that route was already cut off by the waters.

A solid wave crashed into Kit, pausing him in his tracks, and turning his head towards the sea. They had less time than he thought. The bad spring weather seeming

to make the change very abrupt.

Half running, half wading through the ever-rising water, Kit strode on. He needed to reach her, and then what? His mind asked. His right arm pained him, but he was certain he could swim. The question was, could she? There wasn't enough time to get back to the pathway, so what should he do?

They slammed into each other, the water rising, her face flushed from exertion, the blasted dog whimpering in her arms .

“We need to get out of here.” He snatched up her elbow, pulling back towards the path.

“It's gone,” she said as he turned and to his surprise when he looked, she was right, the uneven steps he'd hurried down were hidden beneath the waves that currently encircled their waists.

“What do we do?”

Kit whipped around his eyes studying the inlay, searching desperately for a safe vantage point. “How good are you at climbing?” he was already moving them forward, but he saw that her skirt was weighing her down. Without thinking of the consequences, he reached beneath the churning waves, and ripped the fabric away from her body. The movement jolted them both and the waters lifted a fraction. Their feet no longer touched the sand.

“Where are we going?”

“That way.” He gestured over the water. “Can you swim?” He was still holding on to her, supporting her amid the waves.

Her small face bobbed in front of him, but he saw her nod. “There’s a cave, can you see it?” Kit treaded water beside her and was pleased when she looked over and said, “Yes. We’ll need to climb.”

“Come on.” He started swimming, relieved she kept pace with him, towards the jagged cliffs. There was a partial, broken pathway, half buried in the side of the cliff, which led to a small cave within the rock face. In his youth he played there. Surely that should be a safe place to escape the rising tide. He hoped to God it would be high enough.

Through the water, their hands met, the waves were coming in at a pace now, rushing through the narrowed cliffs at the base of the cove, swirling and dragging them closer and closer towards the cliffs. The trick was going to be getting to the right place high enough on the ledge, hoping the water wouldn’t rise so far up that their supposed safety would actually trap them .

He heard her take a shuddering breath, the dog and her both peeking over the rolling waves.

“Try not to panic,” he called out, still holding on to her hand.

Not too far from them the waves lashed into the cliff with a power that Kit hadn’t imagined. That was another risk he hadn’t thought of—the water lifting them up and crashing them into the hard rock.

“Hold on to me.” He grabbed farther up her wrist, trying to move her despite the rolling water, so she would come to be shielded by him. “Leave the dog, we’ll pull him up when we’re on the ledge.”

She struggled, wriggling and pressing against him as she manoeuvred her way along his arm, clinging to him until he felt her arms around his neck.

Kit focused on the ledge. He was going to have to judge the distance, take the impact of the wave, and lever them both farther up the cliff front. Hopefully when he was carried forward, it wouldn't be too much of a smashing motion, and he'd have time to grab and scramble upwards. The strength of the wave gathered around him, and Kit braced himself. It was now or never.

The momentum carried all three of them forward, and the pull of the sea's waves, so powerful no human could resist them, slammed them into the rock with one almighty crash. Kit, who'd been prepared for the impact, swallowed a mouthful of dank salt water, coughing and spluttering but motioning, nonetheless, to hook a hand onto the jutting-out rock.

With all his efforts, he clung on, reaching out his free hand and started to climb. It wasn't an easy ascend, not with the tightness of Miss Keating's hold on him, and the knowledge that at any moment the sea might come crashing back into the pair of them. he felt the bite of the water on his legs, against his boots but he didn't let that stop him.

"Go," he told her once they were within touching distance of the ledge, and with a lift and shove, he pushed Miss Keating upwards and towards the relative safety of the cave. Five feet below him, the dog was circling—his round, brown desperate eyes fixated on Miss Keating. Kit let go of the cliff front with one hand and reached down towards the dog.

From above him, he heard Miss Keating say, "That's it, Lancelot. That's it." For one brief moment, he wondered if she had named him that, and it made his heart swell to think of himself as her knight in shining armour.

The dog let out a bark and tried to jump at him, but it was too much of a gap. Not fancying the pet's chances if he was left in the water, Kit looked up at Miss Keating, who was thankfully secure on the ledge. "Can you spare us some underskirt?"

For a moment he wondered if the girl would refuse, were he to reach the ledge she would not be wearing a great deal, but the danger of him trying to remove his coat on the cliff front seemed too great. A moment passed and a large square of ripped white fabric appeared over the side which Kit snatched up. Slowly he lowered it down to the hound, hoping to catch the rogue dog up in the material. Minutes stretched by whilst Kit wondered at the fruitlessness of his endeavour when suddenly the small hook caught around the dog, and he managed to yank him upwards out of the water. The wet dog lay in his arms, before emitting a muted little cry.

“Yes, you and me both,” Kit said.

“Pass him up.” Miss Keating was leaning over the edge, both of her hands dangling down for the dog.

With the water nipping at his heels, Kit lifted and then practically threw the hound upwards, grateful when he saw Miss Keating’s arms close around the soggy fur and disappear. Heaving out a sigh, Kit started to scramble up the remaining distance. His body ached as he moved, his bad arm screaming at the movements, the nature of climbing was not an action he took regularly—he supposed it was a little like some of the manual labour he did around the manor—but the chill of the water added an element he did not enjoy.

Still, he was pleased when the route was not as hard as he’d pictured, and when he pulled himself up and over the ledge, it was to find Miss Keating catching hold of his hand and pulling him into the shelter of the cave. To his own great surprise, he was seized with an urge to embrace her—presumably, an emotion based out of a relief. It came as a greater shock when Miss Keating threw her arms around his neck, pressing herself against him. As much as he tried to think of this as nothing more than soothing Flora when she was distressed, it did not feel remotely similar—his hands moved to glide down her back in what he hoped was a reassuring manner. But he realised as he did so, the gesture was not remotely brotherly.

With her head still nestled against his chest, he heard Miss Keating ask, “What if the water reaches us?”

Exacting himself from her grasp, Kit edged near to the ledge once more whilst the waves were beating ferociously against the rocks they had not as yet appeared to climb any higher. “We must pray it doesn’t.”

His eyes moved around the dank cave, taking in the small narrow space that was to be their sanctuary until the waves drew back. There was not very much room, and when he looked at her, at Miss Keating, shivering and hugging her arms to her chest, he saw how delicate and half-dressed she was—her yellow day dress’s skirt ripped away, and the bottom of her chemise torn to rescue the dog. She had removed her shoes in order to empty them of water, and for one long moment Kit stared at her feet, her toes the smallest and most feminine thing he could ever remember seeing. Why had no poet ever written a ballad to a woman’s foot? Presumably because they had never seen Miss Keating’s perfect toes.

Pulling off his own wet jacket, he hung it over a rock. “I think we are going to have to stay a little closer together, Miss Keating.”

Her rounded brown eyes narrowed a little, and he expected her to argue, but she gave a decisive nod. “If we are going to do that, I think you had better call me Elsie. Everyone does.”

“Kit.” The noise was not entirely natural, and for a moment, Elsie looked a little perplexed.

“Is it a shortening?”

“Aye for Christian.”

She stepped forward. “We are to huddle?”

“My coat will dry I hope, and then we can use it for warmth. In the meantime, you... well...” Kit tried to think of the right way of putting it.

“The time for formality might have slipped away from us.”

When he looked up, he was surprised to see that Elsie looked as if she was trying not to laugh. It was then that he thought, whilst she might be one of the prettiest girls he’d seen in many a long year. She had the loveliest and smallest feet imaginable. Yet she might also be one of the strangest people he had ever encountered, which was something given Kit lived in what was widely agreed upon to be a haunted house.

CHAPTER 7

Elsie had never found herself in a cave before. It wasn't a location she would ever wish to return to, with very little space to move between the three of them. Thankfully, Lancelot had curled up in the corner furthest from the ledge and was watching the sky with great interest through the mouth of the cave.

As for the new duke, he was watching her with a curious expression, one which she found impossible to read and make head or tail of. Perhaps he thought wrongly that she was attempting to compromise or entrap him. Elsie had heard men with titles often felt that way. She fervently hoped he did not believe her capable of that.

However, she was acutely self-conscious of her own bedraggled state, her ripped dress with the chemise askew now blatantly visible, and its white material wetly clinging to her legs. Protectively, she raised her hands and folded them in front of her. She supposed she could be grateful that the duke—that Kit had moved away to look down into the cove, seeming to consider how trapped they really were.

Edging nearer to him, Elsie asked, "Has the tide slowed at all?"

"Seems to have done." He looked grim and cold now he had removed his coat. "As it starts to lower?—"

"What strikes me as most odd is how the cottage is still... well it is not under water." Elsie had moved to the edge of the cave and was looking out into the cove.

Kit abruptly moved back into the cave. "Come away from the edge."

Elsie let him go, and continued to stare out at the cottage, lifted out of the waves on its little rock jetty, a safe barrier around the building of a good twenty feet. Perhaps they should have risked swimming towards that, it would have been preferable to climbing up the cliff front.

When she looked back, Kit had lowered himself to the ground, stretching out his long legs and placing his back against the wall. He looked cold and tired, and yet somehow more engaging and approachable than ever before.

With a tentative step nearer, Elsie asked. “Will you tell me why we didn’t just go to the cottage, surely it would have been easier to swim there?”

“There is always a question with you, isn’t there?”

“Perhaps if you could answer one or two of them, I might stop asking them.” Elsie was surprised at the forcefulness of her reply, but to her even greater astonishment Kit sighed and nodded.

“It’s an old wives’ tale, one my mother told me, that the cottage is cursed. That in short it isn’t safe. I didn’t want to risk—either of us trying to venture out to it.”

“Do you always believe superstitions?”

“In this part of this place, it often seems the wisest course of action. It has cost me, denying such things.” Even in the dim interior of the cave, Elsie could see the glimmer of a smile forming around his lips as if Kit understood the irony and perhaps even humour of what he’d just said. It made his dark features brighter, casting an almost appealing look to his demeanour. “You must know the story of Tintagel? ”

“The story of the knights of the round table? Or Arthur and Guinevere? Yes, of course, why do you think I named the dog Lancelot?”

“That’s part of it—but that’s not the story of Tintagel.” There was a sad intensity to Kit’s face as if the mythic legend might somehow have some impact on him personally.

“What’s Tintagel’s real story then?” Elsie asked.

“It’s where Arthur was conceived and born,” he said, looking away from her as he spoke of such delicate things. “But he was only brought into existence by a trick. Merlin bewitched Arthur’s father to look like Igraine’s real husband, so he stole into her bed in the night and forced himself?—”

“I understand,” Elsie said. That part of the story had been skipped over in her readings. It painted Arthur’s father as far more of a villain than most might want to consider.

A wry look of sympathy twisted the duke’s face, and Elsie had to mentally shake her head and tried her best to dismiss the idea that the duke might ever be classed as attractive.

“I think it gives the area an unpleasantly debauched aura. Which certainly fits my family’s reputation,” he continued, “when you look at what my own father is reported to have done in his youth, not to mention all my uncles. Their actions rather place them alongside Arthur’s father.”

“Do you think that all Ashmores are so cursed?” It was not that Elsie believed in curses, but Margot was an Ashmore, and if there was any hint of truth to it, Elsie should know, so she could defend her sister.

“Being related to the Ashmore name is rarely found to be a good thing.”

Taking a step nearer to him, Elsie sank down next to His Grace. “I’m afraid I am

quite ignorant of your family's history.”

Kit—that seemed too intimate to her, though that was his name—gave her a strange look, weighing her up almost, before coming to a decision .

“It is probably nothing more than coincidence and merely bad luck,” he finally said, although there was an edge to his voice that spoke of something he was keeping from her.

Well, Elsie could understand they had, after all, only just met, and their talk had drifted into the wildly inappropriate.

So, Elsie decided against pushing against his obvious discomfort. Perhaps it was best to change the subject. “When I was small, and my little brother was born, I told everyone that he was bad luck. It is probably rather cruel of me to say so, but I was not pleased to no longer be the youngest, and dear William had quite the ugliest nose.” The duke made no reply, so Elsie continued confidingly, “He has now much improved, grown into the feature as my mother would say, but I told my sister, Margot—sorry, Miss Keating as I should call her—that our younger brother was...”

“That your brother was cursed?”

“Yes.”

“Because of his nose?”

Rather shamefacedly, Elsie nodded. “That is what I told her. I was only four at the time.”

To her surprise the duke laughed. There was something warm to the noise, which seemed with the strength of it to reach out and touch her limbs—to heat her body.

Then he lent nearer, closing the distance between the two of them so that their shoulders touched. “Gaining a sibling is not always such a gift, especially when one is so small.” He paused, suddenly alert. “God, you’re freezing.”

“I have lost several parts of my gown. Which is presumably not aiding in keeping me snug.” Elsie made a gesture down at her ruined dress and chemise. “All in a good cause of course.”

“If you would not deem it hugely inappropriate on my part, may I...?” He angled his broad chest towards her, offering to embrace her with his body. Her eyes moved down his shirt which was damp and beneath it she could make out the shape of his muscled chest. “I mean no disrespect towards you but in order for us...”

“To stay warm?” she asked. He was right, she was blisteringly cold, goose pimples streaking up her legs as she spoke, so her words came out with a wobble.

He didn’t wait for her reply but slowly and carefully with far more grace than she’d ever imagined him capable of, enfolded her in his arms. First the right arm closed over her shoulders, and then when she was close, his left hand came around to protectively cup her knees. There was a solid kindness to the gesture, one which a family member might display. At least that was what Elsie told herself. The problem was it did not feel remotely familiar to her—Kit was warmer than she’d expected, more keenly muscled, which she could now feel through the thin and damp layers of their clothes.

The smell of the salt was present, clinging to his curling hair, yet there was something else, an almost mint-like flavour that clung to him. It unnerved her, seeming like a temptation emanating from a man.

Being this much closer to him, she could study his features, which were far less harsh and intimidating up close. The jut of his nose seemed softer today, better suited to

him, the curve of his eyebrows, which she had dismissed as dark and heavy were actually far more winged than she'd given him credit for, and the shape of his lips, which she had originally thought too thin, held a sensuality which made her wish to gaze up at the bow. Now she could see the paleness of his eyes, originally so unnerving, were far more beautiful than she would ever imagine a man could possess. When in her shock she shuddered at this bizarre thought, his arms tightened, bringing her flush against him, and Elsie realised that even if he wished to hide it, he was holding her carefully with compassion, no man could be completely unfeeling or cynical she told herself and behave in such a manner.

Desperate after a few minutes to break the hold and what felt like thickening tension, Elsie shifted slightly. "Can you smell the scent of mint?"

For a moment Kit looked down at her in confusion, and then it cleared, and he said, "Ah yes, I happened to pass some on my way home." He lifted his hand and pointed over to his drying jacket. "I filled my pockets with leaves."

"Why?"

He leant back against the wall of the cave, and replied with a marked indifference that hinted all too clearly that this meant something dear, "It is my sister's favourite flavour, and I thought if it was brewed..."

"I would have done the same for my mother." Elsie judged it better not to linger over the mention of his sister thinking it best to focus on the gesture than the recipient. Lady Flora was a sensitive topic, and Elsie in her cold damp clothes, wretched and isolated in a cave, did not feel herself able to do the matter justice. Besides, she had no desire to further burn any bridges with the man who was currently keeping her so snug.

"I'm sorry if I scared you earlier," Kit said, and Elsie wondered if he meant during

the cove being flooded, or if it was in reference to her first night in the manor house.

“If you did so, I would not own up to the fact.” Elsie gave him a cheerful grin both as a means of reassurance to each of them. “I pride myself on not being intimidated, unless it cannot be helped.”

“Did the tides—” he started to say, and Elsie was somewhat saddened to realise he had not been referring to his initial treatment of her on her arrival. “Does the natural world have an effect on you?”

“If the storm could not, then no, I will not be so frightened by the weather. I know a great many women claim to be terrified of a storm, but I would not succumb to such weakness.” She tried her best to sound brave, and to the best of her knowledge, she was telling the truth. Of course, there were things that frightened her, but not everything had to be disclosed, despite their close proximity, which might imply some intimacy.

“Would you save any fear for certain acquaintances?” If she knew him better, Elsie wondered if he was attempting to tease her.

“Only certain people,” Elsie replied without thinking and saw an eyebrow twitch on Kit’s face, he looked like he wanted to laugh. An urge to tell him the truth about Margot, and how frightened she had been when she’d seen the dying duke on the carpet, blood surrounding him, but she swallowed it down, scared to reveal such a secret and the consequences of sharing something so personal to her sister. It could be argued it was not hers to reveal. Silence stretched as Kit waited patiently for her to tell him what was so terrifying. “My grandmother,” she finally said.

He pulled back to look down at her, quizzical surprise dancing over his face, before he laughed. “Your grandmother?”

Earnestly Elsie nodded, focusing on the more humorous elements of her grandmother. If any of it could be said to be amusing. Something that would lighten the tension that simmered awkwardly between their huddled bodies. But a story that would not hint at the family secrets Elsie wished to keep buried.

“She is very strict about society,” Elsie said. “Very proper and was not the easiest when my sister and I made our debuts into Scottish society.” It was an overview, a brief skirting of the truth. Grandmother Keating had been hideously controlling five years ago, and each season upon season she had gotten worse until Elsie loathed their annual trip to Edinburgh. It was clearer to her now why her grandmother had been so disapproving—the woman had always suspected that Margot was not actually her granddaughter. Not that it had meant she had been kind to Elsie, especially after the incident with Graves.

“I never knew my grandparents,” Kit said. “Never met a single one of them. I suppose that is not uncommon.” As she tried her best to listen to his words, she realised there was something melodic about his voice, a softness she had not appreciated before. A studied slowness that did not imply a simplicity in his mind but more that he wanted to consider his turn of phrase with consideration. Why that should be so appealing, and endear her with the desire to curl up closer, was strange.

Elsie became increasingly aware of how close his head was to grazing the top of hers, nestled as they were together, if he leant down another inch, their hair would be touching. Suddenly she desperately wished he would, it wasn’t enough to merely have his hand resting lightly on her knee and the other around her shoulders, she wanted more contact. Wanted to lose herself in his touch. “My father was the last son of his parents, and my mother was orphaned young.” Kit sighed. “I suppose if they would have been like your grandmother it is just as well, I didn’t have that particular experience.”

“If I ever have children, it pleases me to think my father and mother will be most

excellent in the role of grandparents,” Elsie said without really thinking. After all, she knew she would be highly unlikely to marry. Besides which, she should never discuss such matters with a gentleman—the idea of children, implied or at least alluded to, thus hinted at the begetting of them, and that a lady should never admit to knowing a thing about. It just seemed perhaps because they were intertwined together, that the formality of society existed far away from them. Which of course was ridiculous because, provided they survived this day, all the rules would immediately reinsert themselves all too quickly as soon as they left this cave.

Before Elsie could think of a suitable way of moving the topic of conversation on, little Lancelot came snuffling over to them, sinking down next to her feet with a whimper.

“You named the dog Lancelot?” Kit asked.

“That’s right.” Elsie ruffled the pup’s head, and the slight whine ceased. “I already had an Arthur in my life. ”

“Oh,” he said. There seemed to be depth to his oh , but she could not pinpoint quite why.

“My father is called Arthur. He is a vicar. I thought the dog could aspire to the great knight,” Elsie joked. It was easier to ignore the magnetic pull of the man beside her if she focused on the puppy.

“I believe, although I am not an expert on dogs,” Kit said, “that Lancelot is a spaniel.”

“I would have rescued him regardless.”

“I know.” Kit’s voice dropped, and it was then that their hands met as they stroked

Lancelot. She dared a glance at him, and to her surprise their eyes met and held. There was an awareness there, a bright spark, which cartwheeled and cascaded through Elsie's chest, with a growing suspicion that Kit wanted to kiss her. When his unnerving perceptive gaze dropped to her mouth, Elsie felt herself rewarded with the knowledge she had been right—he did.

But that was not all. She wondered if she wanted him too—to lean down in this quiet, cool cave and to press his lips against her. What it would feel like to kiss a relative stranger. Oh, she had known men who'd wanted to kiss or even go a step further, but she had never truly questioned whether she wanted to kiss them. Her motivation had been curiosity, at least for kisses.

Now she felt certain she did.

I wish to kiss him, even if he is a stranger, I want to know what his mouth would feel like pressed to mine. What it would be like to part my lips and have our tongues touch ...

Elsie knew that despite the chill in the air surrounding and engulfing them, her cheeks were colouring with the heated idea. Slipping its trickster way beneath her senses and heating her blood, blooming in her rib cage, stomach, hips and finding its way to twist deep within her... It occurred to her that this sensation had to be desire. How like the wanton her grandmother always warned her about, how close she was to ...

How bloody inconvenient .

Cautiously she looked up. Had Kit moved closer, had he been able to read or know what she was feeling? A previous summer had left a handful of freckles on his high cheekbones, which gave him a slightly boyish air at odds with his former formality.

His hand tightened, their fingers still touching on top of Lancelot's head. Elsie

wondered if she should close her eyes, unbidden her tongue darted out to wet her lips. There was a tightening of Kit's jawline and Elsie braced herself.

Lancelot shifted, and Elsie saw the moment that Kit remembered himself, his fingers flexed and suddenly he was on his feet.

"I should check..." He gestured towards the cove and presumably the water. He stood, moved away, and started to rub a hand over his chest as if in great discomfort. Clearly, he had felt none of the same pull as she had.

Unwillingly Elsie nodded, surprised at how disappointed she was that he had stepped away.

CHAPTER 8

It was just as well that distraction came when it did. He had been tempted, tempted beyond belief to close the distance that separated them, and taste the sweetest mouth he could ever remember seeing.

Where had such an odd and inappropriate thought sprung from? It had to be a form of madness, was the only logic that Kit could ascribe to it. But if he did so, he could hardly call himself a gentleman—they were trapped, she had no option of leaving, and all around them was danger. He would be the worst sort of man imaginable.

So, he had moved as quickly as he could, his ribcage plaguing him. Now he stared down at the waters far below. The tides did seem to be calming, but there was no sign that they were retreating. It could be hours before they did, and in this narrow, damp cave with the partially dressed Miss Keating—no, Elsie, that was what she asked him to call her.

With another check of the view below, Kit stepped back away from the edge. If he was going to resist giving into the strangely beguiling or bedraggled allure of Elsie, he was going to have to find something to fill up the space that burnt between them .

Moving back to sink down beside her, Kit positioned his legs carefully, out in front of him, providing what he considered a barrier. Adding to this, he folded his arms one on top of another, further adding a layer of a shield. It was important she did not receive the wrong impression about him, as much for his own sanity as anything else.

When he finally looked at Elsie, he was a little disappointed to see she was paying

him no heed, but all her focus was on her little spaniel, who cuddled close to her. Well, she could be warmed by Lancelot. The most optimistically named dog that Kit had ever met.

“I offer my apologies if there was a reason...” Elsie finally glanced up, her brown eyes bright in the cave. “If I made anything awkward, I am sure it is due to my country ways.”

Unable to countenance that he wouldn’t be classed in the same way by the beau monde that he’d met, Kit laughed. Amusement welcomed in such a grimy little cave. By society’s standards, he was classed a lofty duke now, supposedly the head of one of England’s ancient and noble families, but gaining the title had never truly occurred to Kit as a possibility, certainly not one he wanted or pursued. But from the way Elsie was regarding him, suddenly he wanted to explain to this young woman the truth. Or at least part of it—he doubted he could fully explain all of it, after all he had already told her about the curse and that hadn’t been believed.

“Since we’ve already moved past the more obvious revelations, there is something I can tell you that might be worthwhile knowing about my family.”

“Beyond what you have already shared?”

“Yes.” There was a disease within him, and yet, he wanted to tell her. It was as if there was a separation built in—because of the distinct possibility of death and the fact he felt attracted to her—an instinct within him that, if he told her, some of these burdens both new and old would be dispelled. Hell, even if he did well, neither of them might survive the climb down, and if they did, they might die in the uneven waters below. “My family—the Ashmores are said to be blighted, which I alluded to earlier. But it was why my father moved us away from London, away from it all to protect my mother and any children they might have. He did not want any of us associated with his brothers. Well, it did not work.” He turned back to look down at

her. There was no judgement on her features, no she was watching him intently. “I’m sure it is quite nonsensical to you hearing such things.”

Elsie’s face twisted, at once amusing and reflective but also not entirely clear what she was thinking. As Kit watched her, he saw she was dwelling on his words, forming her thoughts—it was fascinating to watch as she considered the matter and then finally answered, “If you believe it to be true, if what you have witnessed has led to this conclusion, then who am I to pass judgement?”

For a moment, Kit wished she would pass her sentence, there would be a relief in hearing her clear-headed rationale on it. Or perhaps it was because she was a vicar’s daughter there was a religious benediction to her words, a salvation in hearing her view. To have it settled by her decision, and then he could stop carrying his father’s fears with him and around him.

“From what I have seen of your uncle, the brief time I knew him...” Elsie paused, her eyes looking down at the cave, her perfect rosebud mouth almost pouting, then she lifted her head as if she wanted to reassure him. “I believe that could well be an ill omen on you and your family. Unless we can find a more natural cause of it...”

“You do not even know half of what has occurred.”

“Sometimes I think it does not matter what the individual has seen or knows but what that person considers to be true. It is gospel to them. I suppose that would not hold up to the great scientists of the day.” Elsie smiled at him in what Kit took to be a warm encouraging manner. “You see my mother always said my father was her knight in shining armour—that he saved her. Saved her life. It might not be true or at least not entirely, but if it pleases her, then what is the harm? The only difference I suppose is that this curse of yours is not a pleasing bedtime tale. But more of a nightmare.”

And to which there is no cure, Kit thought rather morosely. Unable to resist the pull

of her kind belief, he lifted up his jacket and handed it to Elsie to wrap around herself.

“For hundreds of years, I don’t know when it began, but the Ashmores were supposed to possess a great fortune.” Unable to stop himself, Kit resumed his seat next to her. His jacket was now draped over her shoulders, and although not entirely dry at least would provide another layer for her. If he focused on the grisly or sordid aspects of his ancestors’ past, perhaps this would be a sufficient distraction to stop his wayward thoughts from the more physically appealing aspects of Elsie Keating. He was a grown man of thirty, this should be doable—they were facing potential death surely, he could be sensible enough to make this topic his key focus. “Of course, no one has seen this treasure. Or if they have, it has not been shared widely with the family. You saw the state of the manor. If properties are not entailed, they have been sold off in order to keep the estate afloat.”

“You will have to marry a great heiress if the family fortune cannot be found.” There was a teasing note to Elsie’s comment, but when he glanced at her, she had huddled close to him and into the folds of his jacket which dwarfed her.

“I think that is the trick at least a few of my family members have tried, so I would imagine that the dukedom is a rather sordid prize at this point in time. Or the beau monde would be wise to my intentions.”

“A dukedom is still a dukedom regardless of its past.”

She was being too *laissez-faire* for his tastes. “You don’t know what they’ve done, seducing and disregarding women as if they were nothing more than...” He heaved out a sigh. “And that was just the last generation, the earlier lords were said to?—”

Suddenly Elsie’s hand shot out, and she took his gesturing hand in a soothing manner, her fingers sliding through his. “Just because our family is not what we would have

wished, does not mean we are doomed or must repeat their mistakes. Your father sounds as if he were far more than his errors in judgement.”

“Even if the treasure could be found, which I suppose it must be eventually, I’m not sure I would even want it.” That was the secret he had been holding on to. The one he could not carry forward into whatever the next few hours held—if they were to survive them—it needed to be aired out and acknowledged. He had not even been able to admit this to his father, and it hurt him that this was what the man had spoken as he lay dying on the ground rather than talking about Kit, his sister, or their mother. No, his father had just spoken of the cursed family fortune, how his brothers wanted some poxy diamonds. “I do not wish to spend my life in pursuit or in the need for money. That it would come to define me. I would wish for something greater.” As it had for his father despite him running away to avoid it.

“Do you not think enough to mitigate that possibility?” Her voice was soft, which Kit was beginning to learn hid the strength of will behind her sentiments.

“For some.” Kit could not shake the memory of his father on the ground, lying there, bleeding from his mouth, and he wanted to talk of it yet also run a mile from the memory. “Maybe one has to be very courageous to manage it.”

“I’m not sure if I could be classed as that.” Elsie leant in closer, her head coming to rest against Kit’s shoulder, it was moving to feel her there. rather like she was pleased for his presence. “But when you meet my sister Margot, you will see what a formidable woman she is. I don’t think I know a stronger one. I think I can see a few notes of similarity between the two of you—if only in your stubbornness.”

“Me stubborn, madam?”

She laughed, it was a chilly one, roughed by the cave but unmistakably a sound of mirth. “Indeed sir, a very stubborn streak.” She gave a shudder, and Kit gave in,

lowering his legs to pull her flat against his chest. It was amazing he thought as she snuggled up against him, how neatly she fitted against his chest. A fool would believe it was as if she were designed to be nestled in his arms—her sharp little chin, cushioned by his muscles, her head stilled against his heart, their hips aligned—a fool as he said, or a romantic. And Kit liked to think he was neither of those things.

“When we survive this, when we leave here, you will meet her,” Elsie said. The words were a little muffled although there was a determination to the statement, and Kit gave a rueful smile which she could not see. It was practically enough for him to believe Elsie she sounded so sure. “You can tell me if you want to, how they died.”

No one had ever said that to him, Kit realised. The magistrate had needed him to confirm the facts of the matter. Flora had needed him to carry her away from the site. The manor required that he step into his father’s shoes but not a soul had offered to hear what had actually happened. No, the estate and the general vicinity preferred to listen to the rumours. Whereas here a veritable stranger, admittedly one nestled in his arms, was offering to hear and he could almost share the burden of the experience.

“I would not wish to distress you.”

“I have survived a storm. A night in your manor house. And now, hopefully, a near drowning in a cove.” Elsie lifted her head, and her warm brown eyes looked up into his, and suddenly Kit knew he had to tell her. He had to admit the guilt, the horror, and the sadness that had trailed him for the last few months because admitting it in this damp little cave would feel as if it was, at least in part, lifted from his shoulders. “I don’t think a story will shake me too greatly.”

“It’s my fault they died.” The words slipped out of his mouth, and Kit let them drop easily enough. “It was late November. We had been invited to the nearest town—there was a party. I don’t suppose my silly reasoning for wishing to go matters now.” The truth was he was resentful of being cooped up in Cornwall, trapped and

desperately wanting a way of lifting boredom. It felt so petty and trivial now he thought about it. “We set off. Flora was poorly, but I insisted. The roads were bad.” As he spoke, he found his gaze drifted to Elsie’s face, watching her closely for a reaction, a telltale sign of her distaste or disgust. “It was supposed to be a grand party, all the local beauties, champagne... and I was desperate to be out of the manor.” Kit looked back on his actions—ones of a demanding child, harrying his parents and sister into the carriage. “But it was a longer trip, so we needed the older carriage, and it hadn’t been checked. The wheels went from beneath the old contraption miles from anywhere—I had been riding, but even at a distance I could hear my sister screaming. It was so dark; all the carriage lights were out. By the time I got there, my mother had been thrown clear and was dead. But my father...” Kit trailed off, his father’s glassy eyes seeking out his, his bloodied lips moving, muttering about that curse. “It took me too long to find him, and when I did, it was too late.”

“That doesn’t sound as if it was your fault.” As she said this, her rescued Lancelot came and curled up next to them. The dog’s warmth heated them slightly, and the animal let out a comical little sigh.

Kit grimaced but knew he needed to admit it all. “You see, it was my fault. Didn’t you say you would believe me when I spoke.”

“But I thought it was a curse, so then it can’t be your fault. It would be beyond your control, surely?”

There was a sympathetic tilt to her face, but Kit could tell that Elsie was pleased with her logical reasoning. He allowed her theory to sit with him—perhaps that was what his father had been trying to tell him, as a way of lessening Kit’s guilt.

“Horrible things happen every day,” Elsie continued, pulling Kit out of his reverie. “The reason my parents met was because of a carriage crash, no one was at fault, it was an accident, a pure coincidence I suppose you might say, but sadly the driver

died. However, if it hadn't occurred, well they would never have met, and neither my brother nor I..." she said. "I don't wish to say there was a reason for your parents' deaths, but I am certain that neither of them blamed you."

Whether it was true or not, it was still kind of her to say it, but it went beyond the simply considerate. There was a sincerity to her words, and when she lent in closer, her head came to rest against his chest—she trusted him enough to be close, to be held by him.

Minutes eased by, and Kit enjoyed the solace of the silence, the comfort of being close to someone who knew the truth. Her knowing of his confession was a small burden being eased from his shoulders.

"I suppose that is how you injured yourself?" her question was a quiet one as if she too did not want to spoil the truce.

"That is correct..." Kit had not really dwelt on that side of things, having to break into the smashed carriage, pulling out his sister and then looking for the others. Lifting Flora free had not been burdensome, but getting her out when she was unconscious hadn't been straightforward, but part of the broken bits of wood had stabbed his arm as he'd freed his sister. He had ignored it. Pretending it wasn't painful for hours, working to find everyone since the driver was of no use, injured with a bad concussion, and Flora was dead to the world. In the darkness with no nearby buildings, Kit had worked through the blackness searching for his parents, each second underlining the fact that he was unlikely to locate them alive. Days later, the doctors had checked him, told him to rest, and Kit had tried, but there was a great deal to do around the manor, regardless of the pain he felt. It was an earned pain. It was what he deserved.

Elsie's fingers reached for his and they linked their hands together, holding his injured wrist in her grasp. She didn't add anything else, and when he heard her breath

start to slow and become steady, he realised she had fallen asleep in his arms.

When Kit looked down at Lancelot, the dog was watching him with a tilted head, and Kit felt a wave of responsibility wash over him. It was not the same as it had been with his parents or even Flora, this time was different. Lancelot lowered his head, and Kit closed his eyes, not allowing himself to dwell on why it might be different.

CHAPTER 9

N ight had fallen when Elsie started up, a heavy cool darkness had flooded the cave they were in. The storm from yesterday had cleared though, and sheer bright moonlight played across the rocky stones, bathing the space in a silvery soft glow. As they'd slept, the two of them had rolled almost as a unit, with Elsie coming to rest slightly on her front, with Kit curled up beside her, his arm casually draped over her waist. She was surprised how easily she'd fallen asleep. It would not seem the most natural place to find respite. Yet she had, and how nicely it had felt to be so close to the heat of another's body in such a location.

Aware of how improper their positions were, Elsie jumped upright. She hurried to the edge of the cave. Below were the soft waves, the cove still full, and yet, it did not seem to her untrained eyes as if it was as choppy or as rough as before. Distantly she could make out the strange little cottage she'd been so curious about earlier in the day. It was utterly untouched by the waves, protected by an encirclement of rocks that kept a barrier between itself and the water. It was rather unnerving and an unnatural sight .

She turned back to look at Kit—or as she should probably be thinking at least internally, at the duke. It was important to keep those two as separate entities in her mind. One was the man who'd likely saved her life twice. The other, the cold noble who would decide her sister's future. Either way, it was crucial she remembered he held the power with both dynamics.

“Has it cleared?” He was getting to his feet, seemingly unruffled by the experience of being huddled up together, warmed and entwined as a pair.

Kit stroked Lancelot's head as he moved closer to her and nodded at Elsie in such a manner that she felt as if she was nothing more than a good friend. So much, she thought, for any romantic illusions she might have built, better to squish those out of her head right away.

"No," Elsie said, "although it seems calmer. Quieter than before. Do you think it worth descending and trying to make our way back?"

Kit peered down. He had drawn on his coat as he'd walked over, and the sleepiness that she enjoyed slipped away from him with casual ease. "It's an option. I would certainly like to be back at the manor sooner rather than later." He lifted his eyes up to hers, dwelling on her for a moment, and Elsie recalled that if she were a proper lady, a woman governed by society's rules, then she too should be worried about being trapped in such a position with such a man.

But nothing had happened despite how tempting she had thought it would be if he had kissed her. That did not count. It was not enough to ruin her good name. It had not happened, and one could not be punished for what one imagined despite Grandmother Keating's views on the matter.

"It does seem to be retreating," Kit mused, upright again and close to her. "The alternative is that we wait here until it is completely drained and descend then. But that would leave us vulnerable if we slipped climbing down the rocks." By the term we, Elsie thought he meant more specifically her, but given her torn dress, not to mention her numerous experiences as a child climbing everything that was available in Berwick-upon-Tweed, Elsie thought she could manage the descent with either the water there or not. Her preference was to leave the disconcerting cave, swim back through the calmer waves, towards the pathway and get back to the relative safety of the manor.

"I think we should go," Elsie said. She sucked in her breath and raised her chin. "I for

one am hungry and getting back to the manor...”

“Would it be better than a lonesome cave?” Kit asked. Then she caught his smile. “Don’t fear. I know you won’t start considering the manor house a ‘friendly’ location anytime soon.”

Ignoring the desire to smile back in a similarly warm manner, Elsie said instead, “It would be easier to get down and into the water rather than risk falling without the safety of the waves.”

“Very well,” Kit said. “Right. I’d best go first. If we create a sling, I can go down with Lancelot on my back.”

Using the end of the dress, they did just that, and when he started his descent, Elsie watched from the edge as the pair of them slowly moved away from her. Closer and closer to the water below. It was a less hurried affair than their ascent. Kit managed to climb down the front of the cliff. He went slowly, and for that she was grateful, as it reduced his risk of falling. Or Lancelot slipping out.

Once at the bottom she was pleased to see the water came up only to his waist. He looked up the front and waved, a smile visible from where she perched.

As she started to climb down herself, Elsie was impressed at how skilfully Kit had managed the stones, they were slippery beneath her fingers. Briefly an insight bloomed within her mind, that he must be rather strong—after all she had seen those muscles under his wet shirt just a few hours ago—to manage the climb, whereas she was clinging on and hoping not to slip .

Surely it was not common for a man—as her mind turned back over the shape and the heat of his body, one of her hands slid a little off the rock she was using, and below she heard his bellow of fear. Scolding herself Elsie forced her thoughts back to the

cliff front.

When she reached near enough to the bottom though, she felt his strong hands grasp first her legs to keep her steady, then her waist, to ease her away from the rocks.

“There we go, I’ve got you.” He held her, and it unnerved Elsie how much her breathing was laboured, and how eagerly she clung to him now that she was off the cliff face. It was a little flattering she thought as he too seemed a touch reluctant to lower her the rest of the way.

“Do you want to avoid a re-soaking? I can try to carry you out of the cove.” Kit cut into her whimsical hopes, and Elsie was disappointed to realise yet again he was just being a gentleman.

“I can swim or wade as it is not very high.” She said with as much dignity as she could, and when Kit lowered her down into the water. She was rather pleased when he reached across and took her hand, interlacing their fingers both damp and needful.

“This way.” He had already turned and started taking long steps cutting through the water, with Elsie in his wake. Her eyes rooted to Lancelot still strapped to the duke’s back. The blasted animal looked as if he might be smiling, completely at his ease, and Elsie wondered suddenly if she too had worn such a daft expression of content when she dozed, cuddled up in Kit’s arms in the cave.

A realisation hit her as they moved through the water, although she was not sure how she could ever tell him. He had an aura of deep reassurance and strength—which was a gift perhaps, and one, ironically the man did not seem to know that he possessed. It seemed he did not want his title, or any of the pressures of the role, but it struck Elsie that actually Kit would be greatly skilled at such an opportunity. Of course, she could hardly tell him that. It would feel far too much of an overstep, and besides what she knew—an impoverished daughter of a vicar—her viewpoint was of little value to

society or more importantly to him.

How inappropriate to have such a thought about a man, Elsie scolded herself. But that feeling wouldn't leave her as they moved through the shallow waves and towards the pathway, she had scrambled down hours ago.

"I suppose," Elsie said. There was a wobble to her voice as she stepped out of the water and onto the pathway. "This could be classed as a great adventure."

Kit, who was a few feet ahead of her on his knees freeing Lancelot, glanced back at her. The look he gave her was one of scepticism and doubt. "I would hasten to correct that misconception. No one local comes down here. Your maid must have misunderstood what the household was talking about."

"She knew I wanted to see the sea. Just not that close. Surely some people came down here, after all what about the cottage?"

"I told you it is said to be haunted."

"I mean..." Elsie raised her hands to her arms and hugged them against her cold, clinging day dress. Now she was out of the water and out of the danger, her body was even more aware of her own tremors. "It does seem as if a haunting or a curse is a common theory in these parts. You would think everyone would have gotten bored or..." Her attempt at humour did not seem to land with Kit, who started shaking his head.

Striding closer, he placed his arm around her, it did not have the same kindness as it had in the cave, but almost seemed to scold her with his touch. With a forceful step he marched them both up the pathway towards the top of the cliff. Elsie was too self-conscious to utter any objection at how quickly they were moving.

“I really would recommend you staying at the manor house,” Kit said as they reached the cliff’s top. “It’s far safer. ”

Elsie wondered if that was true. There were the cobwebs, the odd and distant staff, his unwell sister, and everywhere she turned he liked to bring up a curse or an ill omen. To her mind, the safest course of action was leaving the place as soon as possible. With that in mind, she turned her head and looked sideways at him. “How was yesterday’s work, clearing the road?”

“Slow.” Kit released her as he pulled off his jacket and placed it around her shoulders as he had done in the cave. “Come, miss. I will gather my horse, and you can sit on him back to the manor. That should warm you up a little.”

Miss? He wished to reinstate a proper formality, that much was clear, and Elsie had thought there was a moment of hope of at least a friendlessness between the two of them.

With a sigh, hiding any disappointment that any closeness they had created seemed to have slipped away, Elsie replied grandly, “Yes, of course, Your Grace.” Moving forward, she fell in step with him until they saw his horse tied to a tree. Kit—or His Grace, Elsie corrected herself—stroked the horse’s side and then turned to Elsie, his face expressionless. He seemed drained by today’s events—the forest’s dense greens created a dim light on him.

“Can I lift you up?” His tone was polite.

Mutely Elsie nodded, not knowing what else to say, and she found herself lifted up in the air and then placed in the saddle. Deposited there by him, before he walked around to the horse’s rein and started to lead them through the woodland.

Watching his straight back, Elsie knew she could say something, begin a conversation

or she could at least try to. When she was better at being in society, something would spring to her mind. But nothing occurred to her. She could not think of how to begin with him as if he were a stranger, nor could she strike up a topic of talk referring back to the cave. His Grace didn't want that—he had made that clear. So instead, she let her eyes linger on him, study his body, with an interest that was far from ladylike. After all she'd been cuddled up next to him, it felt defiant and rebellious to ogle him. It was an indulgence on her part but now she could, without the interruption of the water or the presence of the household trying to serve them dinner, she could allow herself the opportunity. Elsie noted the well sculpted shape of his legs, the heat of which had warmed her earlier. Her eyes trailed higher to his arse, which was rounded and held by some rather handsome buff-coloured trousers. For someone buried deep in the countryside, His Grace dressed very nicely. With a naughty idea slipping through her head, Elsie felt sure he would be even better without such items clothing him.

“Nearly there,” he said. He cut into her wanton meandering thoughts, and hastily Elsie lifted her eyes over him and out towards the horizon where the trees were starting to ease away and reveal the fields close by, and beyond that the manor house. It loomed there, cold, and large in its very stillness. It seemed to exist there, luring her closer without any alternative option of where she might go. A dead spot, her active mind suddenly burnt with the term, and unable to help herself she suppressed a shudder.

It should have been comforting to have the known sight of a building, where there would be beds, food, even a roaring fire to warm her up. That would have been the normal reaction, but instead for a wild moment, Elsie thought she would rather be back in the cave. Back with a gentleman who she didn't know, but who both scared and thrilled her in equal measure.

“There you are, miss.” A great cry could be heard as her maid broke away from the shelter of the building. Samson crossed the gap towards them, her round face

gleaming with fretfulness. “Everyone was worried, and they’ve been searching, but no one could find anything. Nor could anyone see you in the cove.” She looked between the two of them, noticing Elsie’s ripped skirt and the fact that she currently wore the duke’s coat.

“I think a hot toddy by the fire would be in order,” the duke said as he turned in the direction of the stable. There was the immediate shuffling of feet as several servants jumped to it once they had a directive. “Let me help you down.” He looked up at Elsie, and for one fleeting moment, their gazes locked. For all of his change in behaviour since they’d left the cove, there was something else there now. An emotion which Elsie could not entirely label or wish to pinpoint swirled in the depths of his eyes—there was pain, suppression too, of sensation that burnt beneath the surface within Kit’s face. What did he want her to know?

Unable to think of a response or something suitable to say, Elsie dropped her gaze, and the duke lowered her to the ground. The stable was full of people, their talk and questions clustering together. They would see the two of them in this state and assume a great deal.

She hastily pulled away from him and walked after her maid, the duke’s jacket still clamped around her. It was hard to concentrate on the manor house and the staring open-mouthed servants, watching Elsie in her torn dress and bedraggled appearance. Behind the pair of them followed Lancelot, seemingly unaware of the tension that ran through the surroundings.

Up the stairs and into the bedroom, it had been aired, and the curtains partly open, allowing in a soft breeze. The bedroom had been cleaned too, but there was a rather invasive element to the chamber—it created the impression of being intruded upon.

Someone had lit a fire before they arrived, and Samson set about slowly pulling off Elsie’s gown and hurriedly finding another dress should Elsie want to put it on. But

Elsie refused, she was happy in her chemise with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. There was no desire within her to go downstairs and face or talk to the duke again.

“That will do the trick, a nice warm bath,” Samson said comfortingly as she looked at Elsie. It seemed like the little maid was feeling guilty for suggesting visiting the cove. She walked off to the door and had a silent conversation with the other servant who’d come to the door. As they talked in low voices, Elsie walked away from the middle of the room. There was something to what Samson had said—a bath would improve the condition of Elsie’s body. What could be done about her scattered thoughts on the duke, well perhaps a bath might help with that too.

Sinking down on the edge of the bed, Elsie watched the interaction until Samson accepted the tray from the maid with a nod of her head. A glimmer of a smile touched Elsie’s lips as she saw that on the tray was a selection of sandwiches and the promised hot toddy, its golden liquid glinting in the late afternoon light. The duke had insisted that Elsie receive the drink, and there was something rather sweet about that gesture. Then again, perhaps a servant had just followed through on the duke’s request.

“The tub will be brought up soon,” Samson said. “They’ve promised it will be hot.” She lowered the tray down onto the nearest table. “Do you want me to stay with you, miss?”

“No,” Elsie said, “I will be fine until the tub arrives.”

Samson nodded and slipped out of the chamber.

With a sigh Elsie dropped back on the bed, hoping the cushioned surface would be soothing but as soon as her head landed, it brushed against a piece of paper. Rolling over, Elsie lifted the page up. It was not in an envelope, hastily scribbled and written

across the cream surface. It read: get out whilst you still can.

CHAPTER 10

K it lolled in his armchair in his study. Hopefully he would be left undisturbed with the bottle of whisky close beside him, and the memory of the last few hours would be dispelled. That was what he needed, time and space to drown all those confusing emotions, that Miss Keating inspired in him, and the remaining mystery that swirled around her being down here. She was a curiosity, one he resented mainly because he did not enjoy unanswered questions, but if he was honest with himself, being remotely interested physically in a woman was an inconvenience.

The deep quiet of the night was a welcome sight after the day he'd had, and the dusk in the cave and return walk had not brought any relief. Nor had the last few hours helped much. He'd heard how the roads beyond the estate were still blocked, and his butler assured him, even if he were to send out each and every one of the servants to help, it could be weeks before an exit would be possible and the roads accessible again. It was not because he felt a strong desire to go, his remaining on the estate was all he could envision for himself, but packing off the confusing Miss Keating... Well, that would be a solution .

For an indulgent moment as he sipped his strong drink, and let his imagination wander back to the cave, the memory recalled how Miss Keating—how Elsie—had felt nestled and secure against his body. She curled up so sweetly, so naively. Of course, it had to be innocent, didn't it? As the daughter of a vicar, surely Elsie had no idea what thoughts she might inspire in a man with her back wriggled close to his chest, her rounded bottom pressed against the flaps of his trousers, and their legs entwined. It had been for warmth, he told himself, after all the coldness of the cave had played a crucial part in her decision. There could be no other thought in her mind.

All his wicked, desirous instincts that drifted to her dainty body, dishonouring her in all the ways he wanted, in the same manner he'd always judged his relatives?—

From next door, there was a loud crashing sound, and the distinctly unladylike voicing of a curse, despite the speaker most definitely being a woman.

Kit found himself on his feet, alert despite the swishing of whisky that was colouring his vision and distorting his reactions. He had no doubts who it was, and the very devil in him that battled against desire, annoyance and confusion carried him forward to the side door, which he flung open almost vindictively, to look across the adjoining library with a calculated fury. She had no business being downstairs at this time, was it not enough that she was bothering him, flitting in and out his mind and stirring his blood, without destroying parts of his already dilapidated manor house?

“Why Miss Keating, what mischief are you set about now?” he was quite pleased his voice came out steady and clipped, with no sign of the three tumblers of whisky he'd ingested.

She was posed on a ladder, halfway up the bookcase, around her a pile of books.

Insolently Kit's eyes travelled down her form. Her hair was loose, and by the candle she had carried with her, he could see the flickers of light hit the chestnut waves with a warm glow. The expression was harder to tell as she ducked her head, then he could not see her brown eyes or the feelings dancing there. She was wearing a nightdress, a billowing white monstrosity that his eyes narrowed in on—it looked wispy and insubstantial. Had she really been wandering around in such a state? With only a casually draped Indian shawl wrapped around her as any kind of barrier. A vision of tearing at the material, as he had done with the bottom of her gown, flashed through his mind, and his body tensed at the idea. Now all he wanted to do was tear that nightdress off her and fall upon that delightful body.

“Oh, I did not think anyone would be awake.” She was still perched on the ladder, seemingly frozen in place.

“So, you thought you would throw my belongings all over the floor?”

“They slipped.” Her reply made sense, but it was not something Kit wanted to embrace, having been logical, gentlemanly, and practical all day, now all he wanted was the chance of indulging in some of his other instincts—ones which he did not think a vicar’s daughter should ever be privy to.

“What made you think it appropriate to roam around a household at midnight? Is this the norm in Berwick-upon-Tweed, or even Edinburgh? Do you regularly take yourself to explore a gentleman’s house with so little regard for—” he had stalked forward, ignoring all his earlier kindness and their interaction because of his frustration over her. The latter feeling had blended together his questions, his thwarted lust, and his general annoyance, and created a baser feeling best summed up as anger.

But it seemed as if this was enough to stir a similar response from Elsie. Her body moved, turning towards the onslaught, her feet carrying her down the ladder, and across to the table to snatch up her candle. Despite the low lighting, he could not see the colour that bloomed in her cheeks, and the fire that had sparked in her eyes .

“You seem to delight in being the most changeable creature I have ever met.” She was within five feet of him, her diminutive height not diminishing the matching annoyance. “One minute the daring rescuer, then the unwelcoming host, and yet you came down into the cove and...” She had reached him, and with her free hand swatted at his chest. He would have liked nothing more than to snatch up that little fist, and pressed it against the muscle, but he let her fingers drop away. “I can tell my presence displeases you, but look what was left for me to find today, tucked into my bed. Can you wonder why I feel the need to seek the smallest of comforts in a book?”

She extracted from her sleeve a small sheet of paper, with the words get out whilst you still can scribble on it. Despite the dim light Kit was fairly sure he recognised the handwriting, and he thought the writing resembled Flora's.

With a decisive movement he tucked the note into his inner jacket pocket, promising himself a discussion with his sister in the morning.

Elsie was watching him expectantly. "Is this typically how guests are treated here?"

"To say we hardly ever receive company would be an understatement, added to which, would you say you were a typical guest?" Kit wondered whether he should list all the ways that Elsie was not in any way behaving in a manner that any of his distant acquaintances would have deemed suitable. Then again, he reasoned that finding such a threatening note on her bed was far from ideal—what had his sister been doing? Still, he did not feel as if he could cast Flora aside and inform Elsie that she was correct in principle—no, today he had spent far too much time realising how insightful the young woman was before he went around admitting as such to her. She was a stranger here, and his loyalty was to his sister.

"I did not claim to be typical," Elsie snapped, having waited long enough for Kit to say something else. She turned and walked across to the library's fireplace, which still had some burning embers in the grate. The soft light was not enough to penetrate the layers of her nightdress, so instead it created a golden halo around her—so she seemed rather like an angel shining there. Elsie made a loud sucking noise as she drew in a heavy breath. One of annoyance or sadness, he was not sure. It rather spoiled that poetic image, but oddly enough Kit found it endearing. "Nonetheless..."

"It may well have been placed in your chamber as a harmless tease." Kit stayed where he was, and to his ears the words sounded hollow and insincere. Given Flora's normal refusal to even talk with him let alone anyone else, he had no doubt that she had meant every word she had written. It was a warning, or was it supposed to be a

threat?

“If I could leave,” she muttered, “then I would take great satisfaction in leaving, but that is not possible. To almost be stranded out on the moors the first night and drowned the next was not what I pictured doing. What is likely to happen on the third?”

Realising that he had to say a little more, Kit walked to the chair which was positioned closer to the fire. It had a low seat, so when he sank down onto the cushioned pillow, he was left gazing up at her. To his mind it felt rather confessional, and his previous decision vanished as he said. “I think it was my sister, rather than any of the servants.”

“She is frightened of leaving the manor?”

Everything seemed to scare Flora at the moment, Kit thought. He had not given due consideration to leaving the manor for fear that a wider diagnosis would see him lose his one remaining family member, with the doctors insisting on carting poor Flora away to a madhouse. Although he was supposedly a peer of the realm now, so he would now have the power to stop such actions. Finally, he nodded, although he was not sure if it was true, he had no real insight into his sister, not anymore.

“I can help you,” Elsie said. “I would like to.”

Despite all his intentions and efforts to be different from his ancestors and uncles, Elsie’s offer, the look of kindness on her face, and the expression in her eyes, made vivid, craven images play wantonly through his mind. Yes, yes, she could help him there, ease his body as he pounded into hers, give into the craving, the sought-after release for the lust that beat through his blood, drag Kit most willingly into the sweet black surrender after fucking... Yes, Elsie Keating, with her innocent wide eyes and perfect pout of a mouth, could certainly do that.

“What I mean is perhaps I could speak to Lady Flora?”

Kit found his face had formed a frown as she spoke, but Elsie had no idea that this scowl was far more directed towards himself and his own previous thoughts than it was towards her and her generous offer.

Her little nose wrinkled. “You think it a terrible idea?”

The truth was far more complicated than that, but the sweetness of Elsie’s desire to help, moved him. After all, Kit reasoned, surely it couldn’t hurt?

“No,” he said. “It was most kind of you. Especially given her actions towards you. But,” he added when he saw the brightness glimmer on her upturned face, “I have tried numerous activities, suggestions... She is quite trapped in her own mind.”

Elsie was nodding, her hands twisting as she moved closer, taking the seat on the armrest next to him as she considered his words. There was a small line between her brows and her teeth came out to chew on the rounded curve of her bottom lip. He wondered what it would taste like if he tried the same—strawberries his mind whispered, not the ones shipped down from London that were large and often watery, but fresh from the summer gardens, full of dappled sunlight and sharp tang. She would taste like the promise of summer.

“When is her birthday?” Elsie asked.

“In five weeks,” Kit answered. It would be Flora’s eighteenth, the first she had spent without either of her parents, and Kit had not ordered her a thing. Guilt roiled through him.

“We should throw her a party,” Elsie said, a dimple appearing in her left cheek as she grinned at him, pleased with her idea.

It was a wild, silly idea, Kit immediately thought—Flora never spoke, ran around the manor house and gardens as if she were untamed and loathed all forms of company. Surely doing such a thing would simply be a disaster. He was about to say this when Elsie held up her hand.

“I’m sure it sounds quite mad, but if we—I mean to say your household—were to demonstrate what faith we had in her, if Lady Flora could see the benefits of learning to be in society... perhaps it might prove a motivation.”

Leaning back in his seat, Kit eyed Elsie sceptically. It was a highly risky move, which might involve his sister’s humiliation, but that did not seem to be what was motivating Elsie in the slightest, she earnestly seemed to wish to help. Kit simply had so little faith in it working out that he was certain the doubts played across his face.

“If I was to say yes,” Kit spoke slowly. He did not wish to promise too much or even agree to the party yet. First, he needed some kind of guarantee of his sister’s protection. Despite how eager and bright-eyed Elsie appeared to be at his cautious words. “My family is hardly popular in the area. It would seem highly unlikely that anyone of interest would arrive...”

“We’re hardly intending to marry your sister off,” Elsie said. “If anything, the promise of music, of a new gown, of different people—even if those people are merely the vicar, his wife and say a dozen local citizens...”

“You would wish to arrange such a thing for a family you barely know and a young woman who writes you threatening notes?”

Elsie paused her breath, halting whatever she had been about to say, and looked down at him. “I do think it might help. Isolation certainly hasn’t.”

“But?” Kit asked. There was a hesitation in her last few words.

“I will help, but in return I want your word. Once her birthday is done, marked, and hopefully celebrated with a lovely party, we will leave for London. My sister needs us in Town, and whilst the roads and Lady Flora may be a good reason for deferment, after the party, we must leave.”

In an effort to hide his smirk at her demands, Kit raised a hand and covered his mouth. Whilst he might forget he was a newly made duke, it seemed his companion did too. The truth was that Kit rather liked how bitingly direct Elsie could be. There was a cutthroat brusqueness to her character, which was at odds with her dainty elfin persona, that he found admirable. Or certainly different from the other ladies he had interacted with while briefly in Town years ago, at university, or even in this remote neighbourhood. She had authority and made no bones about claiming it when it was needed.

“Do we have a deal?” Elsie’s question cut into his meandering thoughts. She stretched out her hand towards him, and all that strength of will he’d been priding himself on, diminished as he looked down at her small hand, outstretched as if they were embarking on a business arrangement rather than a man and woman huddled close to a fire in a secluded library, when it had gone midnight. The idea of taking her narrow fingers into his hand, holding her, touching her again caused a strange tightness in Kit’s chest, one which was not comfortable but not entirely unpleasant—his very blood and muscles seemed to be tightening at the idea, and there was a dryness in his mouth which prevented him from immediately replying or even coming up with a response to her.

It was silliness, he had held her in his arms this afternoon, they had been entangled together and fallen asleep—surely that was far more intimate than simply shaking her hand. Her thumb was visible, jutting out from the lace trim of her nightdress, and he gazed down at the shell-like sheen of the nail, he could only focus on how delicately shaped it was. Everything about Elsie struck him as perfectly formed, petite and very her.

Raising his eyes away from her hand, Kit met her gaze before he leant forward and grasped her fingers. Awareness shot through him, burning and bright, stronger now he could look her in the face, than it had been in the cave, where the fear of death had lurked. Now it was just the two of them in this snug library, enclosed together away from everything. The contact of his hand encasing hers, garnered a reaction from her, just a little one around her eyes, which widened at the touch as if she too was aware of what passed between them, then her lips parted ever so slightly letting out a breath. It seemed to his mind that she was conscious of the connection but unwilling to accept it. Or perhaps too innocent to know what it meant.

“We have a deal, but if at any point Flora expresses doubts,” Kit said, whilst also acknowledging to himself, that if Flora were to say anything uncertain, at least this would be a reaction.

“Of course, in that case a new plan would need to be made.” Elsie released his fingers and jumped to her feet, an awkwardness to her movements as she moved around the library.

Kit too got to his feet. for his own sanity, and to get him away from the alluring temptation of continuing to luxuriate in Elsie’s presence, he stretched a small bow. “I will bid goodnight in that case, Miss Keating.”

“Your Grace,” she muttered, but he was already at the door, and Kit continued to walk through it despite the strange pain in his chest at Elsie returning to his formal title.

CHAPTER 11

Over the next few days, hours slipped by without much for her to do. Elsie laid out her plans as carefully as an Admiral would. Or at least that was what she told herself. It was far harder than she'd imagined. Firstly, on the top of her list she needed to avoid the duke. Whilst it was an instruction to herself, it was a little galling to realise that Ashmore—Kit—seemed to have no problem keeping his distance from Elsie. So, she had to rely on Samson and Lancelot for company, or the occasional snatched glance of Lady Flora. When Lady Flora spotted Elsie watching or approaching the girl would run away, wide-eyed and pale—which was almost as disappointing as the duke's reaction.

The only bright spot was Samson, who it turned out was now coming out of her shell a little. She was a useful gossip, relying on titbits about the manor house to keep Elsie informed as most of the household was allocated out to help clear the roads.

“Clary says...” Samson moved through the chamber, straightening, and attempting to tidy an already neat room. She referred a great deal to Clary, the driver they had journeyed down with. It did not take much insight to see that the maid had developed so mething of an infatuation with the manservant. “That the road is close to being cleared. Is that not excellent news, miss?”

Elsie nodded and smiled. It would be needed for the manor house to be reachable—Elsie wanted to receive and send letters, to hear the news from London. Besides, if she were to arrange a party, Elsie would need to ensure invitations were arranged too. It might be worthwhile going, when she was able, to make her way to the nearest town for new clothes and various birthday items.

“Indeed,” Elsie replied. “It is nice to hear that the workload will lessen soon for all the men in the household.”

“Aye.” Samson paused and looked most earnestly down at Elsie; her expression was most concerned. “I know Clary has found it most taxing. But I am sure the rest of the servants, and His Grace did too.”

“His Grace?” Elsie could not help asking. She had known Ashmore had gone to supervise and oversee the progress, but it was interesting to hear that the duke was actively involved in clearing the roads.

“Yes, he let the mail coach through,” Samson said. “Would you care for some tea, miss?”

“Mail?” Elsie was on her feet, suddenly engaged. If letters had been received here, then at least one letter should not be in the manor house. “I must go and find the butler, where would you say Peterson would be?”

Samson looked rather surprised by the burst of energy on Elsie’s behalf. “The kitchen, I believe.”

With quick steps, Elsie made her way through the bedroom, and down the stairs. She already had her own letter to Margot and her parents in her skirt’s pocket, and was hopeful to catch the mail coach. Presumably, the driver would have stopped in the house for a refreshment. It would have been nice to think that after several days in Tintagel and having grown used to the manor, that Elsie would have learnt some familiarity with it. Or failing that, she would at least find it less intimidating. But that was not the case, the manor continued to unnerve her.

On entering the lower floors, the continued stale air of the place continued down here despite a much busier environment than the upstairs floors. Dust and low lighting

created an atmosphere that put Elsie on edge. It seemed to slip under Elsie's skin, to rub there uncomfortably. Despite this Elsie marched forwards, ignoring her instincts and forcing her feet towards the sound of voices.

When Elsie pushed open the kitchen door, it was to see two maids who she did not know. But sitting at the table, was the butler Peterson and the housekeeper, Mrs. Clarke. They were positioned close to each other, sharing a pot of tea. A wide faced, curly haired woman in her late forties stood close to the fireplace, Elsie suspected this was the cook, Mrs. Whitelaw. Everyone who turned to look at Elsie showed dismay at her arrival—it was clearly inappropriate for her to be in here, but Elsie could not be bothered with such formality. Not when she might have some contact with the outside world.

“I believe there have been some letters delivered to the house?” Elsie walked forward, moving closer to Peterson.

“Miss.” Peterson was on his feet and gave her a stiff little bow. “We did receive letters for the household an hour ago.”

“Was there anything addressed for me? If the driver is still here, I have several letters I need to send out.” Elsie pulled out her own envelopes, labelled to both her parents, sister, and brother.

Peterson eyed her letters most suspiciously. Slowly, he accepted these missives with a polite nod. “You have unfortunately missed the mail coach.”

Annoyance flooded through Elsie, surely it would have been the normal state of the household to alert her to the presence of the driver. But this had been Elsie's experience of the Tintagel household in her time living here. Just enough slow difficulties added together, hard individually to accredit as being deliberate but enough, once accumulated, to be certain they were malicious.

“I would appreciate it, Peterson, if the next time the driver is here, that I am informed directly.”

“Of course, Miss.”

“I assume there were letters for me.”

“None.” The butler who had stood up to address her, remained in his position, and whilst he didn’t shift closer, there was a touch of intimidation to the man—perhaps from his stocky build, or from the militant look in his eye. Or simply because he refused to help her. It was most frustrating, and for a moment Elsie wanted desperately to open her mouth and question the validity of every servant present. There was no possibility that Margot hadn’t written—surely her sister would have been in touch? They had promised to write to one another. It made no sense that Margot would have...

“Is that all, miss?” This was from the housekeeper, who had stood up too. The woman’s eyes were boring into Elsie with a hardness that seemed unwarranted. “Did you wish for us to send up some tea or the like?” She sucked in her breath before adding, “Your maid should know that she can arrange such things.”

Elsie knew that. She would have betted all the coins in her possession that Samson knew too. And the reminder made her blush as Mrs. Clarke knew she wasn’t the lady she pretended to be. She knew that the servants would all still be talking about the state she’d been in when the duke had rescued her, presumably they all thought she’d set her cap at him.

It was just a way of ordering her from the kitchen, in another attempt to exclude her. All the household seemed to her to be conspiring against her making any sort of progress.

Forcing a mild expression onto her face, one which spoke of politeness and understanding, Elsie said, “Yes Mrs. Clarke, my maid has been informed. However, I would like to feel I can journey down here if the need is urgent. ”

“This is a busy household,” Mrs. Clarke said most primly. It struck Elsie as a lie, given the general state of dust and decay that permeated the manor and the fact the five of them had been sitting around the kitchen table. But she was not their mistress to scold them so.

“Indeed,” Elsie interrupted whatever Mrs. Clarke planned to continue, saying, “but as I am just one guest, I hope I will not be an inconvenience.”

Without being unjustifiably rude there was nothing for Mrs. Clarke to do but bow her head and silently agree with Elsie’s assessment. She doubted as she moved away from the table and towards the door that it would change anything in their behaviour but at least she had shown them that she wasn’t going to simply accept their treatment. It wasn’t much but it was something, Elsie clung to that idea as she walked out of the kitchen and up the lonely, dark stairs. As soon as she had left the kitchen though, that minor sense of victory trailed away, and the sensation of isolation and annoyance washed back through her again—how was she supposed to achieve any of her goals if every way she turned there was a door closed in her face?

“Is that you, Miss Keating?” His voice was carrying but soft, with enough of a Cornish lilt, that vibrated through her, and Elsie had to suppress the feeling of bubbling joy as she turned towards Kit’s voice.

It was unnatural to feel such elation at a mere question, but it had been days since she’d seen him. Despite knowing this, his query warmed its way through her limbs, past the barriers of her dress and nestled in the pit of her stomach. She had wanted to see him. That was a rather galling thing to realise, and hastily Elsie tucked it away, ignoring the idea and whatever the consequences of what those sensations meant

entirely.

“Ahh.” He was leaning out of a doorway, watching her. “I thought I heard you. ”

“Your Grace.” She bobbed a curtsy. “I was informed you would be outside with the men.”

“Did you not hear the main road has been cleared, I sent several of the servants out to check on the nearby farms and buildings. Come.” He gestured to her to follow him, and cautiously, Elsie walked after him into the snug little sitting room. It was not a room she was familiar with, there was a mixture of furniture, some of it grand whilst other pieces looked a great deal humbler. Strewn over an oak table was a large collection of papers.

“You receive your letters,” she could not help but murmur.

Ashmore turned back to her and cocked an eyebrow. “Yes, yes, the post is here. Nothing sadly of importance.” He pointed her towards a seat at the table. “But there rarely is.”

Surely Elsie wanted to argue that he must have had a missive from London, something from Mr. Holt, telling him something? Had the solicitor lied or had multiple letters just been lost?

“No,” he continued, “these are all local issues, or from my steward on occasion. The man is getting on a bit, I suppose at some point soon, I should look to hire a replacement, and let the man enjoy his retirement.” He bent over the table, and Elsie found herself watching his hands, deft and finely made, as they moved over the pages with careful consideration.

Her earlier annoyance over the mail coach dissolved as she studied him—that balance

between rough maleness she had grown accustomed to, was now playing against Ashmore's role as lord of the manor, and the blend of masculinity and refinement was playing havoc with her senses.

“What did you call me in here to discuss?” Elsie asked. It would be far too easy to let herself luxuriate in the presence of his company, listen to his voice as he talked through matters and perhaps offer the occasional remark—to fall into a companionship-like situation, all the while ignoring the signs of danger that Ashmore resonated with. Elsie was too knowledgeable of her own foibles, let alone the risks of a desirable gentleman, to let a mistake happen again.

He frowned a little at the tartness of her words, and his hand drifted up to rub absently at his chest. “I am glad to have you here, as I have a list of guests that I thought suitable for Lady Flora’s birthday party.” He handed over a sheet of paper with a dozen names on it, and the number of people who were included within the family were in brackets. “I thought it a suitable but not an overwhelming number.”

Elsie let her eyes drop, scanning the list before she looked back to find that the duke had taken a seat closer to her, and seemed to be waiting for her response.

“I have had no luck in speaking to your sister,” Elsie said, lowering the page. “So, she is unaware of the planned celebrations. And she would need to be prepared, I am certain. Even a girl who had not witnessed what Lady Flora had would wish to buy herself a new gown and... Perhaps my scheme was a foolish one.”

Suddenly Elsie had a rushing desire to simply ask that her driver, maid, and the coach be sent for since the roads were clear, and she could return to London. The panic gathered pace through her belly until Ashmore reached out and took her hand.

“Let us talk to her this evening.” His smile was true and warm, an additional appeal to his sardonic face. “We can attempt another dinner together and broach the

subject.”

It was in those moments that Elsie realised she was in far more danger than when he was being brusque or gruff with her. The sweetness in his character, that peeked out when it was directed towards his sister, showed his worth and strength of character.

The touch of his hand on hers lingered, tightened it seemed as he waited for a response from her, but all Elsie wished to do was turn her palm up and interlace their fingers, so she could hold on to the reassurance that was him. Tremors of awareness were alive under her skin, jittering outwards in uneven movements through her body. Exciting and different from what she had previously experienced. All she wanted to do was reassure him, that yes, she would help, that yes once that was done, she would go with him to London. After that of course, there could be no more holding hands or shared looks, but for the next month, surely, they could at least have these snatched moments. There was no possibility of anything else. Whilst it was fanciful of Elsie, it was still where her imagination went.

To her surprise he did not draw back, but instead continued to watch her as if assessing and coming to his own conclusions before he finally asked. “Would you agree to another dinner? I can assure you I will prepare my sister better this time?”

“I think it wise, especially if I am there to win her over.”

“Win?”

“Convince her?” Elsie suggested, in a teasing manner. Why had he not withdrawn his hand, did he care so little for propriety, had he forgotten, or did he think she was amoral? Perhaps a better question would have been why she did not pull her hand from his—perhaps her last idea on her own morality was sadly correct.

“Yes, that is what we both shall do.”

“And then, once that has occurred, it would be wise to head for London. It is where our presence is required,” Elsie forced herself to say, to remind them both of what obligations they had beyond this room.

It was this sentence that had him getting slowly to his feet, but instead of loosening his hold on her, he helped Elsie to her feet, drawing her slightly closer to him as they both stood. He seemed to tower over her, and Elsie wondered whether she should have felt worried, but there was nothing in her that sparked fear of him, only a desire to curl in closer towards him, to be near enough that the distance no longer mattered, because all that space was uncomfortably alive with a throb of unrelenting tension.

When she looked up Ashmore was looking at her hand, his brow was marred, and she thought it likely he was trying to think of something to say. She too wondered what words would be best uttered now, how to fill the gap that needed to be bridged.

“It is beyond anything that is expected of you,” Ashmore suddenly said, lifting his eyes and finding Elsie’s. “No one would blame you for desiring or requesting to leave the manor, now the roads are open. There is no obligation here.”

“But there is.” Elsie was annoyed as she snapped back, “If I wish you to help my sister, then I need to help yours. That is what you mean isn’t it?”

Ashmore grimaced, and she wondered if he was embarrassed, but he finally nodded.

“In that case, I am happy to do all I can to help.” This was not entirely true, but Elsie was stubborn, and her spirit would not be broken by Lady Flora’s difficulties or by a truculent household.

To her great surprise, it was then that the duke lifted her still enclosed hand to his lips and kissed the back of her hand. It was swiftly done, but it had been enough for her to remember the feel of it. Warm, soothing, and with the faint promise of something

else, which made her long for more. The touch of his mouth had been imprinted on her skin, and Elsie doubted she would forget the sensation in a hurry.

“I will see you this evening,” she said as she loosened her fingers from his grip, and moved away from Ashmore, towards the door.

She felt his gaze follow her to the doorway until she bobbed a curtsey and left the room, all memories of her letters utterly forgotten and replaced with the brief kiss given. She hurried back to her room, unable to stop smiling.

CHAPTER 12

His actions, Kit knew, were not one of a gentleman, yet he was supposed to be a nobleman, and that should mean something. A title to his mind should convey responsibility and respectability. So, flirting with an unmarried guest in his own home was hardly the image he wanted to cultivate. Then again, a great deal of the beau monde certainly did not act in an honourable manner. Yet when he gazed down at Elsie, he wanted to charm her, wanted her to feel the strength of his regard.

The problem was he was not sure what this regard entailed. Oh, he wanted her. He doubted he was alone in that; men would have wanted her before. Miss Elsie Keating was an adorable little package, from her curling chestnut curls, to the recently discovered dimple on her right cheek close to her mouth, or the changing shades of her chocolate eyes—displaying elements of wit, sweetness, and intelligence in their dancing depths. So, she was pretty, that was a given, but he'd seen other pretty girls previously, bedded a handful of them too when they'd been eager and willing although the memory of that seemed to have faded entirely. The answer lay not merely in her appearance but another aspect of her character, and that unnerved Kit greatly.

Besides which, given her tentative and admittedly blurred connections to his own household—a bond he was not entirely sure he understood or knew the whole story—the best course of action was, of course, to avoid any foolishness with Miss Keating. That was easier said than done, and temptation especially under one's own roof was a challenge that Kit had not appreciated being as hard as it was.

Turning away from the sound of Elsie's retreating footsteps echoing up the stairs, Kit

set about straightening and ordering the contents of his desk. It was better to focus on his sister, and the plan that had been concocted with Elsie—convincing Flora to celebrate her eighteenth birthday, with strangers. It would include a new gown, a cake, and presents, as well as the promise of a trip to London—it should delight most young women. The problem was that Flora was not most girls. Still avoiding the topic would do no good.

Kit followed Elsie out of his sitting room and then up the staircase, towards his sister's room. His household, despite repeated requests for the place to be aired and dusted, still retained that musty smell, and clogged atmosphere of dead air no matter what occurred.

On the landing of the first floor, Kit proceeded down the corridor until he stood in front of Flora's bedroom. After a tentative knock, Flora opened it, her gaze mistrusting as she let him in.

It seemed as if Flora had banned the maids from coming into her chamber, as it was disordered at best, and at worst looked close to belonging to that of a madwoman. His messy desk downstairs was neat in comparison to the splutter of papers, torn curtains, spilled coals, and disordered bedding that made Flora's bedchamber require a few hours of tidying to make the room habitable.

Kit looked across to his sister only feet away, she too needed some care and attention, and unwilling to see her awkward shuffling a second longer, he stepped closer and enfolded her in his arms.

To his relief, Flora came forward willingly and her hands closed around his midriff, and he held her as his little sister rocked against him. With a slow movement so as not to startle her, Kit leant down and rested his chin on the top of her head. More than anything he wished he could ask her to speak, to vocalise all the things that frightened her, and to let him know what could be done to help.

But instead, since he'd asked this countless times and only ever seen Flora shake her head, he said, "It is your birthday soon."

Flora stepped back, her expression quizzical at his presence in her room. She shared the same blue eyes as he did, but her face was slightly similar to their mother's softer feminine build that his harsher lines. Still if she were to rest, ideally away from the manor, perhaps in London, the bloom of colour might return to Flora's rounded cheeks, and she would resemble the girl she had once been. "I was thinking a party might be in order."

He watched her closely judging her reaction, and to his delight, she smiled. It gave him confidence to continue.

"I thought a new dress and a few invited guests." He saw how dubious she looked, but he sailed on. "I will only pick out a few special people, and we will have plenty of time to prepare."

Carefully Flora stepped back, her hands twisting together, and her body was huddled, but her face was brighter than he'd seen in a while, and then to his great delight, she nodded, and said, "If you think it wise."

It had been so long since he'd heard her voice speak so, relief poured through him. That he had not entirely failed her—she was still in there, the girl, the sister he'd known all of Flora's life.

Which was why he spoke the next fateful words. "And once you are comfortable, we can look at going to London. Not for some grand Season or anything like that, but perhaps to see a theatrical performance or visit a museum and hear a talk. I hear there are bookshops which one can get lost in, and boats that..." His sentence broke when he saw that Flora was shaking.

She lost all semblance of excitement or interest. Her skin was as pale as a ghost. Her body vibrated where she stood, her eyes unblinking as she gazed at him, and her head shaking with a silent, blanched no.

“We cannot ever leave here.” Flora took an unsteady step forward, grasping hold of both of Kit’s hands between her own. Her hold was hard and punishing. “Promise me that.”

“You know I can’t do that, Flora. You will have to leave here eventually. We cannot stay locked away from everything forever.”

She was shaking now, her entire body tight and her jaw set.

“Neither mother nor father would want that for you.” Kit carried on, desperate to say something that would break Flora away from whatever she was so fearful of. “We both should see more, witness the wonder of what the world might offer, not just the sadness that keeps us here. Would you not like to see London—have a chance beyond this place?”

It was then that she started to scream, his insistence apparently enough to tip her over the edge. Her scream continued until there were noises nearby, the sound of people running, coming towards Flora’s bedroom, but nothing broke the sound of his sister’s screeched pain.

When the doorway was flung open, and he heard the soft step of Miss Keating and her queries as she hurried closer, it could not penetrate or cut off what Flora said, “If we leave here, we die.”

With that she backed away from him, climbing into the nearest faded armchair, curling herself into the space before she started to cry. Her wails sounded around the bedchamber.

Elsie, who had reached him, took several steps back, moving away to the doorway, and closing it firmly as Kit watched her. At her heels was Lancelot, whose dark brown hair and warm eyes seemed as distressed as his mistress's. Elsie returned to his side, reached out and touched his arm before walking over to the armchair where Flora was huddled up weeping. Elsie crouched down on the ground beside his sister, so that the two of them would be on the same eye level.

“Lady Flora.” Elsie’s voice was calm, far more level than anything Kit would have imagined himself capable of in that moment. “I have my dog with me, he’s called Lancelot.” Elsie bent and scooped up Lancelot. “When I feel upset, I take great comfort in stroking an animal’s fur. Lancelot has the most beautiful coat. Would you like to try it too?”

The crying changed, merging away from the hysteria, and slowed down into something softer—broken by the occasional hiccup. Flora raised her tear-stained face, damp eyelashes, and a wobbling jaw as her pained eyes moved from Elsie down to the dog.

Lancelot was deposited on the seat next to Flora. The pause as the three of them gazed at each other, whilst Kit watched—more hopeless and useless than he’d imagined possible. Was not the point of being the head of the household to have the power of the role? Yet Kit felt that tiny, determined Miss Elsie held more than him and oddly enough he was happy to cede it, if it meant his sister would improve.

A tentative hand emerged, and Flora petted the top of Lancelot’s head, and then to Kit’s relief, the little dog nestled closer and started to lick Flora’s outstretched fingers. A strange noise bubbled up in Flora’s throat, which sounded like a giggle—a sound Kit could not remember hearing from his sister in what felt like a lifetime. With little respect for anything, the dog scrambled over to settle in Flora’s lap.

“Lancelot seems to like you.” Elsie was standing up. “Perhaps you need him, more

than I do at the moment. I found that, even though he is a small dog, he gave me a great deal of strength.”

She turned to move away, and without realising what he was doing, Kit raised his hand, silently mouthing at her and uttered “thank you” as his fingers clasped hold of her elbow, keeping her rooted close. Elsie nodded, her eyes settling on his face, considering him in a manner that Kit could not fully understand.

“A party?” Both of them turned at the sound of Flora’s question. It had similar scratchiness as her laugh earlier, but she was clinging to Lancelot and watching them carefully.

“That is right,” Kit said. “It felt right to mark your birthday. There could be dinner, a cake... a new dress.” He offered out these temptations, hoping against everything he had experienced so far that it would whet his sister’s interest.

“Would I be expected to dance?”

Kit looked hopeless down at Elsie. He had not considered this, but presumably that was something that was expected of a young lady of Flora’s position. Certainly prior to their parents’ deaths Flora would have learnt. Yet, would the traditions of mourning prevent such occurrences? Society’s expectations pulled at him, and Kit’s frustrations twisted through him at anything that might hinder Flora’s desires.

“Given the circumstances, it would be your choice,” Elsie said. “I am given to understand the guest list will be small, intimate—only close acquaintances, and therefore unless Flora should suggest...”

“I read about a dance,” Flora said. She had leant forward, her expression wrapped, and bright with an interest that surprised Kit for it hinted at a previous aspect of her character which had been hidden for months. A glimmer of the girl she had once

been—the little sister he remembered, who liked hearing of society, who giggled over fashion illustrations and would read poetry, giggling over the contents. Their mother had called her a romantic, and his father had laughed indulgently. “I’ve heard it is a very scandalous dance, but nonetheless, it is very popular in Town. It is called the waltz.” She looked at Kit and then to Elsie expectantly. “Do you know it?”

It was not the sort of thing that Kit had given much credence to, and yet this was the most engaged he had seen Flora in months. There was a returning warmth to her wan features. Suddenly he had a great desire to learn as much as he possibly could about the waltz and regretted that he had not read anything about the latest blasted fashion. “Well Miss Keating, I assume you know something about this wondrous dance?”

He fully expected her to say no, but to his surprise a spot of colour blossomed on Elsie’s face, and she said, “I have read about it. I regret to say it was considered a little scandalous.”

Immediately Kit felt quite certain that Elsie had done a great deal more than that. Even if the dance was considered risqué, he felt fairly certain Elsie was not the type to shy away from the temptation of learning as much as she could—as one of the perpetually curious, she was the type to read of something scandalous and wish to try it. He cocked an eyebrow at her expectantly and his suspicions were rewarded when she ducked her head in acknowledgement.

“It is allowed in Almack’s,” Elsie said, she drew a step closer to Flora, who leant a little forward in rapt attention. “The music that is played is much slower than...”

“Have you seen it danced in London?” Flora asked.

Kit wanted to know too and was a little sad when Elsie shook her head. A vision of him insisting they attend the elusive club together flashed through his mind, but how could that ever occur? Despite being a duke now, Kit was not sure he would be

prestigious enough to be granted entry to such an establishment.

“I did practise it though, with my sister playing the music.” Elsie cut into Kit’s train of thought, and her admittance made Flora smile. His sister was still stroking Lancelot, seeming to gain much reassurance from the little spaniel. Then to Kit’s surprise Elsie started humming what sounded like a piece of music, low and melodic, it was certainly as different as could be imagined from the high paced country dances that both Kit and Flora were familiar with. It was hard for him to imagine quite how this music would fit with a fast-moving set of dancers. Clearly Flora had a similar idea because she frowned.

“Do you move between other dancers?”

“No,” Elsie said, “it is all danced with just one partner.”

“Show me,” Flora commanded. Her feet dropped to the floor, and her earlier fears seemed to have vanished, although he feared this might just be a temporary phase. “Use Kit.” She gestured towards her brother. “He won’t mind. He is quite a good dancer.”

On that point, Kit had his doubts. After the carriage disaster, he had not danced once, in part because he never had the opportunity, and with his injured arm, it would be unwise.

Two pairs of eyes turned towards him, and Kit felt a growing desire to protest—that he did very much mind being “used.” And yet the temptation of witnessing, of dancing, of touching Elsie intensified, and before he entirely knew what he was doing, he stretched out his hand with a mock little bow towards his partner.

Elsie eyed him dubiously, the chamber they stood in was messy, crowded with loose bits of paper, discarded clothes, and general debris, certainly not an especially

opportune location for practicing dancing. Yet it seemed to be the thing that was motivating Flora and with a judicious eye, Elsie nodded and took his outstretched hand.

“Of course.” She looked at Flora. “You will have to mimic the sound so I can teach His Grace the steps.”

For a moment Kit felt sure that Flora would flinch, or resist given the use of his title, but his sister started copying the sound that Elsie was making. It took a few moments, but it seemed that Elsie was satisfied because she turned back to Kit and lifted her hand onto his shoulder. Her expression was set, immovable and were it not for the noticeable swallow she made, Kit would have felt sure she was not affected by him.

“We would, of course, be wearing gloves. And permission needs to be granted to ladies before they can take part,” Elsie said. Her voice was loud, carrying as she attempted to reduce the informality of how close she stood to him. “You need to place your hand on my waist.”

Stepping nearer, Kit did as he was told. Her back was warm, and he felt the gracefulness of her figure through the day dress she wore. Undoubtedly, her loveliness would be magnified, if she were dressed in a dazzling evening gown, but Kit rather liked the simplicity of what they were doing—perhaps artifice would draw away from how earnestly appealing Elsie was.

“Now normally you would lead,” she muttered.

Kit followed her steering as she manoeuvred them through the chamber, attempting to miss the larger items that blocked their way. Whilst it certainly was a far more intimate dance than Kit had engaged in previously, it was however a darn sight easier to learn than some of the country sets he’d been forced to memorise in his youth. His hand curled more closely around Elsie’s waist as they moved, bringing her nearer to

his chest, her body swaying in deliciously close contact to his.

As they neared a discarded and overturned footstool, Kit took charge, overtaking Elsie's lead, feeling that he now understood the one-two-three step well enough. He could hear Flora's attempt to keep the pace as he started to control and swing Elsie through her steps. His dance partner lifted her eyes to his, and there was merriment there as he swung her more fully through the paces—she clung to him as they moved.

“Should we not go slower?”

“We are not in Almack's yet,” he teased. For a moment, he feared she would be disheartened to hear this, as it was likely they never would be, but Elsie smiled instead, and tipped her head up as he pivoted through the room to the most uneven of beats. She, as Flora had done beforehand, laughed with true abandonment and went even further by angling her head back as if she was truly enjoying the movement of the dance. Laughing and losing the sway of the dance .

It seemed to Kit that he could hardly feel his injury when he looked at her upturned smiling face—there was such a possibility within this Elsie—true delight, and for him the chance to lose every bad memory. It shook Kit to his core, and he was grateful to end the dance so he could slip away from both his sister and the terrifying if tiny Miss Keating.

CHAPTER 13

Elsie was pleased to report, if only to herself, that over the next two weeks she had managed to grow closer to Lady Flora. Which was not an easy task since the young girl was still almost entirely silent, refusing much in the way of conversation. However, Lady Flora clearly felt comfortable with her and hung around, clinging to Elsie's elbow on occasions. The girl's confidence seemed to be growing by the day. His Grace was not to be seen—since that moment of dancing in his arms, the duke had rarely been in Elsie's presence—their deal, if still in place, seemed forgotten. Every time she went to look for him—to ask about the post, returning to London, the plans for the party—the duke would be busy or away from the manor. She knew she could no longer call him Kit.

There were, however, a few signs of progress around the manor. Not so much in terms of how many cobwebs there were, or dust covered surfaces, but Elsie had received several bolts of material and patterns to make up dresses for both Lady Flora and herself. With little else to do—except stifle a mounting feeling of annoyance—Elsie had set about creating two evening gowns for the pair of them.

On her way up the stairs to visit Lady Flora, having finished the soft lilac and cream gown for the girl, Elsie paused in the lonely hallway, the end of a conversation catching her attention. In part because it was so rare to overhear anything within the grim and isolated manor and the other aspect was the topic of the whispering pair's talk. As she drew nearer, she saw it was her own maid, who had her arms wrapped around Clary's neck, hidden although poorly, in a small alcove. The two had clearly been kissing, and from the way their bodies were angled against each other's—Elsie had no doubt they meant to do far more.

She should walk on, but Samson's giggle had her frozen in place, her gaze wide and her cheeks flushed at the sight.

"The others were talking about Lansdown as a most respectable place for a dance."

"Oh, aye." Clary seemed far more interested in the underside of Samson's ear than in whatever might be happening at the Lansdown.

"Yes—there is even the occasional tradesman, and member of the gentry who attends. They dance there."

"What makes you such an expert on the local parties?"

"Well." Whatever Samson had been about to say was lost when Clary started kissing her most seriously.

Elsie had overheard enough, in fact in good conscience she had heard too much. But as she watched the couple before her, twisting closer, their eager hands exploring each other, their hungry mouths desperate for each other, she found she could not tear her eyes away.

Clary pressed Samson against the alcove's wall, his hands pulling loose her dress, Elsie felt desire run a finger down her back, a need she had thought she had managed to banish from her body. As she watched, telling herself all the time to dart away to leave, her stubborn feet would not move her an inch. Deep within her, there was a pulse of sensation that felt as if it was tugging at her limbs, crying out to be touched. No matter how far she travelled, that craven part of her seemed to burn bright still.

Samson's neck was arched back, her pale brown hair tugged out her cap, and there was a warmth which discoloured her chest. Perhaps it was from Clary's unshaven whiskers or from her own want, but whatever the case, maybe Elsie needed to know

if the colour went farther, dipped any lower. Clary's hands parted the material at the top of Samson's dress, and it dawned on Elsie, if she did not force herself to leave then and there, she would witness her maid's breasts, and how mortified the girl might be.

Blinking away her own wanton thoughts, Elsie moved away taking several steps as quietly as she could before breaking into a run. She just hoped her feet were quieter than the turmoil her thoughts were in. Reaching the safety and peace of her chamber had to be the first thing she did. Unsteadily, her hands grabbed at the handle of the bedroom, flinging it open, the dresses she carried with her discarded as she entered, all her attention focused on the sensation that burnt and writhed within her.

Surely her experience in Edinburgh had taught her enough. And yet it seemed, despite this, the mere sight of those two in the alcove had been enough to trigger a wave of need through her. In the sanctity of her chamber, her body shielded in the semidarkness, Elsie let out a sigh, the weight of what she wanted settling in the space between her hips. She leant back into the shadows, pressing herself against the wall, not daring to move away, desperately willing those memories out of her mind. Still, they came, and this time it was her gown being torn asunder, her breath robbed by all-consuming kisses, herself up against the wall...

Against her better judgement—hell perhaps even against her own common sense—Elsie lifted the bottom of her dress up, pressing her fingers over the shift until her legs parted, so that her own hand could cup her core. The pressure helped but even as her fingers slid inside her, she knew she wanted more.

Bending her head back, she played through the sight she'd witnessed on the staircase, but it wasn't Samson and Clary she imagined there, no, now the image she conjured was the duke. His kissable mouth was smiling as he tasted her body, his hands everywhere all at once. All his brusqueness over the last few weeks vanished as she projected her desire and lust into him. Gone was the hard, stilted man he presented to

the world. Elsie told herself this hunger within Kit would be similar to the occasionally seen element of laughter she saw within him, but it ran hotter, and it was all for her. As her finger stroked herself higher, a small sigh slipped out of her mouth—half formed and partly resembling his name. She wanted him with a ferocity she had not realised herself capable of and could not entirely explain even to herself.

The door of her bedroom opened, and Elsie had barely enough time to release her skirts as she looked into the face of the man she had been picturing standing in her room, gazing at her with concern, and what she hoped was absolutely no idea what she had been doing.

Clutching at her skirts Elsie studied Ashmore's face. The heat of embarrassment flooded her face, but she hoped the dim light made it hard for him to make out what she had been doing or note the tingle of pinked cheeks shame. At least she thought as she edged away from the wall, he would never know what she had been visualising as she touched herself.

Ashmore had turned a little on his heel to give her space and was gazing around her chamber. Whilst it might have been taboo and wrong for her to be acting in such a manner, it was hardly appropriate for him to come barrelling into her bedroom without so much as knocking.

“Your Grace?” she asked. Hoping that her question hid any of her shame. However, she had initially assumed he might feel... indifferent, but then she had questioned this, given the hours teaching Flora her steps. She'd caught a smile on his face she believed to be entirely genuine. So, what did he feel towards her? The lust she felt towards him might be one sided, but the situation dictated that they continue to interact.

“I heard a noise, and there was the...” Even in the darkness, she could clearly see the flush on his face. “There were the dropped dresses.” He bent down and grabbed the

forgotten gowns, one of which had clearly been sticking out of the door, visible to him. “I feared...”

“That something had happened to me?” Elsie took an unsteady step away from the safety of the wall. She was still twisted and raw with want despite his untimely interruption. Perhaps even driven a touch wilder because of it.

“In this house”—he moved into the chamber and deposited the gowns onto the nearest armchair—“I do not trust anyone in this house to remain safe.”

The movement caused his normal level of stiffness he had spent the last few weeks displaying, but it also allowed Elsie to see more of his features, and there was something in his eyes which made her draw nearer—it reminded her of their stolen, isolated moments in the cave.

The duke’s lips drew together as he saw her approach him, and he promptly moved his hands behind his back. “Madam.” His tone was harsh, as precise as it had been on their first meeting together. “Once this party has been celebrated, you will be leaving us.”

“Won’t we all be heading for London?”

“A brief sojourn,” he replied, “but then I will return here. This is my home,” he said, as though it was in fact less of a home and more of a curse. “No one else should have to remain here in such a place, but since I am obligated to remain, I will make sure that Flora leaves.”

He was punishing himself, Elsie realised. She was not certain if she believed in curses, but it was clear that Ashmore did, and that he meant to punish himself.

Boldness filled her, a sort of bravery born from a mixture of boredom and lust, as

well as a strange need to confront Ashmore and have him be convinced she was not a coward. She was not scared of this strange old house. There was nothing within these walls that scared her, at least not in the way he meant. In truth, whatever desire had driven her to imagine him as she touched herself was clearly a bizarre one. But Elsie was worthy of his attention, at least over the next few weeks. Whilst that might sound desperate in her head, Elsie knew that, unless he did pay some mind to her, she would never be able to shake the grip that this silly, unnecessary lust had on her. Unless she broke this hold, she would be forced to carry this desire all the way back to London with her.

“I do not find myself as scared as I was initially of the manor.”

“That is simply because you do not know all its secrets.”

“Lady Flora has started speaking a little more to me. I believe she is excited to see Town. The servants, it is true, are not the friendliest I will admit, but I have found a way.” This was a lie. She was still bereft of letters from any of her family members, but at least the maids would bring her trays of tea now and then. Elsie continued, “I can ignore the cobwebs. It is only Your Grace who remains inscrutable...”

A small awkward grimace appeared on his face, which Elsie thought resembled an attempt at a smile, but one which could not entirely be arranged by Ashmore.

“It is not inscrutability I wished to project.” There was a pained look on Ashmore's face as he spoke, almost like the words themselves were a burden to him, “but you Miss Keating...”

“Me?” For one brief, bright moment Elsie glowed under what she hoped would be praise. She had brought this irascible, difficult duke out of his shell, and he was about to praise her. Then he moved slightly nearer, and Elsie saw his expression more clearly, but she had no time before his barrage began.

“I have tried my damndest to be polite. Hell, I have risked my life to ensure your safety, but you continue to be... a plague.” He waved his hand towards the dresses. “You leave clothing dotted around my house, and whilst I know my sister appreciates your presence, my servants do not.”

Elsie wanted to break in and point out she had been making a dress for his sister, but Ashmore was not giving her enough time to form, let alone make, a reply. Besides, he was towering over her, and his presence was robbing her of all common sense. Darn this blasted infatuation with him.

“But like all unwelcome guests, I am certain of some good intentions on your part—despite how it has manifested. And as for your dog?—”

It was enough. Quite enough. Especially after everything Elsie had tried to do. How frequently she had been thwarted and all to end being insulted? A burst of anger swelled with Elsie, an unfamiliar emotion but one she felt quite entitled in this moment. All thoughts of how this man—this duke—was the one who was supposed to help her sister, fled from her mind as she closed the remaining distance between the two of them, jabbing a finger into his chest. Hard .

“I disagree with your assumptions. I have seen neglect and poor parental decisions before, known all too well the cruelty of a harsh word and hardship that comes from a tight budget.” This was true. Not from her parents, but from her grandmother, Elsie was all too aware of the consequences of unpleasant behaviour. She had suffered from it first-hand, yet it would not see her bury herself away from the world, too frightened to experience a few little wonders. “I do not believe we should let the words and actions of others bother us.”

A small twist of guilt ran through her when she said this, after all she still recalled with vivid clarity the vile words her grandmother had thrown at her, and it seemed not entirely able to be discarded. Was she being a hypocrite as part of her would be

forever humiliated by her grandmother's words? Still, she was trying her best to battle these memories, what was Ashmore doing? When he had all the advantages with which to fight—sex, wealth, position—how dare he back down and hide away?

With a scoffing sound at the back of her throat, Elsie gazed up into Ashmore's face hoping to read something beyond cold disinterest in those hardened features. A small twitch in his jawline was all she saw. She had tried her best for weeks in the manor, even making some progress with Lady Flora, but he would not bend an inch for her or let her further in.

Or whenever he did give her something, say when they'd danced together, he'd immediately withdrawn—it was infuriating. “But that is all I am left with—rank speculation. Which festers and rots and I do believe half of the stories that run through the house. No, there are no such things as ghosts. Let me tell you this talk does not make for good bedfellows.”

A flash around his eyes at the mention of bedfellows was the only indication that Ashmore had heard what she'd said. Boosted by fear of what he might reply, Elsie continued, although she felt less confident, “I'm not the coward here. I know what your family is like—for goodness' sake there was a murderer in your uncle's home the night we arrived—my sister had to chase the braggart off while I...”

To this revelation Ashmore responded by clasp ing her arms roughly in his grip, his fingers nipping at her shoulders through Elsie's gown. “Why the hell didn't you mention this earlier? Were you in danger?” The force of questions and the profanity further stirred Elsie, not to mention the fact that Ashmore had lifted her off her feet to press her frame against his body as he looked furiously down at her. He was so tall she thought in girlish fascination. It was too much, from what she'd witnessed in the hallway, to her own fevered touch earlier against her innards, to all her colourful imaginings of him. So, her desire got the better of her again. Elsie raised her own hands, cupping his face so he could not escape, and pressed her lips against his in one

quick heady move.

In part, she realised as she held her mouth there, it had been done to shock Ashmore. In part because of her own desire. But the latter was taking over, running rampant over the initial ideas, as a yearning built within her, fed as he responded hungrily to her kiss.

It wasn't Elsie's first kiss.

In fact, in Edinburgh, she had kissed five different young men, three of them officers. Which in her opinion meant there could be no surprises saved up for when she kissed Ashmore. That was her theory.

How wrong she was.

She was surprised when one of his hands dropped from her arms to wrap around her waist, curling her closer. The other hand lifted to her own face, tilting her chin for better access, and it was then, as his mouth pressed more fully against her lips, Elsie started to think her experience had not prepared her for the taste and feel of him.

When his tongue pushed her lips open, it wasn't a curious touch but more like possession—there was no hesitation in Ashmore as he backed her up against the wall whilst continuing to rob her of her wits. His mouth was all-consuming, molten temptation moving from greedy kisses to lighter ones, hardly giving her time to catch her breath. Let alone gather her senses.

Ashmore could kiss, kiss better than she ever imagined possible. Surely a grumpy, isolated recluse could not be this practised or skilled at kissing? But it seemed that he could in fact, leaving her breathless, alert, and keen. The touch of his tongue inside her mouth drove her wilder while his hand on her chin feathering out over her skin as they kissed before moving up to tangle in her hair, sent sensations racing through her

body pooling between her legs. With all her prior experience forgotten, Elsie leant into the rush of feeling he created in her, of those boundless, pulsing tingles that made her want to scream and rub her body closer to his. If she thought she wanted him before this kiss, it was nothing to how she felt now .

Ashmore pulled back away from her, and Elsie hoped he would admit something of a mutual longing that was burning between them.

Instead, he simply stared down at her, his expression forbidding before whispering, “Never again.”

CHAPTER 14

Kit forced himself away from her bedroom, his feet uneven and his mind more so. There was one advantage to this house, and that was the size of it. It was entirely possible to lose himself down one of the numerous passageways and corridors. If only it was so easy to forget or preferably bury the memory of kissing her.

Elsie. Miss Keating. He should repeat the latter until he stopped slipping into informality...

You imbecile, he cursed himself, the use of her name is not the problem. Returning her kiss with the enthusiasm you just demonstrated is the far bigger issue. He should never have even entered her chamber and followed the sounds he'd heard because...

Casting his mind back to what he'd seen, he was clouded in uncertainty despite it being just a few minutes ago. Surely it was just his own desire that he'd witnessed her touching herself. The likelihood that a gentry woman, the daughter of a clergyman...

But she started the kiss... whilst he most definitely ended it. Why would she do that? That was a question that cascaded through him, battling away more erotic thoughts.

Kit forced his feet to stop moving. He stood in the middle of a long portrait gallery, one which was dusty and thankfully unoccupied save for himself. God, he finally acknowledged how much he wanted her. How he'd wanted her for weeks and been avoiding her in an attempt to deny this. He wanted to taste the sweetness of her skin, to run his hands over her slim frame, recapturing the willingness of her mouth. Better yet to lead her away from the middle of the room and over to her bed. He was certain

he could fuck her for hours until her mouth was swollen with his kisses, their naked bodies spent. How he wanted the daintiness of her beauty, the quickness of her wit, the generosity of her spirit...

He had thought or perhaps hoped that avoiding her would cure him of his interest. That was what he knew was too mild a word.

Elsie Keating was a charming torment, and surely any man who met her would want to bed her, but unless he planned to wed her, a kiss was as far as it could ever go. After all, he couldn't inflict an association with his family on any woman. Sucking in a breath, he tried to make himself think of something, anything else.

Cynically, Kit told himself that there was the distinct possibility that women, ladies... persons like Elsie would consider him a catch. Which perhaps might be the case, were they moving through polite society. But they weren't. They were isolated, and Elsie might see how undesirable it was to be trapped here.

Yet she had returned his kiss.

With an abrupt movement Kit forced himself to stand upright. He had to resume his earlier firm grip on himself and avoid Elsie as much as possible.

A dark thought shifted forward and within the next ten days, Miss Keating, Lady Flora, and himself were due to host a formal dinner party. And then journey up to Town together.

Well. Kit dragged his fingers through his hair. Once that was done, surely Elsie Keating would return to her own world, and Kit would come back here to this sad, wet manor. It was not a cheery thought. Still, it was his obligation.

With an enthusiasm that surprised those around him, Kit threw himself into preparing

the manor for the upcoming party in Flora's honour. Invites were sent, the proper overtures made to surrounding families who Kit was certain would be happy to attend—if still likely to gossip behind closed doors, but that could not be helped. More staff were hired, and Kit set about helping Flora prepare for the world outside Tintagel Manor. Yes, he knew deep down inside he could leave, but a larger part of him could not imagine doing so. It seemed like the actions of another man.

The weather and the devastation had cleared, so any excuse that poor travel or roads would cause a delay was now gone. Occasionally, he was foolish enough to run into Elsie Keating, he could catch her watching him with a furrowed brow. But with all haste Kit ignored her and strode off, it could not be helped. And he reassured himself that, in the long run, Elsie would be grateful to be free of this place.

The evening of Flora's party arrived. Despite everyone in the household's best efforts from the newly hired servants, to the especially chosen decorations which included dozens of glittering candles, freshly bought curtains and linens, as well as spring flowers stuffed into every corner. The glass had been polished and the rooms aired, so that the appointed ballroom, salon, and adjoining card room were ready. Yet each in turn managed to retain a rather gloomy air, as if the fact they were was so unused and for so long, they could never quite be shaken off.

Tintagel, rather like its reluctant owner, was not truly meant to socialise or even to be seen. It was odd before he'd become the heir, or rather before he'd watched his mother and father die, Kit had enjoyed parties and spent his university days ensconced in gaming dens, card rooms, and even balls in the local area. Far more time than he'd spent on his studies. This was his punishment. Most men would long for a dukedom but not when it came with such a heavy and inevitable death sentence. That was what the curse entailed, that was what had happened to his grandfather and to his uncles one after another before finally taking his father. Kit had never been prone to foreboding, but after what he'd seen and what his father had said, there could be no doubt. The only answer was to get Flora out and ensure that he had no

heirs himself. Inflicting the family curse on the next generation was a thought he could not stand.

A soft, happy tune cut into his morose thoughts, and Kit was grateful for the hired musicians whose chosen pieces were at least less morbid than the general air he felt sure would permeate everything.

The household was ready, and despite his fears of what might go wrong, there was a not unpleasant twist to his stomach, that Kit realised was close to excitement.

Perhaps he was simply sensing the nervousness Flora was expressing as she rocked back and forth on her toes close to him. He was so proud of his sister—in the intervening few weeks she had made such progress. It was not entirely possible to say all of Flora's fear was gone per se, her wide eyes still looked like a startled young creature when anything took her by surprise. But she had improved her social graces, how to smile, greet guests—speak as other young ladies did.

Of course, she had learnt a few marriageable skills along with some watercolours or embroidery, but the family had struggled to keep a tutor at Manor. Kit did not know the workings of the ton well—he doubted his sister would be a smashing success, but he didn't need Flora to be a diamond of the first order, he just needed her to be free of this place. It would be a comfort for her to escape and never return. At least he could give her that future .

“You look lovely, Flo,” Kit said, using Flora's old childhood name.

It brought a slight smile to his sister's face. “It is all a great tribute to dear Elsie.”

He could not allow her to use such informality, but he did not have the heart to scold Flora. Not when she was clearly so joyful, and he thought. or rather planned. That when Miss Keating and Flora left the manor, he hoped the former would look after

his sister if he was unable to. Surely, he reasoned, Miss Keating might be willing to look after his sister... That was another thing he would need to mention at some point to Miss Keating—offering her the permanent position of companion to his sister. “You will do well in London I am certain.”

“Away from here?” Her voice trembled. She tugged slightly on his sleeve, turning Kit to see Elsie enter the room. All his carefully laid-out plans for what he wished to say and discuss with Miss Keating disappeared in smoke—she was far too striking for him to keep such trivial matters forefront in his head.

He thought he’d been prepared for this evening’s events, but as she stared at him, Kit realised his mistake. Nothing in life had prepared him for Elsie Keating, she was extraordinary and rendered him speechless as he watched her draw nearer. Of course, he’d known Miss Keating was pretty. He’d known that. Now thanks to his mistake in kissing her, he also knew what her mouth tasted like, how she smelt of femininity and hope, and what she felt crushed against him...

Elsie was walking across the ballroom, with a slight smile on her shapely rosebud lips, moving with the grace and ease of a true lady. It had been agreed she would be styled as Flora’s companion for tonight only, although suddenly Kit doubted anyone would believe that for long—no-one would believe a woman who looked like that had to settle for being a companion. This realisation slammed into him, but he was too far gone to remember that he wished to ask Miss Keating to be his sister’s companion going forward.

His eyes swept over Miss Keating’s dress, seeking a way of distracting himself or rather pulling some semblance of himself, but it did little good. First, he noticed the graceful sweep of her dark curls piled on top of her head, with a few loose strands hanging down, captured by an elegant white band which had little white blooms woven through it, creating a neat coronet. Next, he looked at her face and her fierce brown eyes, marvelling in their shimmering depths. Then his gaze dropped to the

small dimple in the left of her cheek, the edge of a smile forming on her lovely face. There was a confidence to her that held him utterly in her sway.

Miss Keating's gown was a romantic dreamy purple, as charming as her, showing all her delicate curves, but Kit remembered how she'd spoken, how she'd challenged him, not to mention the way she kissed him back, and he knew there was steel character beneath the softer exterior. God, he would give anything for them to be alone in this grand ballroom, for it to be empty of the musicians, and his sister, and the servants with their trays, for it only to be them. For them to be as isolated as they had been in the cave, with her pressed against him as he envisioned her every night when he closed his eyes and tried to let sleep claim him. But then again if he was playing at make believe, he'd rather they were back in her bedroom, and he'd pick to be less of a gentleman this time. All this latent lust he'd bottled up for too long. Yet what other choice did he have? There was the bloody family curse to consider, and he had no desire to cease being a gentleman—and only a complete cad would attempt to seduce a young lady under his roof.

When her eyes met his, a realisation dawned on him. There was a flame in her velvety-brown depths, as if she were considering the merits of his evening wear. This desire for her deepened as he watched her—his assumption had been she was as innocent as Flora, but now he watched Elsie with his own desperate hunger, he thought, he suspected she might feel the same way as he did...

"Your Grace." She dipped her head, her dark curls bobbing in a respectful curtsy. When she lifted her head, Elsie fixed him with an upfront look, and Kit could not resist offering his hand to hers, clasping her fingers in his grip before lowering his head to her gloved fingers and kissing the back of her hand. He felt the slight shudder at the contact, and it was a small consolation to himself, the idea that she felt as he did—that the attraction was mutual—the question then, were either of them prepared to do a thing about it? And even if she was, could he as a gentleman seduce a clergyman's daughter?

“Miss Keating.” His reply was gruff, said with a stiffness that he hoped conveyed his own formality when, in truth, it was a cover for hiding his desire to say more. To lift her up in his arms and carry her from this place. It was merely lust he thought as he studied the elegance of her profile—it was what represented a chance of something entirely different from the hideousness of this wretched place. “I hope you will honour me with the second dance?”

“Are we to be so formal?” she asked.

It must be she thought him overly proper, but with his sister present surely that was better than the alternative or her finding out the depth of his desire?

“You are promised to Lady Flora for the first dance,” Miss Keating continued, nodding at his sister before Flora moved away, far more interested in the music that was being practised. “That is of course how it should be, at least that is how society went about order in Edinburgh, and that would mean you should take out the next lady of importance. As the pretend companion of your sister?”

“I wished to make that an offer of employment to you,” he cut into her speech, pleased to notice how surprised Miss Keating looked.

“I am not certain that...”

“You will be accompanying her to London.”

“We are all planning to venture up to Town?”

Kit looked away, following his sister to the end of the ballroom. When would be the best time to confess to her that he had no intention of leaving Tintagel—that he had his doubts he would be able to? Would anything he said convince Miss Keating who seemed so bright, so resourceful that his family was doomed to remain here? Perhaps

she looked so pensive because she was clever and thought this offer was a ruse, a way of him being constantly in her presence, almost a trick to make her his mistress by sleight of hand—well at least he could clear up that understanding.

“If there was any misunderstanding on your part, or a lack of clarity on my part,” Kit said. He knew minutes were ticking rapidly by, and all too soon, the local gentry would be upon them, surrounding them, asking for their attention. Suddenly it mattered that despite his wishes, perhaps hers too—he was going to be honourable even if it killed him. “Let me insist there are no underhanded motives here.” This got Miss Keating’s attention. She turned on her heel and looked up at him, her expression opaque. “If that afternoon weeks ago gave you the wrong impression—I am not about to use your position as my sister’s companion, or mine as your employer as a way of... taking advantage of you.”

“As a means of seduction?” Her question was asked in the mildest of ways as if it were the merest trifle and nothing more, rather than a prospect that had tormented him for weeks, doing battle with his other worries, concerns, and fears until he was quite sure it was overwhelming him.

From outside, there came the sound of carriage wheels and raised voices—their guests were upon them. It was just as well, he reasoned, to make it clear to the girl that even if he thought he could see desire in her, it would burn both of them to proceed with such an undertaking.

“Quite,” Kit said. “I had no wish to give you the wrong—idea.”

“I see.” Her head tilted a little to the side, and she looked a little perplexed before giving him a tiny smile. “I have been trying to give you precisely that idea for weeks. What a shame you have no desire to pursue it.”

Miss Keating moved away from him, crossing after his sister, leaving Kit with more

wild thoughts that he would ever have imagined and the greatest desire to cancel tonight's ball immediately and drag her off to bed.

CHAPTER 15

Elsie kept her back straight as she walked away from the duke, staring forward, and resisting the temptation of looking back at him. Thankfully the ballroom was the most beautiful Elsie had ever seen it—cleaned and with dozens of candles illuminating the room. The ballroom had been opened up and aired last week in preparation for the party for Flora.

The lights flittered elegantly, and Elsie focused on these as she neared Lady Flora.

She still could not quite say why she had spoken to Kit in such a forward manner. It was shockingly unladylike behaviour on her part, but she was tired of waiting and hoping that he'd act. Besides, in a day or two they'd have a long carriage ride together, with Lady Flora beside them and, inevitably, all the problems that were awaiting him in London. He would be preoccupied with Margot, his dukedom, and Elsie realised there would be dozens of ladies all too eager to throw themselves at the new handsome duke. There was no way that Elsie could compete with that—she had no dowry to speak of and as her grandmother so delicately put it...

Elsie hastily shut down the memory of that particular lecture from her Grandmother Keating. "Lady Flora," she said, coming up to stand next to her charge.

The younger woman gave Elsie a nervous smile, clearly anticipating the arrival of her guests. Hastily, she took hold of Flora's hand, linking it through the crook of her arm with the physical confidence she wished she had with Flora's brother. "Your quietness is a blessing. If you get too worried just look at me and..."

“We are so unlucky,” she whispered. “Good things like this”—she glanced around the ballroom, her skin pale in an almost sickly manner—“they don’t happen for us, not for my family... not without punishment.” Her white-gloved hands twisted together, and Elsie saw that the corner of one of her fingers was badly rubbed. Lady Flora had been worrying a new pair of gloves away, close to creating a hole in the material.

“Who’s going to punish you? Why would anyone wish bad things on you? Have you ever done anything to hurt anyone?” There could not be a more innocent soul in existence than Lady Flora, of that Elsie was quite certain.

For a moment, Flora looked nonplussed with no clue precisely why she would be cursed. But then she continued in her scared, low tone, “The devil or the almighty, it doesn’t matter which because the result is the same. People die, my family dies.”

“Then whichever it is that’s doing the cursing, it will have to deal with me.” Elsie drew Flora to her, and together, they followed after Kit. The duke had made towards the front door in preparation to greet the arriving guests. “I am experienced in arguing and sometimes I even enjoy it,” Elsie said in a conspiratorial tone, hoping to make Lady Flora laugh but all the girl did was exchange a tiny nod. She did not seem entirely convinced by Elsie’s argument.

The rush of guests into the hallway, filled the manor’s gloomy corridors with noise. There had already been light added and the bump of decorations, so to all extents and purposes the manor now resembled a normal aristocratic home, which hopefully any member of the gentry would feel honoured to have been invited to.

Elsie nodded and bowed as one after another member of the local gentry filed past her and into the ballroom. She stood slightly back from Ashmore and Lady Flora, as befitted her station. This vantage point should have allowed her to properly see and judge whoever walked past, but if Elsie was being honest with herself, her eyes kept

drifting back to Ashmore. Dwelling on what she'd said, on the daring gauntlet she'd flung his way. It had been a rash mistake... his eyes turned her way and were lit by a strange new awareness as he looked at her, and for the life of her, Elsie could not regret her boldness.

Once a good twenty guests were inside with more expected soon, Ashmore offered both Lady Flora and her, his arm to escort them back into the ballroom. After all, no one wanted to miss out on the champagne.

Despite her gloves and his fine dark suit coat between them, Elsie still felt the heat of his skin through the fabric. There was a stiffness to his jawline as she laid her hand down on his arm, and he hastily turned to one side to ask Lady Flora a whispered question.

As they moved the noise of the ballroom rose to greet them, and even with the duke's body between them, Elsie could sense Flora's hesitation. Perhaps they had pushed the fragile young girl too far. The wave of voices rose as they slipped into the ballroom, and the musicians started up a jolly tune. With so many eyes on her, Elsie forced a cheerful grin onto her face.

"What a pleasing number of neighbours you have," she said as she looked right, then left as Ashmore guided them through the room towards the head of the chamber.

All around them the lights of the candles sparkled, making Elsie feel as if she had already consumed several glasses of wine, the smoke from them making the room airless.

"Despite living far from Town, when a duke issues an invitation, we still can attract a number of guests," Ashmore replied smoothly, nodding as they passed the vicar and his wife, who Elsie remembered from the introductions just minutes ago. "Or perhaps they have come to gawp at us. We must present quite a faded sight, and it should

keep them entertained I suppose.”

“So cynical,” Elsie said. As she spoke a strange set of things occurred in rapid succession. Time, for a moment, seemed as if it no longer obeyed the common rules of the game.

A beautiful piece of music picked up, and Elsie was amazed to see Ashmore bow to her and offer her out his hand. He wished to dance with her.

“My lady?” His tone was gentle, seductive, and for a moment, Elsie was moved and excited, touched and pleased to be able to dance with him.

The partygoers started to clap as others joined them on the dance floor, the tune picking up the pace as the piece properly started. Elsie knew the minuet, and when their hands touched, despite the material of their gloves, it warmed Elsie’s heart.

“It is going well,” she whispered as they came together and was pleased to see Kit smile.

As the music slowed, both of them looked towards Flora, who was watching the party with great interest.

It was working, Elsie thought excitedly, pleasure pounding through her.

Ashmore started to escort her off the dance floor when the murmurs of the surrounding inhabitants of the ballroom started to cry out.

Elsie’s head whipped around desperate to see what the matter was—was there some minor problem that had been forgotten? Had she not brought the right shade of pink gown? This was the sort of problem that society often deemed worthy of worrying over. But then she saw Lady Flora break away towards her brother and let out an

unnatural cry. All sound ceased, even the musicians reacting by pulling back their chairs, their hands raised. And far too slowly, Elsie looked up to the ceiling.

The chandelier had been lowered this afternoon to be fitted with candles, lit, and hoisted high again. She had ensured this would be managed by the servants. But now it hung by a thread high above them—wax dripping, candles quivering, and with a silent scream, Lady Flora pointed up as the entire thing wobbled.

Then it snapped free and fell, hurtling towards the ground.

Heading straight down to land where the three of them were standing.

Elsie closed her eyes. It was so large even throwing herself out of the way wouldn't do much, not in her long evening dress. It was going to land on her, and it seemed as if all of her defying the curse that the siblings had warned her about was finally going to come home to roost.

A warm heavy body crashed into her, at speed, surrounding her with its heat and strength. Shielding her as the sounds of the chandelier landed around them and the ballroom's bated breath broke, and the screams rented the air. Opening her eyes, she looked up into Kit's face.

"Are you hurt?" he asked. His voice was quick and harsh as his gaze raked her face.

"No," Elsie said. She tried to move, to search nearby, everything save for him seemed to be in movement. "What about Flora?"

"She ran but you just froze." He let out an uneven breath. "Do you have a foolhardy desire to die?"

Elsie shook her head, trying her best to clear it. She could not entirely explain why

she'd stopped dead in her tracks. Perhaps it had been fear. Or the thought surely, surely this could not be happening? It was too unlikely, too unfortunate. It beggared belief. Especially as she'd checked through the ballroom again to prepare it for the most perfect evening—nothing was out of place and yet disaster had struck once again .

Her eyes moved back to Ashmore, their faces inches apart. He was trying to shield her as best he could. His large frame on top of hers. She'd hoped and even attempted some humour that they'd end in this position. But not with a broken evening in pieces around them, nor at the risk of fire, which surely the candles on the chandelier might lead to. A horrid idea occurred to her. The smoking candles had caught, and Elsie could see there was a spreading fire up the nearest set of curtains.

“Did anything hit you?” she asked, and she clasped his shoulders trying to hold him to her.

All around them there were thundering feet, the shouts of their guests as they tore through the ruined ballroom which was filled with smoke.

As Elsie huddled between Kit's broad back and the ballroom floor, she wondered she had been the fool for not believing the two siblings about their family's inherited curse. She feared she believed it now, and it was going to be her mission to get both Ashmore and Lady Flora out of this damned place before anything worse happened to the pair of them.

“Come.” He dragged her upright and towards the partly opened doorway some of the guests must have departed through. “You need to leave.”

Shaking despite herself and disliking her nerves, Elsie linked her fingers through his. “You too.”

“I need to make sure the fire doesn’t spread,” Ashmore said as he untangled her fingers from his and then hastily yanked off his jacket, wrapping it around her shoulders. “If you see Flora...”

Nodding Elsie held on to the folds of the jacket as she stepped outside into the cooled night air. All around them there came shouts either inside or out of the house, she wasn’t sure, all her focus was on Kit who was about to go back into the ballroom. Beneath her feet the stone steps seemed absurdly sturdy, whereas everything else felt as if it might vanish into the night.

“Be careful,” she said as he took a step back .

“I have something to come back for.” He gave her a smile that in normal circumstances might have threatened her equilibrium but, in that moment, sent butterflies fluttering through her body. Then he was gone, and Elsie was left alone outside the manor house, staring up at the tall, stretching monstrosity, fearful it might swallow Kit whole.

She must have dozed off, Elsie sat up with a start, the duke’s jacket draped around her shoulders as she woke from the stone bench close to the ballroom. The noises of terror and shouts from the manor house had faded and been replaced with the sounds of nighttime, the hoot of an owl and the distant swish of the sea in the caves. Pulling herself into a more upright position, Elsie hurried back towards the doorway, Kit had pushed her through, hours ago—although in truth she had no idea how long ago it had been since she hurried outside.

Why had no one emerged to look for her? The question frightened her, for it meant they were probably in too much danger to find her? She doubted that Ashmore would leave her out there, unless...

Stepping back into the ballroom Elsie looked cautiously around the chamber. Or

rather what remained of it. Gone was all the elegance she'd admired and arranged. How such devastation could be wrecked by such a relatively small chandelier was beyond her, but the dent in the floor would take a skilled workman to fix. Smoke hung in the air, but at least there was no fire beneath it. There were large burn marks dotting the walls and ceiling, and an unpleasant musk hung in the air as if hair had been burnt.

Yet it wasn't merely the defeated atmosphere in the room that Elsie felt, it was also the knowledge that the catastrophe would destroy the fragile faith Flora had built up, rendering the possibility of leaving the manor as a trio unlikely .

Elsie walked farther into the ballroom, all the way across to where the musicians had been stationed, her hands touching the discarded sheets of music. Destined to go unplayed now. There was something so melancholy about that realisation.

The doorway opened, and Elsie looked up across the destroyed ballroom, her eyes seeking out the returning party, alighting on Ashmore as he entered the room. On Kit. A tremendous smile reached her mouth at the sight of him. Dishevelled. His dark hair matted with a ringlet hanging down to reach his left eyebrow. There were smudges on his face, and his previously pristine white shirt was now grey.

"I looked for you outside." His voice was sore with meaning as he stared back at her.

An almost hungry, animalistic expression consumed him as he strode forward towards her. Elsie braced herself. She knew what was coming before he reached her, and yet when his hands snatched for her, dragging her close, Elsie realised nothing would have been preparation enough for the onslaught. She wanted him, and now he was pressing his hands over the shape of her gown, feeling her bones, shape and that she was alive.

"But I couldn't find you," he said. "I needed you. And looked but..." Words seemed

to fail him, so instead he locked his hands on either side of her face forcing her to look up into his face. The feel of Ashmore's fingers sank into her skin, both reassuring and arousing. Ashmore had such a ferocious expression it almost daunted her—and Elsie had to remind herself she wanted him, wanting this passion finally unleashed.

When his mouth descended on hers, Elsie let out a moan. This was what she had dreamt of. This man. This dark, unknown who would only show her some small aspect of himself, yet it was enough for her to want him.

Kit's kiss was all-consuming. He claimed her. Burning away any memories of any other man she kissed. When his tongue pushed past her teeth, she tasted him—warm and sensual—and as intense as his claiming kiss was, it left her in no doubt this would only end in one outcome. He meant to have her. Which was just as well as she wanted him. She lifted her hands and sank her fingers into his thick curling hair pulling him closer. The moment jogged them, and as a struggling pair, they fumbled their way back—any elegance or grace was gone, swept away by a sheer need for one another, and when the momentum was done Elsie landed up against the rear of the ballroom, Ashmore pressed against her. His hands swept over her body, clutching briefly with strong, possessive hands until Elsie was lightheaded with desire.

Kit pulled his mouth free, his pale eyes assessing her face. “Yes, are you certain?”

“What would you say if I told you to stop?”

“I'd walk away.”

“That easily?” Elsie asked as if her voice was not quite her own, warmed by want and alight with a teasing flirtatious note she barely recognised. This was her as a wanton—the very creature her grandmother had accused her of being, but now Elsie liked who she was, revelling in the feeling of lust and being wanted.

“I didn’t say it would be easy.” He pushed a curl off her face and dropped a quick sweet kiss down onto her lips. “For either of us.”

Laughing up at him, Elsie kissed him back and her hands sought out the buttons of his shirt eager to see him. To feel the strength of his shoulders, his muscles tensed as she touched him. Better yet to lean in close and lick him. Consume him. He was right. It wouldn’t be easy to walk away, which was why she was relieved they wouldn’t be. This tension, this knot of awareness would be quenched this evening. It would take more than a ruined party, a burning crashing chandelier, hell even a curse to come between them.

His mouth had dropped to her collarbone, leaving a string of kissing there, as he tangled with some of her laces, loosening her gown so that he could touch and stroke more of her exposed skin. With every inch of her exposed Elsie felt more alive. Kit was doing this to her, and yet she was made into so much more by it.

“I need...” his words were desperate as his hands skimmed between her skirts, seeking out the heat between her legs.

Earnestly Elsie nodded, urging him on until his fingers grazed her drawers, parting the material to stroke her curls, which elicited an eager cry from her. She clung to him as Kit angled her more precisely against the wall. A delicious thought came to her—they would consummate their connection, right here up against the wall. He touched her again, his hand claiming her, whilst the other loosened the folds of his trousers.

In the dim moonlight, Kit’s eyes studied her face. “Yes, Elsie?”

She thought, suddenly wondering if this was that the first time he’d called her by her Christian name, and it warmed her heart. “Yes,” she said. A hundred times yes, she repeated to herself as she threw herself into their kiss.

CHAPTER 16

He was done denying this. Done avoiding Elsie around the manor house because the truth was, he could no longer resist her. It hadn't done any good staying away from her; she had haunted him regardless. And now he could luxuriate in holding her, kissing, caressing her skin and tasting the softness of her. It fed him, filling him with the sort of hot passion that thrummed through his chest—spurring on a hunger that he'd kept buried for far too long, and he felt like a caged beast now he was let loose. Elsie's dress was pushed up, her drawers ripped, his fingers pressing into her—laying claim in a way he'd denied himself.

Her lips melded with his, encouraging him on, and her small hands clung to his shoulders as he pushed her more entirely flat against the wall. All the niceties of a formal bed, of making love in a proper setting fled from him, leaving just an overwhelming drive for her body.

Moving both of his hands to her hips he steadied her, the differences in their heights no longer mattering now she was pinned against him. Her body had already been riding his fingers, and when he shifted them out of the way, he heard her groan .

“God,” he muttered.

Her eyes shot open, fixating on him. “You were what I was imagining when you walked in on me.”

The dim light in the ballroom showed her bright eyes, awareness flared in him, back to the moment he'd entered her bedroom—and the suspicion of what he'd walked in

on.

“Only the one time?” he asked, given the countless times he’d indulged in the privacy of his own chamber, and pleasure flared within him when Elsie shook her head. “I’ve imagined this.” He pressed himself forward, his cock brushing against her curls, inches from entering her. “Pictured it again and again, longed for it...” Until I thought I was going mad from it , Kit thought the last part, not ready to say it aloud.

“It doesn’t have to be imaginary anymore.” Elsie gasped. Her head thrown back against the wall, her chignon loose around her shoulders, the tops of her evening gown bagging to reveal the tops of her breasts. Even in the groggy moonlight, he could see her flush.

Lifting her slightly, Kit adjusted himself more firmly against her, pleased to feel the soft wetness of her need urging him on.

Elsie’s hands clung to his shoulders, eagerly encouraging him until he found the right position and slid inside her, taking her, holding her, and claiming her in turn. Any resistance or barrier he might have envisioned occurred to him briefly before the overwhelming need swarmed him, leaving no time or space for such thoughts—just with the drive to be sated. And to sate her too.

His movements as he pinned her to the wall started with an earnest ferocity, claiming and surging, the hot tightening of her holding him before he moved again, seemed to create between the two of them an uneven, lustful dance. Their breaths were heated, desperate, and lacking in anything beyond the sheer pressure of want. He surged into her with as much skill as he could manage, delighted to see colour flare brightly across her face, and watch as Elsie’s eyes flew wide, her throat worked, and she gasped out a moan. The tension in her body hardened, and then she cried out loudly as her limbs wobbled against his, lost to a world of sensation.

Suddenly her hand came out, pressing against his partly clothed chest, and he paused in his rocking, to gaze at her, the desire rumbling in him, riding his innards to finish in her.

“It’s too much,” she said. He slid out of her immediately, pulling himself away, the pain of being away from her excruciating. “I know this.” She gestured with her hands making circular motions as she stared at him with a strange expression on her face. “What it is to find... completion... but...”

Was Elsie rejecting him? Kit eased back, allowing her to drop down, to find her feet unsteadily on the floor. He had come on too strongly, been too demanding for her, too much for her. And he only had himself to blame.

She sucked in a breath and then gave him a tremendous smile, partly nervous, partly encouraging, and Kit closed the distance to brush his mouth against her lips. She clung to him again and whispered, “Did you...?”

“No.” At least he figured she was asking him if he had found his own end. Between their bodies, his cock still throbbed with want for her. Elsie let out a small laugh as she brushed her hips and then her hand along the length of him. “Did you want to continue?” He tried to make his question light when all he wanted was to be back inside her.

When she nodded, he bent his head and started kissing her neck, his mouth devouring the taste of her exposed skin, the two of them unevenly landing in a sprawl on the floor. The section they were in, a little secluded and padded with carpet. They rolled as parts of their formal wear were discarded, each of them tasting and touching whatever aspect of each other they could reach. Until Kit felt the burning sensation of his need for her consume him, and he knew he needed to be inside her again. They rolled over, and he pulled her body up against his, her back flat on his chest as his hands explored Elsie’s exposed front, tugging at her dress until it was beyond repair.

“I need to be inside you,” Kit said, his voice unrecognisable with need.

He felt her nod against him. Tilting her forwards at an angle, pushing the remains of her dress up to expose the rump of her arse, the roundness filling his hands briefly as she slipped into a better position in front of him. Kit pushed forward, keeping her steady and held her to him, as Elsie gasped out to find herself filled in such a way, her hands reaching out to the wall, ensuring she kept in close contact with him. In such a position, Kit let one of his hands roam over her body, exploring her as he rocked inside her, the motion making the pair of them cry out.

Pressure and light built up inside him, the feel of her tightening around his cock more exquisite and intense than he could ever have envisioned. Elsie’s body was a work of magic. A thing of enchantment. An endless maze of beauty... the compliments rolled through him until Kit was no longer sure what he’d said aloud and what he’d merely thought, what he felt certain of, and where he ended , and she began. The sensation built up in his body, flooding through as it claimed his mind too, and it was only with a distant realisation, he found his release. It crashed through him, bright and powerful as he pulled her close to him, his hands encircling her as his hips pumped into her, kissing the side of her neck and face.

All the while his breath was harsh and quick, logic and sense beyond him until the two of them crashed down on the carpet again.

Minutes crept by. Occasionally one of them would shift, adjust themselves into a comfortable position. Vaguely, Kit knew they should move. This was a public space. Someone, a servant might enter. But this distant thought could not stir him. His hand reached out as he pushed a stray strand of a curl off Elsie’s face as his eyes drifted down her body. They lay, him on his back and Elise on her front, side by side, only a foot between them. A stupid smile played on his face as he looked at her.

“That was not your first time,” he finally said into the darkness. Perhaps someone

might see it as a criticism, but he was pleased to see Elsie did not take it in that manner.

“No,” she replied. Her hand reaching out and resting on his chest. “I was ruined long ago.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Nothing could ruin you, Miss Keating. Ever.”

She laughed at this. “No, you cannot return to such talk. Now I can only be Elsie to you.”

“Will you tell me what happened?”

A shadow passed over her face, fleetingly, a memory which was not pleasant, and Kit felt guilty. “I can tell you what mine was like if you want to hear it?”

The exposed shoulder lifted in a shrug. “If it matters.”

The idea of hearing about it, of dwelling on another man, gripped him for a moment, and then Kit shook his head. “As long as it wasn’t against your will.”

“I was a fool, and I believed a soldier’s promised offer of marriage, but nothing was forced on me.” She looked up into his face as she spoke, and this released Kit of the burden of hunting the man down to kill him. No, he just needed to ensure that any memory of this soldier was burnt away entirely.

“Mine was with a tavern wench when I was at Cambridge. I am not sure what promises I made, but I’m sure they did not leave me with much dignity,” he said. The memory was a faint one, growing less significant with each year that passed, especially after what they had just shared.

Despite his fears, despite the ruined evening, despite everything that happened to spoil their best laid plans, Kit curled up closer to Elsie revelling in the feeling of pushing his worries away in her company. At least for these few snatched moments. His hands sought Elsie out, lightly touching her hair brushing it away from her eyes and then pulling her closer. She smiled at him through the darkness, and Kit kissed her. Her mouth rewarded him, her lips generous beneath his.

“Are you going to tell me we should leave?” She came to rest her head on his shoulder. He enjoyed this closeness, knowing it would not happen again. A bittersweet knowledge playing with him that it could be repeatable.

“Not unless you want to.”

She mockingly pretended to stretch out, as if this floor in a partly smoky room, dirtier by the remains of the party, was the most elegant and refined of boudoirs. “We do have a good record of finding locations to get closer to each other.”

“What do you do?” he teased her. “This spot is...”

“Starting with our cave, nothing could compare,” she said.

“This is an improvement then,” he said, thinking that were they able to be together again they hopefully might be able to locate a bed. In response she laughed. It was a sweet soft sound, and it gladdened his heart.

Behind him, there was a crinkling sound of a door closing, and they both sat up staring down the length of the ballroom. Someone must have heard them, or worse, could they have been seen?

“I should go.” Her voice was low, and he hated that she spoke the truth. For everyone’s sake. “My reputation?—”

“I cannot offer for you.” He would not assign another person to be tied to his dreaded family. “I’m sorry?—”

“I didn’t ask you to. Not given...” she trailed off, then came up, and sat on her folded knees, looking down at him. It was difficult to make out her expression, and he feared he’d disappointed her. “I have no dowry, no connections, and most importantly no virtue. I’m hardly a catch.”

“You’re more desirable than any other woman,” he said what he was thinking aloud, and she dipped her head and kissed his lips lightly .

“I suppose I’m simply not the marrying kind,” Elsie said.

Kit sat up, reaching for his own clothes as she dressed. How could he explain there was nothing wrong with her, and he would be more than happy to do the honourable thing? Being married to her would be a wondrous thing, and their nights would be ones filled with pleasure. A notable marriage based on friendship and affection. It sounded rather like his dear parents’ union and look at how well that had worked out—both of them disappointed and dead despite their best efforts. He would ensure that the Ashmore line ended with him. He could not inflict this fate on another.

“You will find a better match. Of that, I have no doubt.” A bitterness rose up in him. A form of jealousy that he had not expected even as he said the words. The idea of someone else wedding her, or someone else kissing her... He realised the truth that someone would gravitate towards Elsie’s sweetness, generosity, wit, and beauty...but she was his. Or at least he wished to claim her.

“Better than a duke?” She laughed having finished dressing as much as she could. She sounded doubtful, and he was certain Elsie thought he considered himself too high in his instep to make an offer for her. “Please rest assured I have no expectations of you. I know I am ruined and not good enough for a duke.” She pressed her hands

against the folds of her skirt. “Will you walk me to my chamber?”

“Of course,” he replied. How he wished she knew that she was far too good... but the words stuck awkwardly in his throat and when he thought he had found them she was already several steps away from him. Perhaps in the light of day, with a clearer head he would try to reassure her of this. Following in her wake, all his prior pride put to one side, a need arose to ensure she safely reached her chamber.

If he thought they might be silent, he was wrong. Once they were in the corridor, heading towards the staircase, Elsie was raising a topic of conversation he had put off for the entire time he had been focused on her.

“You think the chandelier was done deliberately?” Elsie kept stride with him, but he noticed she held on to the banister rather than take his arm. She wasn’t angry, but he suspected she was hurt. But her very question pinpointed why he could never marry—inflicting his family legacy on a woman or a child would be an inhuman act. Having attempted to explain or voice such thoughts to her previously had not worked and Kit doubted such ideas would suddenly take. Elsie would surely just see it as an excuse.

“I do,” Kit said.

“Well, it must have been done by someone in that case. A person who wished you or this evening ill.”

“Possibly. Yet this manor.” Kit glanced around them as they reached the midway point of the stairs, a small landing with an alcove. Elsie was hurriedly moving on, so he continued, “But you must remember that the building is hundreds of years old. It has lived through the monasteries being dissolved, and for decades, there’s not been any restoration done on the place, I wouldn’t be surprised if it was sheer bad luck.” Or the Ashmore’s legacy of death and destruction.

Elsie did not reply to this, but he did see her chewing on her lip. “Which room is located above the ballroom?” Her hand raised in the air as she tried to count. “We should check it and see.”

“See what?”

“Was it just ill fortune or sabotage? If it was the latter, we might be able to find out who is guilty?”

Kit had tried something after his parents’ deaths convinced that, if he found out the culprit for the spike in the wheel, this would somehow improve matters. “I’m not certain...”

“Come.” She grabbed his hand and set off retracing their steps just on the floor above. Darting along the corridor, eager to locate the chamber above the ballroom, flitting in and out of the moonlight. “Is this the one?” She ran ahead of him and pressed a hand against the door. “God, the smell is bad even up here.”

Nodding, Kit opened the doorway to the bedchamber, one of the numerous unused bedrooms that littered the second floor. Most, he suspected, would be dust filled and abandoned with furniture missing or damaged.

Edging their way silently inside, Kit saw that white sheets covered up most of the furniture in ominous shapes, removing from his eyesight clarity on what each of them might be. It was a chamber which had not been robbed of its contents. However, what remained created an ill-smelling gothic counterpoint in front of them. The curtains were partly drawn, and Elsie walked across, flinging them wider. Sickly white light poured in through the glass, like stale milk, revealing in its wake on the floor, a thrown back carpet, splintered wood, and an abandoned axe. Visible through the cracks in the flooring was the dropped chandelier, part of its mechanism still swinging. Someone within the household, or a guest perhaps, had snuck upstairs

determined to end the party. Or more likely end his sister and him. Either way that was why the celebration had come to a crashing halt.

Elsie glanced up at him, her expression drawing down in a quick frown, calculation quickly showing on her pretty face. “It can’t be a curse. Don’t you see it, Kit? I thought for a moment it might be, because you were so convinced, but...” She stopped herself and stepped closer, one of her hands reaching out for him, gently touching him. “But here is the proof, nothing otherworldly, that someone—someone real—is trying to kill you.”

CHAPTER 17

Elsie watched Kit as he circled the axe and the gap in the floor, sections of the ballroom visible. He hadn't spoken in several minutes his face drawn in severe lines as he gazed down at his surroundings with calculation.

If she could guess, she would assume he was waiting for an answer from God. Or hoping for an obvious sign of guilt that would point to someone he knew. Yet he still said nothing. To Elsie, there was no obvious answer other than deliberate sabotage and who might be motivated was beyond her. Never had she felt like more of an outsider, none of the servants had been remotely friendly to her so how was she supposed to guess at those responsible. She wished she could tell what Kit was thinking as it was so hard to tell. His face was inscrutable, even after having been so intimate with him. It was strange to feel as if they were linked and connected physically and yet Ashmore did not trust her enough to confess his innermost thoughts.

Having shared such an act together, their mutual passion overwhelmed them. She saw now how unfulfilling and lacklustre her one previous lover had been. Captain Oliver Graves. He was insignificant compared to what she felt for Ashmore. He'd had freckles and bright brown eyes, which had reminded her of her morning chocolate, but a great deal of the pain his rejection caused her seemed unimportant now.

How had she thought that was love?

She had believed she wished to marry Graves... well it proved how silly she had been. About as silly as she had been to trust Graves to honour his promise to wed

after. She had been a fool, and with the years that had passed since she'd been with him, and since his death on campaign, Elsie had accepted that her stupidity would be punished by no one ever offering for her. She would be denied a marriage.

A loving union which her heart had always sought. Her romanticism had to be put aside, but it did not seem her lusts could be... For a moment, she recalled how her Grandmother Keating had acted on the discovery of her physical relationship with Graves. Her grandmother going far enough to intercept the captain's letter to discover what had occurred between the two of them. The torrent of insults the older woman, her own relative, had directed her way still burnt through her. It had been a revelation that Grandmother Keating knew Margot was not her blood relation, given what the old woman had said about Elsie's mother.

Ashmore's dismissal hadn't stung in the same way as her grandmother's words had. No, he seemed to believe the opposite of Elsie, and yet he, just like her grandmother, would never see her in the marrying light.

Perhaps, Elsie thought, her heart sinking that her grandmother had been right, that she was little more than a light-skirt, who could so easily give out her favours, without ever risking her heart.

And yet...

"You would have me question the servants?" Ashmore finally looked up, fixing her with a perceptively dark glance. His glance sought her out, awaiting her answer whilst she had been thinking about her past .

For a moment, Elsie considered saying yes. They could work their way through the servants, narrowing down the potential suspects. But then of course, they would have to think about the guests too. Could someone have been invited and snuck unseen upstairs to wreck such havoc on the ball? And what would remain would be the

question of why. “Surely it would be better for us to just leave?”

“To the safety of London? Where my predecessor was murdered in cold blood? Has your sister had any luck finding the culprit?”

The memory of the older duke, her sister’s father, lying sprawled on the floor before her, caused tears to spring to her eyes. All this death, this destruction hurt... biting at her sensitive heart and the idea that someone could also target Margot. Or Kit. But Margot hadn’t written, which must mean she’d had no luck finding the man responsible.

“Don’t cry,” Ashmore ordered. His tone was abrupt and for a second Elsie wished to stomp away from him. To act as scared as she felt. Being ordered not to cry, made Elsie want to as a mere act of childish defiance, how dare he order her around? Sometimes the emotions Ashmore stirred in her pulled her in two directions—to scream and run away from him and to step closer and kiss his stubborn face.

“I would have us leave,” Elsie repeated herself. She didn’t say they should go to London. But getting out of this manor house seemed the wisest course of action. Who cared what the rationale was for the attacks on him, it was better just to escape and perhaps work out who the plotter was at a later date. If they could not make sense of the mystery, then he could employ someone who might be able to—as a prominent member of the nobility he’d have enough clout to hire as many Bow Street runners as he wished. “I haven’t heard from my sister. She has not written at all while I have been here.”

“If she had found the murderer, she would have written to inform us,” he said, “which means she has not, or someone has gotten to her.”

That thought had never occurred to Elsie and fear swelled in her stomach, the image of Margot felled in the same position as the dead duke, made tears gather in her eyes.

Surely it could not be the case. Her sister was too bright, too good...

"No," Elsie said almost to herself at the picture of Margot bleeding. Her mind rushed for answers. Surely if that had happened, then there would be something in the papers? A notice from her parents? She swallowed and forced herself to be sensible. If something terrible had happened, then Mrs. Bowley, her sister's companion, would have written to tell her. Clinging to that idea, Elsie straightened.

Abruptly Ashmore put his arm out towards her. "Let us leave this room. No good can be done this late at night. Or rather this early in the morning."

She took his arm, her fingers sinking into the material of his ruined shirt. "Will we leave in the morning?"

When he looked away from her, Elsie already knew the answer. Ashmore had no intention of ever leaving this bloody manor. She dug her feet into the floor, and he turned back to her, concern marking his face mingled with a touch of frustration. "What is the matter?"

"You won't leave here, will you?"

"This is my home," he said. Even in the darkness, Elsie knew he felt no fondness for the place, and she did not blame him in the slightest, when she finally was able to leave Tintagel, she would never wish to return. It was a haunted place, rich with the memories of what had been lost, which seemed real enough to linger on with the living.

"So, you will force yourself to stay here and welcome an early death?"

"If it is my fate, it is what I deserve." He sounded fatalist and dropped his arm walking to the door. In annoyance Elsie followed after him, her steps quick to catch

up with him. She desperately wanted to call him by his name, to whisper Kit, and have him respond, for the lover to return to the fore, rather than the hard, sharp noble before her.

“No,” she said. Surely, there was something to make him see sense.

“I’m afraid that isn’t enough. Simply saying no, and it won’t happen, can’t change the facts of the matter.”

“If you don’t fight, then you aren’t the man I thought you were.” Anger flooded her voice. He wasn’t being a coward, nor was it something else at play and it made Elsie furious. How could Kit reveal himself so intimately and yet not tell her what thoughts were forming in his mind?

“I am trying my best to protect my sister and even yourself.” Ashmore grabbed her, moving Elsie up against the wall bending so their eyes were on a level. “You can both leave this house for your safety. It is the best and wisest course of action.” There was a finality to his words which brooked no argument, but to Elsie, who considered leaving him here to be tantamount to a death sentence, it was an absurd notion.

“But you would stay, knowing someone wants you dead?” It was hard to keep her face straight when she asked him this.

“Of course,” he snapped back, before sighing and regaining a semblance of calm. “I will draw their attention from you both. Can you not see my logic there? It is the curse my father feared made manifest. If it is meant to be my turn, so be it.”

The fury that had bubbled through her suddenly shrunk, and Elsie wanted to cry. He was going to sacrifice himself. That was his master plan, and since Flora could not inherit, he presumably thought it would stop all this.

What about me? She wanted to ask. Don't you care about me? What will I do without you? I have dreamt since you rescued me on that fateful night of being in your arms, and now she had tasted it, he told her it could never happen again .

She searched Ashmore's face, seeking out some touch of softened or affection she felt but there was only the expected harshness. Stiffening her spine, Elsie nodded, pulling herself away from him.

"Very well, Your Grace." She marched the remaining steps to her bedroom, snatched open the door and hurried inside.

It felt bittersweet to be away from his infuriating presence. How could one man stir up such feelings? Elsie leaned back against the doorframe and let out an uneven breath. In annoyance, she realised she was waiting for him to knock, to apologise, to try to talk to her. Instead, she heard the soft steady beats of his footfalls as he moved away, presumably back to his own chamber.

"Hush," she whispered to Lancelot, who had raised his little head at her entrance. Watching her from his position in the softest armchair. She gave him a wan smile.

Returning to stare up at the dark ceiling, Elsie wished he would return and prayed that he wouldn't. It unnerved her that she had no idea what to make of him as a man, as a survivor, or as a duke. He didn't want to wed her, that was not a surprise... she wrapped her arms protectively around herself, shielding her frame from any criticism, yet he desired her. Presumably he thought he was protecting her, but surely, she was vulnerable as an unwed woman too, given they had been intimate.

With a heavy sigh, she concluded—she was going to have to tell Kit everything about her sister. The whole truth of the matter—of Margot's bastardy, of his uncle's treatment of their mother, and that Margot and Kit were cousins. With a rush of guilt, which pulled her in two ways, Elsie knew she should have told him sooner and yet

she felt responsible since Margot wished her to wait. Would it look grasping? Greedy? They needed his blessing for Margot to receive her annuity from the dead duke.

Now she knew him better... even at the thought, Elsie gave a sad little laugh. She could claim to know elements of Kit, but he was a master at keeping her at a distance.

Undoubtedly, Elsie should compile the reasons why Margot hadn't written to her. Despite the numerous letters that Elsie had sent asking, nay pleading for advice. It wasn't like her sister. Or perhaps she should draw up a list of the servants who might have a vendetta, but the truth was they'd kept their distance from Elsie the entire time she'd be in the manor. The alternative—that it was a member of the local gentry—well, that was no help, she certainly couldn't remember any of their names.

Sinking down on the bed instead, Elsie dwelt on the one thing she had told herself not to, the sudden, soul-wrenching act Kit and she had enjoyed. It had been necessary, she told herself. An act of release after such a long build up. She remembered the taste of smoke about him, the brush of his stubbled cheeks on hers, the rush of energy she'd felt as he'd scrambled with her clothes. Then how claimed and owned she'd felt when he'd taken her in an entirely alternative position from anything she'd done before... There were things she wanted to try, new and different, or even basic and boring... because Elsie knew they wouldn't be with Kit.

I'll leave. I'll go take him up on his offer, his order as she should put it, on getting the hell out of here. I can take his offer of employment and leave with Lady Flora. She had tried her best for all concerned and would have received a handsome income for her role as a companion, and that would support both her sister and her going forward.

So, with this plan before her, Elsie dwelt on it as she gazed up at the canopy of the bed high above her. But it meant leaving him, the bloody stubborn, self-sacrificing

man. It meant leaving the mystery as that, an unknown, unsolvable thing, that she would forever be left to wonder at. It would mean she would never again feel the touch of his hands on her skin or the taste of his rough kiss, nor the cry as he lost himself in her. She would be abandoning him as so many had done before, and it was this notion that made Elsie sit up abruptly in the middle of the bed, a giggle escaping her lips.

“Damn and blast,” she swore, the realisation growing as she sat there. A weighty and heartfelt swear word she shouldn’t have known, but it seemed the only suitable thing to utter in a time like this when she had done the most foolish of things. “I love him.”

It made sense. Love. Fitting it together—all her actions, all her awareness of him. The daft thing was this feeling was nothing like what Elsie had previously known of love. Not a bit like the heady sweetness and then disappointment with Captain Graves. Nor like the idle imaginings she’d indulged in as a girl at Lady Flora’s age—all of those had been delicate and dainty with no hard edges. So much with Kit was difficult. Nothing about him was easy, and yet even thinking this, made Elsie want to defend him against herself. He was hers to protect because she loved him.

Why couldn’t she have fallen for someone where it was easy?

Grabbing up the blanket, she pulled it over her head and curled up, still in her evening gown.

Because you tried that, and you were bored.

Whilst Graves had behaved badly at first, refusing to marry her, the truth was once their affair was discovered, Elsie was rather relieved that he had said no. She realised she could not marry the captain. That was the main reason why her grandmother had been so angry with her, banishing her back to her parents’ home.

Her own answer was that she had found all other men to be dull, quiet, and quaint in comparison to Kit. She loved Kit because he challenged her, because he thrilled her, and because there was so much to him that she was yet to discover, she would never be bored. And of course there were the qualities she valued—his bravery, his kindness to his sister, his reluctant sweetness to Lancelot when he thought no one would notice...

As she sought a slither of comfort from that notion, and ignored for the time being the fact he certainly did not love her, Elsie curled farther into the bedding, trying her best to feel sleepy.

Just as the heaviness she associated with sleep, claimed her legs, there came an ear-splitting scream. It echoed through the room, blending a femininity and fear that had Elsie's hair on the back of her neck standing up whilst she threw herself from the bed, grabbing the bed pan, and running to the door.

Lancelot barked, his small spaniel head at an angle. He scurried out of the chair and ran alongside her as Elsie ran down the hallway towards the continuing sound of the scream. As she neared the noise, the scream broke and then restarted, and now Elsie could hear other sounds. A male voice telling whoever it was to be quiet for heaven's sake.

"I warn you I'm armed," Elsie called out. It had not escaped her notice that the room which she had come level with was Lady Flora's. It struck her suddenly that Lancelot should have been in there, and how strange it was that he wasn't in his mistress's chamber. The idea should have occurred to her sooner, but she was far too busy dwelling on Kit.

All sound ceased, and Elsie wished suddenly she had kept her mouth shut. She reached for the handle with trepidation, only for another set of fingers to alight over hers.

Looking up she saw Ashmore standing there. He was dressed in merely his shirt, his hair wet on his head. His magnificently muscled forearms were visible because the shirt was rolled up. In his free hand Elsie saw he was carrying a pistol. His eyes crinkled slightly at the edges, and Elsie eased back, allowing Kit to push open the door and enter his sister's bedroom first. Lancelot, yapping wildly, hurried forward too, and Elsie heard a muttered curse from a masculine voice on the other side of the door.

“Flora...” Kit stepped forward and into the chamber, followed on his heels by Elsie, who braced herself for what awaited them on the other side.

CHAPTER 18

The curse made manifest. That was what Kit had assumed when he'd seen the wreckage of the carriage that had been carrying his parents and sister. Before that it had all been rumour and speculation, but in that moment it had become real.

Such brutal reality Kit had been lucky to avoid, but it seemed it could no longer be ignored, shut away or avoided. That was the thought that he realised as he stepped into Flora's bedroom, utterly prepared to face the devil if that was who was waiting on the other side.

Of course, it wasn't.

Nothing could have matched the demon with the black hood and billowing cape, which Kit had envisioned in his youth. Yet the lack of dramatics of what was before him, almost disappointed Kit as he was ready and willing to charge into battle.

Flora's bedchamber was disordered, with her clothes strewn here and there, books and keepsakes, equally as disregarded, cluttered the carpet. His sister was standing in the middle of the mess, holding on to the small table for balance, her ashen complexion flushed, her eyes wide as she pointed in an accusatory manner towards the man in her room.

Peterson. The household butler was poised by the window, as if he had been about to throw himself out of it, down onto the steps below. Perhaps Kit's entrance had shown him the futility of such actions now he was caught, or perhaps the truth that he may well not survive the fall had stopped him in his tracks. Clapsed in one of his hands

was what looked like a warped piece of cloth, the kind that could be used to strangle someone Kit decided. Or, said the logical part of Kit's brain, to clean something.

But logic be damned, the butler had no business being in his sister's room at three o'clock in the morning, and besides he had never been employed to clean a thing.

In a few strides, Kit reached Peterson and slammed the pistol into the man's skull. Peterson, who had been speaking a jumble of words that made for a very poor set of excuses, landed unceremoniously on the floor, gazing up at Kit, his expression scared.

"Stay there, or I will take great pleasure in shooting you."

When he turned back to look at Flora. She had been joined by Elsie, who despite being several inches shorter than Flora, had wrapped her arms around the girl and seemed to be soothing her. He saw Elsie's mouth moving but her words were not for his ears, presumably a mixture of comfort and strength.

"What are you doing here?" Kit crouched as he asked his question, lowering himself down to stare at Peterson.

Before the man could answer, Elsie brushed past him, and pulled from the butler's unresisting hand, the cloth.

"What are you doing?" Kit asked in confusion as he watched Elsie lift the cloth up to her face and give it a tiny sniff, before hurriedly lowering it and shaking her head swiftly in an attempt to clear whatever she had smelt.

"Ugh." She pulled a face at the smell, blinked several times, and then looked up at him. "It's been dipped in a mixture—the cloth," she said. "It's got a dash of laudanum on it. I can smell that. My grandmother and her friends swore by it. There

might be some camphor too, and perhaps some other herbs. I'm not sure about the rest."

"He meant to..."

"I'm not certain." Elsie threw the cloth onto the nearby table, her gesture clear that she did not want to be contaminated by it. "Flora just told me that she woke up and found him pressing it over her mouth." A look of tender sympathy passed over Elsie's face as she glanced back at Flora, and then in an undertone for Kit's ears only, Elsie added, "She must have fought very hard at its strong smell."

With a murderous feeling swelling in his chest, Kit reached out and pulled Peterson up by his collar. "Tell me what you were doing in here with that."

"I—that is, Your Grace..." The man, who Kit had known for years, gave the appearance of someone else entirely as he shifted and squirmed under Kit's gaze. His familiar features hardened as they struggled to form words.

"He'll have trouble talking if you keep tightening your hold on his collar," Elsie said. From her tone, Kit could tell she did not much care for the explanation that Peterson might give.

Reluctantly, Kit loosened his hold a fraction, and from hastily licked lips, Peterson said, "We—that is, I thought... The little miss—she is hysterical, and the medicine has helped in the past." As he spoke, Peterson nodded to them earnestly, his rounded eyes bobbing between Kit and Elsie, desperate it seemed to be believed, before settling on Kit. "My lord—Your Grace, you know what she was like after your... after that crash. Screaming. Inconsolable. And?—"

"You have dosed her?" Elsie cut into what the butler planned to say next, her question sharp.

“It was only meant to help.” Peterson looked away from Kit and Elsie for the first time, out across the chamber, towards Flora who had sunk onto the carpet, holding on to Lancelot. “Tell him, my lady, you used to come to the kitchen and ask us for it.”

Fury that Peterson would dare to address Flora, after invading her bedroom and attempting to dose her, made Kit yank Peterson close to him. He stared into the older man’s face until Peterson closed his eyes in fear, unable to read what Kit was thinking. The ugly truth was that Kit was not just angry because of Peterson’s nerve in asking such a query, but that Flora would take such action on her own without telling him, that she would make such a choice and believe Kit to be better in his ignorance. How long had his little sister been taking such doses and in what quantity? “Be that as it may, what business had you to administer to her in her sleep? Quite clearly my sister did not desire another dose.”

“You should send for the magistrate.” Elsie had come to stand close to him, shielding Flora from looking at Peterson. “What if he...” She paused, and Kit realised she was trying to formulate words to express her fear that Peterson had done this before and all that could entail. “What if this is not the first time he has invaded her bedroom?”

“I’ve never, madam, come here before—only tonight after what happened with the ball, I thought Lady Flora would need it. She’s never been right in the head, not after what she saw and?—”

“Enough,” Kit spat out. He doubted whether he could trust the man, but it didn’t matter what Peterson swore. All that mattered was talking to Flora. After that, he would decide on the best course of action. Dropping the butler down to the ground, Kit grabbed up his abandoned pistol and handed it to Elsie. “Keep this pointed at him, and I will go and talk to my sister. If he moves, shoot him.”

Elsie accepted the weapon unquestioningly, it was over large in her small hands, and she sucked in a breath before assuming a position with the pistol angled towards

Peterson.

“I...” For all his bustle and desire to speak, Peterson’s lips continued to move but no words came out until he finally slumped still.

Walking across the chamber, Kit felt the weight of his failings as an older sibling—the obligation he owed to his sister and how he had let her down. Kit realised he had been overly focused on what the curse meant—far more interested in what havoc his dead relatives might have wrought, rather than what Flora was enduring. No, instead he focused on what could have caused the crash. What act of vengeance could be inflicted on those who had wronged his family. Instead of caring for the last member of his family that he had left.

When he reached Flora, he leant close, folding her into his embrace. She came stiffly and with great reluctance, and Kit knew he didn’t have the right words to offer the safety she needed.

“Tell me what to do,” he said to Flora.

Finally, after what felt like forever, Flora said for his ears only, “Make him leave.”

Raising his eyes, he sought out Elsie. She stepped back away from Peterson and lowered the pistol. Her expression was so trusting, guilt twisted through his mind at how he had behaved towards her. To all extents and purposes, he had acted as badly as the relatives he always judged—making love to a young lady, who he was meant to safeguard, and was, he supposed, in his employ since he had offered her the role of the companion to Flora. And then refusing to even make her an offer. Elsie met his gaze, her expression sympathetic and if anything, that made the whole thing worse. The messy muddle of the business sprawled out before him as he watched her, wondering what course of action he might take to make matters simpler. And whether that could make either of them happy.

Peterson twitched, perhaps considering making a run for it again. Well at least Kit reasoned he could deal with him. Letting go of Flora, he moved closer to Peterson, taking up the pistol and weighing it considerably .

“We want you gone,” Kit said, “and don’t ever consider trying to return to this estate or any of my other holdings. I will take great pleasure in wringing your neck if you do.” Then with quick strides, Kit moved over to the servants’ bell and pulled. When Flora’s maid arrived, he told the girl to fetch up Peterson’s belongings and three of the manservants.

“What about Mrs. Clarke, Your Grace?” The wide-eyed girl threw a confused look up at Kit. There was a nervous hesitation which Kit did not understand, but perhaps the poor maid was tired and confused by the scene before her, which must strike almost anyone as strange.

“What about her? I would imagine the woman is asleep. Let us keep it that way.” He could almost resent someone who might be able to slumber through the last few hours. Then again, he wouldn’t have missed the opportunity of being with Elsie for...

“I was just wondering, Your Grace, if she should be informed?”

“No, wait until morning. But fetch the men. I want Peterson escorted off my estate tonight.” He was pleased when the girl vanished and even happier to drag the butler to the door and, finally, out of his sister’s bedroom. When Peterson was pulled away by three of the servants, Kit watched him go before slipping back into Flora’s chamber. To his surprise, Flora was asleep, with Lancelot the dog curled up next to her, a thick blanket thrown over her shoulders, whilst Elsie was busy setting the chamber to rights.

Kit watched her, wanting to say something that captured the depth and range of his feelings, that lumbered uncomfortably and with no definition through him—the best

he could sum it up as was rather like having an acute stomach-ache combined with the jovial side of being drunk—none of which any sensible, hell any woman, would wish to hear. It was hardly flattering, but no one had ever labelled Kit as charming, and being locked away in the depths of Cornwall hadn't helped with that .

“You don't have to do that,” Kit said as Elsie started folding up Flora's dropped shawl and ribbons. “Send for a maid.”

“And disturb Flora again?” Elsie shook her head. “I don't mind, I've done it enough times for myself, or my sister when she was unwell. Besides, sometimes I think there is a sense of putting the world to rights even if it is just in one room.” She smiled down at the ribbons as she laid them down on the dressing table, and Kit had to suppress the desire to cross the chamber and hug her. With easy soft movements, she moved around the bedroom soothing and settling anything that looked out of place. No wonder Flora had felt safe enough to fall asleep, in Elsie's company there was the abiding feeling of security.

It was ironic, Kit thought to himself as he watched her covetously, how he had always hoped to give Flora that sensation, and then this diminutive northern woman swept in, and with her mere presence instilled a sense of home.

“I will stay with her.” Elsie glanced up at him. “She asked me to.”

“Do you think it necessary?” He had hoped to be able to stay in Flora's room, to stand guard and to focus on that. If Elsie remained, then he would hardly be able to ignore her.

“Perhaps, perhaps not, but I think it wiser to humour her. It is no trouble for me. Especially...” She paused.

“Yes?” Kit braced himself for whatever comments or pointed remarks Elsie could

justifiably make. She moved a little closer, and her hand pushed a strand of hair out of her eyes, he watched as the curl slotted behind her ear. How he would like to bite down on the small shell of her earlobe.

“You suggested I should be her companion?” Elsie asked. “If that offer remains, staying here would be the least I could do for her.”

“What would make you think I would withdraw that offer? Surely you do not think I am such a braggart?” He hoped she didn’t, although he wouldn’t blame her if she did

A smile creased Elsie’s face, illuminating her with a glow of grace that surprised him in the way it simply flowed out of her—goodness, kindness, and willingness to help others. It wasn’t enough simply talking to her, and watching her move, why did he constantly want to touch her? Yes, there was an overwhelming sensual component to it, and yet, there was also the sheer desire to be close, to smell the scent of her hair, to nestle in her small but surprisingly strong body. To be comforted and to give comfort, and then perhaps to whisper the thing he wished more than anything else to say, “Please let me keep you.”

It would fade. He had been telling himself that since Elsie arrived in his life, and admittedly it hadn’t happened yet. But surely, at some point it would.

“In that case, I will stay outside.”

“There is no need.” Elsie followed him towards the doorway. “I can lock the bedroom and ensure we are both well.” She put her hand out and touched his arm. “Flora was relieved you dealt with the matter so quickly... I know you are far more familiar with her, but I can see how well she trusts you.” Her fingers lingered on his shirt, and Kit could no longer resist. He snatched up Elsie’s hand, lifting it to his lips and placing a fervent kiss upon the palm.

For a brief moment, he saw a hesitation pass over Elsie's face, as if she were being pulled in two different directions, and then she leant up on her tiptoes and gently kissed his mouth. It was such a contrast to their earlier coming together, this time all sweetness and softness, her mouth pressing against his until Kit wished to the bottom of his heart that he could deepen the kiss, that they weren't in his sister's room, but his own.

When that idea entered his head, he pulled back, Elsie's forehead coming to rest beneath his chin, and he slowly let himself pull her in close. Revelling in the feeling before she said, her words tangling in the folds of his shirt. "After tonight you know we cannot be like this again."

He had realised he was waiting for her to say that. Of course, they both knew it.

"Is that so?"

"It wouldn't be fair to Flora." Elsie leant back, her pointed chin raised as she gazed up at him. "Her companion should be above reproach."

It was true and yet... how Kit wished he had never even kissed her. How much simpler things would have been. A temptation tasted was worse to give up. He saw that now.

"Tomorrow—or rather I suppose I should simply say in the morning, you and I can discuss this further. We have a great deal to talk over it seems." It was not a conversation he was particularly looking forward to, given he felt sure of the particulars—all of them rather dry and exacting, and none of them as sweetly romantic as he'd prefer them to be.

"Do you think the dawn will bring some clarity?" There was a faint note of humour to her question as she watched him step away and move towards the door again.

“Yes.” Kit gave her a smile. “Everything will be better in the morning. Lock the door behind me.” He waited for the sound of the key turning, knowing he had told Elsie a lie. As he walked down the corridor towards his own chamber, the thought twisted through him with vile certainty. All that the morning would bring was the unpleasant consequences of his actions and possibly a broken heart.

An odd thing realisation dawned on him as he slipped into his own bedroom. As he discarded his snatched-up clothes and splashed a little cold water from the pewter bowl onto his face, he pondered the quandary—he had assumed that to suffer a broken heart, one would have to have a heart originally—one which might be offered out. As he stretched out on his bed, staring up at the canopy above him, rage and unspent confusion ravaged his thoughts, but what overwhelmed him was the disquieting idea that he had lost his heart without even realising that it was in play.

CHAPTER 19

The following afternoon Elsie had made up her mind about the following points. One, that she had enjoyed writing lists in her youth, they had encouraged her to remember things and most crucially get her tasks completed. With that in mind, Elsie resolved she would begin again. Today. So, on to point two, which was that last night's kiss might have been the greatest kiss that she had ever experienced. If she allowed herself the luxury of remembering it—recalling the scratch of his whiskers, the way Kit had cupped her face and stroked her cheek whilst his tongue had delved into her mouth, robbing her of her senses and wisdom—if she indulged in the memory, she would forget a key part. The most important reason why Kit had kissed her last night was incidentally her point three, and possibly the most important point, he was saying goodbye to her. Or at least to their dalliance.

Letting out a heavy sigh, Elsie knew there wasn't any purpose in adding any more items to her list, as the final point was the key, and the thing she was having the greatest trouble accepting.

“There you are, miss.” Samson bustled in, carrying a tray laden with tea things, and a large slice of fruit cake. “I’ve been round and round the house, in all the rooms looking for you. I suppose I should have checked the library first.” Samson’s good cheer delivered with a happier bounce of words than was normal for her, convinced Elsie that her maid hadn’t been just dallying with the driver, Clary, but was clearly rather enamoured of him. But her maid also could not possibly have heard the news of the butler’s dismissal—or at least not the real reason for it.

“Thank you, Samson,” Elsie said, lowering herself into the nearest armchair, and

reaching for the teapot. It was lukewarm, and yet Elsie did not have the heart to send Samson away to bring back any hotter water. Not when the reason she had been lurking in the library on the pretence of finding a book, when all she really wanted was to run into Kit. A swell of disloyalty to her normally bookish tendencies, wriggled through her, and she forced her mind back to questioning Samson. “I don’t suppose you have heard about?—”

“About Peterson?” Samson’s bright eyes encouraged questions, and Elsie nodded, realising that perhaps her maid’s good cheer was less to do with romance and more to do with gossip. “Oh, you will never guess...” Samson edged closer. “I got down this morning to the kitchen as I do every day, and there was such a hullabaloo. I have never seen the like. Not even when poor duke Ashmore...” she trailed off, looking uncomfortable. “You will remember that day miss. Horrible day. God rest his soul.”

“Amen,” said Elsie, and to this Samson nodded most earnestly.

“Downstairs was in uproar at Peterson’s disappearance, nothing was right down there, and Mrs. Whitelaw was furious at the state of things, but she couldn’t say a thing not with the master just standing there watching us all... You know, I’ve never seen a duke in a kitchen before.”

“His Grace was there?” Elsie asked, unable to picture quite how Kit would manage the inevitable fall out of Peterson’s departure. After all, the idea of a male servant invading a young lady’s chamber, where it is widely known, would ruin whatever prospects Lady Flora might have.

“Oh yes, indeed the duke was. He was the one who said Peterson had been dismissed. Explained why he was down there with us this morn. His Grace told us Peterson had been caught stealing. Several footmen had seen Peterson off the property. Can you imagine?”

Samson clearly wished she'd been awake to witness it, whereas Elsie would have liked nothing more than to have the memories of Flora's distress removed from her memory forever. "His Grace said that Peterson had been let go without references, and if any of us felt any loyalty to him, that we'd best be going too."

"I would imagine you wished to ask the footmen several questions?" Elsie asked.

"Of course I did, but His Grace told us, anyone trying to find out more about what had happened, could also go the same way as Peterson—out the door. Then he said that Mr. Moore had been placed in Peterson's position and would be the new butler... and you can guess how well that went with Mrs. Clarke. I thought her mouth couldn't get any thinner. She doesn't like Mr. Moore."

After Elsie's initial trip downstairs to find her post, meeting the cold-eyed housekeeper, Mrs. Clarke, the bossy cook Mrs. Whitelaw, and even the then stoic Peterson, she had been put off from investigating where her letters had gone. It had been weeks since she'd given up asking Samson. But even by removing Peterson from the equation, it still left the formidable cook and housekeeper down there. A small wave of sympathy swelled in Elsie for Mr. Moore, and she agreed with Samson's summary.

"Did you?—"

"Me and Miss Bright, she's Lady Flora's maid, the ginger one, we hurriedly grabbed up the breakfast trays."

Arching an eyebrow, Elsie gazed up at her maid. From a frightened nitwit just weeks ago, to a young woman enjoying a romance, to now an excited gossip, Samson had gone through quite a change despite her initial reluctance to leave London. Then again, since she wasn't much older than Lady Flora, Elsie reasoned it was to be expected, and were she an older or wiser employer, she would probably have set a

better example for Samson to follow. But since she wasn't, she would at least resist lecturing her maid, and therefore devolving into a hypocrite, so instead she asked, "I don't suppose you heard anything else?"

"As His Grace left, he told us to send for the estate manager in town, so Nealy went for him. The duke said he wanted the place readied for his departure. After that Mrs. Clarke went straight for Mr. Moore, with a dozen questions that would have been difficult to answer all in one go. Poor Mr. Moore. I tried to listen as best I could, but I could see Clary watching me, and he doesn't approve of me—" she blushed, and Elsie realised that this was the information she had been waiting for, that Samson had accidentally let slip—what Kit had been doing and planning. Why wasn't he in the library, or the breakfast room, or in his sister's rooms? Elsie had lingered in each chamber in turn, in the final ensuring that Flora was comfortable and wished to nap, before slipping away. "I'm sorry miss, I shouldn't refer to..."

"I don't mind, Samson." Elsie leant forward and squeezed her maid's hand. "Here, I'm sure you haven't had any breakfast with everything that's going on. You have the cake. I don't care much for raisins." Any sort of hunger that Elsie felt had fled with the news that after everything Kit had finally decided to leave Tintagel. She jumped out of her chair, and grabbed Samson, pushing the younger woman into her seat. "You sit and eat."

"Miss..." Samson eyed the cake with sudden interest, and unable to help herself Elsie let out a laugh. It seemed like the infectious good cheer Samson had enjoyed earlier was suddenly seeping into Elsie. If Kit was prepared to leave the estate, then perhaps he was prepared to see sense and disregard the fears of old. He could finally see that, if there was a curse, it was tied to this house, and leaving it was the best way he could escape .

"And if anyone tells you off, then you send them to me," Elsie called over her shoulder, hurrying to the door. If luck was on her side, then perhaps she could find

Kit before the estate manager did, or better yet their meeting would have been a quick one. Even if yesterday had been a goodbye, it didn't mean that Elsie no longer cared. They had been friends before he'd kissed her, before they'd fallen on each other in the ruined ballroom... and they could be friends again.

Perhaps it was poor logic, and Elsie knew she wouldn't have rushed in such a manner, for any of her friends normally, but she reasoned that he never had to know that she loved him. As his employee—companion to Lady Flora until he found someone more suitable—she could maintain a semblance of closeness... The very neediness of her love caused Elsie to stop in the middle of the hallway.

It was strange to feel that heady rush of want, a desire for confirmation that she was not alone in such feelings, and yet knowing she could not ask someone who was so above her station. A lone tear slipped out, and Elsie balled her fists, trying her best to stop any more from falling—she needed to gather together her strength and if needed be suppressing any feelings that might linger.

With such thoughts in mind, she walked down the corridor to Kit's study and knocked with as much force as she could muster. He did not need to know her weakness, she could at least hold on to some semblance of pride.

"Enter," Kit said, the tone brusque and not filling her with much confidence.

Elsie pushed the door wide, nonetheless. "Your Grace." She moved forward, bobbed her head in greeting, and assumed a dignified pose with her hands clasped behind her back. "I am sorry to disturb you."

Despite his forbidding voice, Kit's reality was very different from what Elsie had been expecting. He had bounded to his feet at her entrance, his jacket was discarded, his shirt loose, and there was a smile on his lips. If she had to describe him, it would be carefree. Indeed, when he reached her, his hands encircled her waist, and he lifted

her up in the air.

There was a freedom with which he spun her, and Elsie let out a surprised gasp which hastily shifted into an unexpected laugh. She clung to him, her fingers sinking into the folds of his shirt, and the study swirled around them.

“Your Grace—Ashmore...”

“I thought we had removed all formality between us,” Kit said as he lowered her down. The devil did so by placing her on his chest, so Elsie had no choice but to slide down his body. He was delightfully warm, the muscles of his chest pressed into her day dress, and Elsie had to keep herself from emitting a different kind of gasp. Hastily, she took a step back, watching Kit as he perched on the edge of his desk, his expression bright.

“I have been speaking to my estate manager, man hadn’t been a bit of use to my father, but—” Kit leant forward and touched a curl that had loosened itself from Elsie’s chignon. “So soft,” he added, then tucked the strand behind her ear. “Locke—the manager agreed.”

“Agreed to what?”

“That he is to oversee Tintagel when we go up to Town. I thought we could leave tomorrow. Or if we must the day after that but?—”

“What made you change your mind?” Elsie cut him off, she had been desperate to leave here, and now finally Kit could see the logic of it. This was the moment she had been hoping for. It meant an opportunity to finally see her sister, and to tell Kit everything she had omitted previously—that Margot was his cousin, and about the annuity. It was high time she told him everything, after all they would be in London within the week.

“It wasn’t a curse—” Kit said, moving closer to reach out and grab her hand until she was beside him. “It must have been Peterson, he’d been in the family for years, and we’d simply overlooked his involvement. I never would have considered him capable of such cruelties, but as I thought through it, he must have committed all the ‘accidents.’”

“Are you?—”

“I was convinced that it all linked back to my family, and every bad thing that has occurred to them.”

“It wasn’t merely your family being unlucky,” Elsie said, her thoughts catching on her sister. “I mean, your uncle treated my mother terribly, and as for Margot...”

A frown creased his happy face, and Kit paused. “She isn’t his goddaughter, is she?”

Despite it not being a question, Elsie shook her head. “Margot is your uncle’s natural daughter.”

“And you?”

“I’m not related to you,” Elsie said. “There’s no aristocratic blood in my veins.”

“Did you wish—or rather, did your sister wish to receive something from me? From the estate?” There was a tiniest fraction of coldness to his query, and it angered Elsie.

“The previous duke did nothing for my mother, abandoning her and their unborn child. If Margot expected anything, I don’t think that unreasonable, do you?”

“I am not angry with you or your sister. I am embarrassed by my family. By how my uncle behaved,” he said, running a hand over his face. “My father often spoke of how

his brothers treated women, and I swore I would not behave in such a manner. I would never abandon you to such a fate.”

Elsie had no idea of precisely how to respond to that. Her decision to fall into Kit’s arms had been one driven by love, need, and fear of what could have happened to him. She had not considered the consequences of it, never once thinking she might fall pregnant.

Without entirely realising it, she raised her arm in a protective gesture, suddenly motivated by a dread of what might happen to her if she found herself in her mother’s position. When she raised her eyes, she found she did not wish to voice any of those things to him, instead she said her earlier words, ones she’d promised her sister to repeat, “Your uncle set aside a provision for Margot, an annuity that would see her comfortable.”

“I will honour it.”

His pronouncement should have been greeted with relief, or at least a welcomed smile, but Elsie could not bring herself to do that. Instead, guilt for her decision was rolling through her—the shame her grandmother had spoken of when she’d been found with Captain Graves arrived within her, twisting through her unpleasantly.

“Where are you going?” He tried to snatch up her hand once more. “You have been chasing me to leave Tintagel since the moment you arrived, and now you have my agreement, you cannot wait to be rid of me?” There was a lightness, a teasing quality to his voice. If it had been the Elsie of thirty minutes ago, she might have laughed with him, but now all she could see was the future: their arrival in Town, him signing off the papers, and packing Margot and her away, before sinking into the legendary Season with the purpose of finding a bride.

It would happen, and Elsie would read about the wedding months from now, locked

in a sad and lonely cottage at some great distance away. An image of her with a rounded belly pranced through her mind, and she could not decide whether it would be a worse torture to bear Kit's child without him, or to have nothing to remember him by. "Is it that now you have your sister's annuity, you have no need of me?"

"That is not the case." How she wished she could tell him to be quiet, to cease his teasing and to let her think for a moment. "I am happy you mean to come with us. It is what I wished for."

"I know." Kit drew nearer. "I meant to send for you, so your arrival is most fortunate."
"

"Indeed?"

"Yes, Locke did not just agree to my plan, he also provided the second key to our lock box."

"I suppose you will need funds to get you up to Town," Elsie said as Kit drew her over to the desk.

"Well, that was in part why it was useful to see him. But not merely for that reason." He gestured at the desk, which currently had a stack of bank notes on it and what looked to be a series of jewellery boxes.

"I thought you told me that Tintagel had very little in the way of funds."

"Those are the family jewels, a few trinkets. I suppose there will be a greater collection in London." With ease, Kit leant forward and prised them open, revealing a string of pearls, an amber pendant, several gold bands, and what looked like a pearl and sapphire ring.

“Lady Flora will look most lovely in the pearls.” Elsie wondered if the other pieces would be worn by his eventual bride.

“And yourself?” Kit asked, lifting first the amber piece to her neck and then lowering it when he saw her expression. “Don’t cry Elsie. You do realise I am asking you to marry me?”

“No,” Elsie said, turning towards him in confusion, her hands coming to rest and then twisting in the front of his shirt. She looked up into his handsome face, frowning. “No.” She had not realised it in the slightest, and it annoyed her no end. “You haven’t asked me. You have simply shown me some items of jewellery.”

He released her and snatched up the sapphire ring from the desk before lowering himself before her, bending at the knee in the traditional pose of a proposal and lifting the sparkling ring towards Elsie. “Now do you believe me?”

But all she could do was stare at him in a state of shock.

CHAPTER 20

K it had been dwelling on the choice of proposing to Elsie for the last twenty-four hours—he supposed he could admit it might be considered an abrupt one but to him, the decision felt like a blessing—and why shouldn't he? As someone who had believed for far too long that he could never have such a lovely thing as a happy marriage, the possibility of children or the longed-for love, and it could all be achieved if he wed Elsie.

If she said yes. He needed her to, although his pride would not allow him to admit as such. It wasn't honourable, his need to possess her, to feel as if she was his and his alone, but there it was, a hard and undeniable feeling riding through him. There would be such a relief in having a person who was his own, a solace too long denied him—a form of comfort that forever had seemed out of reach.

Hoping to tip the scale, with Elsie looking down at him in what appeared to be mild confusion, he stood up and slipped the ring onto her wedding finger. It was a little large on her small hand, but the sapphire flashed brightly, and when he raised her hand up towards his lips, the jewel stayed in its place pointing forwards.

Having kissed her fingers, he moved onto her mouth, capturing her lips in an all-consuming kiss. Immediately the heady sweet scent of her filled his nostrils, and the feel of her breasts pressing against his chest ruined his original aim. He wanted her, here and now with no hesitation. On the desk? In the chair? On the floor again if need be... it did not matter. All that mattered was continuing to deepen this kiss, not breaking their connection, until both of them were breathless and sated. Then and only then would he be able to confess the tumult of thoughts that ran roughshod

through him.

This had been despite all the good intentions he had begun to kiss Elsie with. Just a sedate and tentative nibble of her lips was what he had envisioned, but all of it quickly vanished when Elsie threw her arms around his neck, her body arching up into his, eager for him.

Of all his half a dozen previous paramours, not one had ever clung to him so closely, seemed so attuned to his passion. In truth, the mere memory of those women faded entirely, blurring, and becoming an indistinct mass of limbs, voices, soft hair—little more. All that mattered now was kissing Elsie.

Lifting his hands, he dragged his fingers through her curls, delighting in the sensation of the silky strands against his skin. She was tugging at his shirt, her movements hasty, and her breath quick, a button popped off, and they both laughed before Elsie lowered her head and kissed the exposed area of his chest. The contact of her mouth left him feeling alive. She was life—vibrant, bright and, he thought with a dramatic flourish, able to end suffering—a tempest of feeling that he had always craved and feared but now knew he needed in his life, more than his next breath.

With hands that now shook at such a feeling, Kit moved lower to her dress, a demure piece he'd seen her in dozens of times, and when he dislodged the shoulder, leaving bare skin in its place the simplicity of the moment was heightened.

Still with one arm wrapped around his shoulders, they almost seemed to meld into one. His thoughts, worries, fears fled in her presence, but he was not lost—instead it felt as if he were more himself than ever—a unity of purpose, a sense of self, all when he kissed her. Of course, it transcended that when her hands skimmed over his skin. Heating his desires beyond endurance.

As a fumbling desperate pair, they stumbled away, pulling, and yanking at each

other's remaining clothing, into the corner of his study. His free hand slammed against the wall to stop them from falling over, and Elsie laughed, the sound bright and alive, against every other dark thing that rushed through the manor house. She was the most vibrant presence he could imagine.

Kit moved his fingers to cup her face as they staggered backwards into the window seat, nudging against the hanging curtains. As a unit, they practically seemed to fight against each other in, hands touching, caressing, lingering, and listening keenly for a gasped reaction. It would be a joyous thing to learn and relearn every inch of Elsie's body, now and in the future, and it was entirely possible since she would have to say yes to him.

He landed hard into the seat when Elsie rolled on top of him, his hands sliding into her hair to keep him steady. Elsie's small body was held against his, her dress hanging around her hips, with only her half corset and the chemise remaining as he happily kissed her collarbone, the gentle swell between her breasts, the small beauty spot on her neck. With his tongue, Kit licked the small circular mark that enhanced the perfection of her skin, and Elsie clung to his shoulders, keeping him pressed close to her as she let out a breathy sigh.

"Will someone see us here?" Her voice was in his ear. Not reluctant, closer to laughing at the idea. The question played close to his skin, driving him wilder. But then again, any touch, breath, movement of hers was liable to create a similar reaction in him. Having her close did that to him.

"Would that concern you deeply?" he asked teasingly. A brief but sudden image occurred to Kit of the intruder who might have seen them in the ballroom, before he saw the faint slight of Elsie's smile, and the memory was dismissed out of hand.

Elsie gave a throaty laugh at his query, her skin prickled with heat before she turned and pulled the curtain closed around them, shielding them from view. With the shield

of soft curtains and the window behind him, the thick glass against his shoulders. “I think I prefer this—just the two of us.” Elsie’s eyes met his, innocent and hopeful, and Kit pushed away the feeling of not being worthy of her.

More than anything Kit wished he could echo the sentiment, offer up all the reassurances to Elsie that she deserved to hear, hell—the words of love, he longed to tell his fiancée, but the fear welled up in him, and instead he kissed her. Slipped his tongue into her mouth, stroking their mutual desire, kissing her again and again, stroking her back, before pulling her body tightly against him, over his straining erection, in lieu of voicing the strength of his feelings for her. It seemed that the physical came far more easily than admitting precisely how he felt.

The movement now hitched Elsie higher, and together, they pushed the layers of her skirt up and out of the way, exposing her pale limbed legs. Kit found himself pressed back against the window frame and glass. The pinning motion could have been uncomfortable, but instead, all he could focus on was Elsie. Her grip kept him in place, and he realised she wanted to control this encounter. The idea filled him with excitement. Reaching beneath her dress, he adjusted her hips over his erection, unbuttoning the folds of his trousers to give her access, and provide her with the ability to take charge.

Elsie looked questioningly into his face, and then she grinned, grasping his intention as she shifted her hips, her wet curls nudging against his cock. Sensation rocked through him, and he smirked at her as a groan slipped out of Kit’s mouth as, with slow and deliberate movements, Elsie eased herself lower, tantalisingly close to encasing him. He could remember from their last frantic coupling how wonderful she’d felt, and the memory throbbed through him once more.

“Please,” Kit muttered. One of his hands was on the middle of Elsie’s back, clutching, flexing into the material of lowered chemise, the other beneath her skirts, digging into the gentle curve of her backside, urging her downwards.

“Patience.” Her own voice sounded gruffer than normal, warmed by a matching need.

Leaning in and down, Kit brushed his mouth over the tops of Elsie’s exposed breasts, his tongue dipping into the valley before bringing his lips to the rosy nipple and softly sucking—she was not the only one who could tease. The scent of her, this close and dear, washed over him, the sweet delicate smell—blending together a heady scent of warmed bread, honey, and summer flowers. Glancing up to Elsie’s beloved face as he moved his mouth, licking greedily at her breast, he marvelled at the flushed sight of her. Gloriously pink cheeked, her mouth reddened, and her eyes flooded with excitement and need. Her breath was shaky as for one moment she glanced at him, before she smiled graciously, and put them out of their misery.

Then she lowered herself onto him, and for one blinding moment, Kit feared he was lost. Her hands skimmed against his shoulders and arms as she righted herself, getting a deeper angle, while her warm, wet sheath held him snug. It was heaven. Better than that, Kit thought of cursing himself with the blasphemy.

Her slim, smaller body moved tentatively at first as she learnt what felt best. The muscles of her legs pulsing as they moved, the uncertainty giving way to a more practised movement that brought a smile to both of their faces.

“I’ve never—” He wasn’t sure what she was about to say— admit that she’d not made love in this position before, or say she hadn’t imagined this previously—but it didn’t matter, he leant closer, and their mouths met, kissing furiously, delighting in the stirring of feeling their kisses created.

The sensation of her hips shifted, changing momentum as her hand moved from gripping his shoulders, to lower, flattening against his open shirt, seeking out his exposed skin, coming to rest against his heart. Kit forced his eyes open; he had been so caught up on the wondrous feelings of her motions. Elsie was riding him, her head thrown back—lost it seemed on the onset of waves that had overcome her, crashing

now through her body. She arched in response, unable to control how her release reached its peak. Shudders echoed and convulsed through her body as Elsie clung to him. The feeling grasped him too as her movements squeezed and shook his captured cock, triggering his own culmination. His cock jerked upwards, his hands clasping her to him more tightly as he lost himself inside her.

With a cry, Kit wrapped his arms around her as the sensation crashed through him—bright stars, and that summer scent of Elsie in his nostrils—as every other worry, fear, experience was wiped away from him and replaced with nothing but pleasure. Bone deep, and heavy within him.

When reality came back to him, Kit found Elsie resting her head against his chest, nestling there with true trust, as if he could offer safety. Gently, Kit eased her back so that she sat comfortably in his lap, and the two of them stayed in a leaning embrace. He placed a gentle kiss on her soft mouth. The little enclave they were hidden in was not broken by the movement, and Kit had the lightest of fancies that they were really locked away from the manor in this hidden spot.

“So, I suppose I can safely say we are engaged then?”

A laugh played over Elsie’s face for a moment, and the tiniest fraction of doubt he thought he caught in her eyes faded as she nodded. “My father is many miles away. ”

“And you would like me to seek his permission?”

She nodded. “You might think I’m very silly, but years ago my grandmother—my father’s mother was very angry, she was embarrassed by me. I was a wanton, she told me. Worse, she told my father I would only ever bring shame on my family. That no man would ever wish to wed me.” Elsie’s voice wobbled, and for the first time, Kit could envision throttling a woman. He could easily seek out this grandmother of hers and make the woman suffer. Elsie’s voice brought him back to himself. “Is it wrong

that it is rather pleasing... that it is a duke who might ask for my hand. I hope you know that it is not your title I am saying yes to. I would have agreed to your proposal whatever your position..."

"It should bring someone some joy," Kit said, his mouth tracing the damp shape of her curl against her brow as Elsie nestled closer. "But I hope you will let me tell Flora of our intentions."

"Of course," Elsie whispered sleepily, and he realised his fiancée was nodding off. Kit stayed still, their clothes half torn off them, tangled and a mess, letting her sleep, revelling in the feeling of holding her. When he lowered his own lids, letting rest wash through him, he could not remember a moment in his life when he'd been more at peace. If this was what his marriage was going to be like, he would be a happy man.

The next day and a half was a whirlwind of packing and planning. Kit was perhaps disappointed he had so little time to see Elsie, or even his sister, but he was certain both would understand once the three of them had departed Tintagel. The important thing was to have everything settled with the manor and ease their leaving. It was very strange because despite numerous letters dispatched to Town, no response had come from London or his family's lawyers. It could not be helped—Kit was done with having himself, Flora, and his beloved Elsie be tied to this place for a moment longer—it was time to go.

Without wishing to leave on a long journey with Flora in ignorance as to the engagement, on the morning of the departure, Kit slipped from his chamber early, and hurried along to his sister's room. When he knocked and the door opened, it was to see Flora and the rescued dog, Lancelot, both wide-eyed as they watched him.

"Are you ready? All packed?" He had informed Flora the night before that they would be off at eleven in the morning, thinking it best to let her know but not wishing

that she had too long to dwell on the matter.

His sister nodded, pushing the door wider as Kit slipped inside. He was excited. It was bubbling through him—emotion at leaving, excitement at seeing Town, love only just being admitted to himself for his affianced bride. Not that he would dream of showing that to his little sister.

“I have some news that I wish to share with you.”

“You don’t mean to leave me here, do you?”

“God no,” Kit said hastily. He reached forward and took Flora’s hand, giving it a squeeze, hoping it reassured her. It was his duty to provide for, to protect her, and all too frequently he had failed her. Going forward Kit’s intention was never to let that happen again. If he could help it, he did not want her distressed by anything, ever again. “We are departing this manor today. No, my news is unrelated. I mean. That is...” words seemed to stick in his throat as he tried his best to formulate the sentence. “It is hard to find the right way...”

“Has it something to do with Miss Keating?” A perceptive look overcame Flora’s little face, and Kit lowered his gaze. Sometimes he forgot how clever his sister was. Or perhaps neither Elsie nor he had been especially careful.

“Indeed,” he muttered. Had he been so obvious that everyone in the household had realised the depths of feelings? If so, perhaps he should feel shame, but none manifested in him.

“I am happy for you, that you should be wed...” Flora returned the touch of his fingers, a light smile gracing her mouth. “I think you will be well suited to one another.”

“I know it is a risk for us, given what our family...”

“What father always spoke of—honour, ghosts, a curse we could not shift, none of it was tangible. But you fought off Peterson and his threats. I think if we leave here, we will be free.”

The sense of her sentiments engulfed him, and Kit nodded. “I should have listened to you long ago.”

“I do not think I saw it clearly until—” she trailed off as she studied his face and expression. “We are both indebted to Miss Keating.”

“Just as well—” whatever he’d been about to say was lost when there was a flurry of footsteps outside. There was a knock on the door, but before either of them could speak, it swung open to reveal Miss Keating’s maid. The young woman was around Flora’s age, but she appeared to be in great distress. Her garb and hair were in disarray, having entirely lost her mob cap, and she had clearly run through the manor as if the very dogs of hell were on her trail.

“My—Your Grace—” She looked at Kit and then at Lady Flora, her face reddening as she staggered forward, her fingers reaching out towards him. Instinctively Kit put out a hand to steady her. She collapsed into his arms and gazed up into his face. “My lady—that is Miss Keating—she’s vanished.”

Kit started forward, his fears and furies pulsing beneath the surface as he grabbed the servant’s arms. “How do you know?”

“Brother.” Flora was holding on to his shirt, her face pleading, and he loosened his hold on the poor maid, who immediately started crying.

Through her sobs, the girl said, “If you see her room—I know she’s been taken.”

CHAPTER 21

Elsie was in her dream land, a curious place caught between waking and sleeping. But one she'd always loved ever since she was a tiny child: it was a place of safety, romance, and wish fulfilment. Part of her knew she needed to wake up—there was a feeling of disquiet that whispered at the back of her mind, telling, no, begging her to wake up.

But for now, with the promised reminder of Kit's kiss on her bare skin, Elsie sank deeper into the half memory, half reality of the delicious sensations... His mouth was on her inner thigh tracing light kisses over and over again until she was squirming at the attention. To think that it was the same austere and brusque man she had met, the one who'd rescued her from the moorland, was bending over her, resting himself between her legs, kissing and loving her in such a manner that it sent pinpricks of want, need, and affection through her, as well as a tightness behind her eyes, close to that of tears.

In this fantasy place, she could whisper, admit her feelings out loud. "I love you." He had not wanted that when he'd proposed to her. In typical Kit fashion, he had been all practicalities and the discussion of affection, or emotion had taken second place. Now in this world of Elsie's, it did not need to. In fact, she could revel in it.

The memories flooded in, and the strength of his remembered grip on her returned. Kit's fingers were keeping her in place, not allowing Elsie to move from her position at his mercy. She was his victim, a most willing one she thought, as dream Kit lifted his mouth from her thigh and shifted closer, nearer to her curls. His mouth dipped again, his nose pressing in, whispering half snatched words of praise that fired her blood and had her clenching her legs together.

“You know that just makes me want to explore further,” he had told her. She definitely remembered those words because they had made her blush. “To taste you, to feel your need and coat my tongue with it is the best aphoristic one could ever imagine.” Kit—from his physique to the way his mind worked, to his occasionally aloof but mainly domineering manner, and finally to his very words uttered in their deep cadence—had the power to make her grow wet, dizzy with need for him. For one terrifying moment, the idea that he would realise this almost pulled Elsie from her imagined world, but then the dream Kit lowered his head, his mouth delving in her curls, deeper until he found her most willing flesh, and she cried aloud for him.

On he went, relentless despite her demands that he cease because it was too much for her, too intense and all-consuming. She felt sure if he continued the play of his tongue, mouth, and fingers she would be lost to it, gone and never able to regain her sense of self. All of it, all of her would be spent on him—carried away by the sensations and feelings he stirred in her body, mind, and spirit.

When he finally did pause and shift himself away from her, Elsie found that tears had spilled unbidden down her cheeks. Now she wanted the feel of him buried deep inside her, but Kit wasn’t done playing with her. He seemed to merely be luxuriating in the temporary pause before he moved closer and eased a finger deep inside her. It seemed a form of claiming her, on just yet another level. The intrusion caused the most tantalising taste of her release to hover just out of reach, so a desperate Elsie lifted her hips, eager to feel him more deeply inside her. She felt rather than saw Kit’s grin, a most salacious and wicked smile, as he started to move over her body. All the while murmuring to her, about how glorious every inch of her tasted. Before alighting his tongue on her stomach, nibbling on the softness of it with his teeth, before he proceeded to caress and taste her breasts, promising that he had never seen such perfection and how he wished he could spill himself between their valley. Again, Elsie found herself promising to let him, offering him everything, even if it meant losing herself in exchange, so long as he never stopped.

When he finally kissed her mouth, Elsie could taste her desire, sweet and tart on his tongue, playing over lips, and that combined with the hardness of his body, the memory of his fingers penetrating her, sent a cascading wave of sensation through her, hard and fast, so that she had to hold on to him, begging him never to let go.

The sheer sharpness of her intense release jerked her eyes open, and Elsie started around herself. This was most definitely not her dreamworld. Nor was it the enclave Kit and she had made love in. Nor was it her bedchamber with all the familiar objects and creature comforts close at hand. That was where she'd fallen asleep after Kit had carried her back there and where they'd spent the night together. No, this place was nowhere she'd ever seen before.

The delicious sensation of lovemaking, of intimacy fled from her as Elsie realised the reason she couldn't move was not because of her lover's soothing hands, but because of the rope that encased her wrists. She was tied down to a bed, a half-thrown blanket twisted between her legs had played the part of Kit, and now it covered her shift and body. A new feeling bubbled up, one of fear at who might do this to her and why. She forced herself to sit up and confront what lay before her...

Her eyes catalogued the list in a vague attempt to comfort herself.

One, and probably most important given what she had just been in the throes of, she was alone. Slowly, her gaze swept the space and saw no one there, nor any object that might be a telltale sight of her captor.

The fear reared up again. There was no sign of Kit, nor any evidence of his presence in any of the objects that surrounded her, and Elsie realised how much reassurance she would have taken if she could have seen his cravat, or even a book that belonged to him. But no, none of that was here. Briefly she rested her face against the wall of the room before forcing her mind back to the necessary distraction of her list.

What could she come up with next?

Two, the smell of salt and harsh fresh air lingered in her nostrils. Not unpleasant but it did tell her she was closer to the sea than the manor house. That was worthy of note. If she was not mistaken through the walls of what she assumed was a cottage, Elsie could hear the incoming sound of the tide.

Three, yes, the room she was in was not familiar in the slightest, but what she could make out showed it to be sparsely decorated. There were only the basics placed in the space. Which implied, Elsie told herself, that this cottage was rarely used. The curtains, roughed edged and grey in colour, were all drawn over three windows, allowing Elsie no clue where she might be located along the shoreline.

Wriggling in the narrow bed she lay in, she spotted that her captor had at least snatched up a dress for her to wear. Although the idea of someone sneaking into her bedchamber sent a shiver down her spine. With a sniff, Elsie hoped this gown was a sign of consideration, although in truth she was not sure it was.

Instinctively, she knew that Kit would never have allowed her to be snatched from her bed, and therefore, she reasoned, she must have been taken as a means to punish him. It was the curse again, although it was far more frightening in the daytime mundanity of bound ropes and unfamiliar locations than it was in the cobwebs and drafts of Tintagel Manor.

Turning, Elsie started on the ropes. First, she used her fingers, scraping away at them, but it made very little difference. Next, she shifted closer to the stone wall, she lifted her mouth to the bundle, biting and twisting at the knot, trying her best to loosen them. Her mouth bit on the thick threads, and the unpleasant taste of salted fish filled her mouth, but her bindings moved not an inch.

“That won’t do much, missy.” The words startled her, causing Elsie to jump and bite

her cheek before pivoting round to face the voice. Blood filled her mouth, the tang of metal throbbing through her head as she gazed across the room towards Peterson. The dismissed butler leant against the only door, his lined face heavy with resentment.

It was not a surprise, per se, Elsie told herself reassuringly, after all Peterson had enough motivation to wish revenge on Kit. At least that was something which surely most people, including Kit, would jump to.

The dismissed servant was looking considerably worse for wear from when Elsie had last seen him. His red-rimmed eyes could be attributed to the bottle he clutched in his left hand, and the clothes he wore were sodden. “My father was a sailor. I know how to manage a proper knot.”

Not caring what the villain made of her, Elsie spat out the blood onto the floor. “You know it won’t take long for my absence to be noticed.”

Peterson sank into the nearby chair and took a large sip from his bottle, his face clenching at the taste before nodding. “You’re right.”

“His Grace will see you hang for this.”

“For stealing his mistress?” Peterson made a sort of unbalanced shrugging movement, which to Elsie’s eyes indicated his belief that Elsie was not long for this world. The disdain was clear, but Elsie figured he might have picked a more insulting word, but she did not know if it would be better or worse for her if Peterson knew the truth. Would he be more likely to spare her if Peterson was aware Elsie was in fact the fiancée of the duke? Or if he was seeking a way to punish Kit, then would this knowledge fuel a dastardly course of action by him? With bated breath, Elsie watched the man, trying to calculate her next words...

She settled on keeping her secret, fearing it might be a motivator for further violence.

“You could run,” she said. “Untie me and I won’t say it was you. I often go for long walks. I can convince His Grace that that’s what I was doing on this occasion. You can run.”

For a moment, she thought Peterson might be considering it. He had sunk onto the only chair in the room, his legs stretched out before him as he stared insolently at her, slowly drinking from his bottle. “Nah. All those pretty words of yours aren’t of interest to me.”

“Then what is?” Elsie asked, her mind whirling towards the mention he had made of knots and panicking at the idea of the man placing such a rope around her own neck. Her question was lost when Peterson’s face picked up, as if he had heard something outside the cottage.

He moved to the nearest window and twitched the curtain up, giving Elsie a brief view of sand and sunshine before he lowered the material back down. There was a bright gleam to his pale face, and to Elsie’s mind, it did not speak well for her. Anything that brought Peterson pleasure could not be a good sign.

“She’s here.” The utterance was more to himself than to Elsie. Her sprawled form did not draw his notice, for which Elsie was grateful. He set about straightening his clothes, attempting presumably to dispel the alcoholic aura that surrounded him. Abruptly he seemed satisfied and darted away, leaving the room without a backward glance. She could hear the sound of his footfalls, moving through the adjacent room.

Straining her ears, Elsie tried to listen or catch any part of their conversation, but no matter how she pulled against the rope or shifted herself, she couldn’t hear them. They were either speaking too quietly or the walls were too thick. So, she focused on biting once more on the rope, optimism telling her it was working.

Minutes ticked past and must have dragged into what Elsie thought could be well

over an hour, so soon she sagged against her post. Coldness crept over her flesh, and she looked for the dress that had been dropped on the ground. Elsie forced her mind away from her captors and onto the rope, which once loosened meant she might be able to escape through one of the windows.

Slowly, painfully so, and agonising for her wrists, Elsie started working again on the rope, pulling and biting, all the time with the aim of freeing herself. It seemed to be working, one of her hands could turn, and then with an internal cry of joy, her left hand slid out. Her skin was pitted with the markings of rope, but it could now join her efforts to untie her from the post.

As she raised her liberated hand, a fresh wave of encouragement alive within her, ready to begin the struggle again, a loud blast sounded through the cottage, and Elsie froze in her place. She knew what that noise was. Knew the sound all too well from farmers and local gentry close to Berwick-upon-Tweed who would go hunting, carrying their guns, all dressed in red, eager to find a fox. This shot had none of that ceremony. Instead, there was a deadly certainty to the pistol shot, a sound which had ceased, but the effect was still being felt inside Elsie. It would have been a close-range shot and, presumably, inside the cottage, just one room over from her. And if it was aimed at someone... then...

There was a shuffling noise, all bubbles of conservation were now ended, and Elsie missed the faint, vague echoes of chatter. Instead, she could hear the ominous sound of a chair being dragged along the floor, and then the sound of something heavy hitting the floor. Sickeningly the thought occurred to Elsie that it could well be a body.

Her eyes darted back to the door handle, whilst all the while, she could feel her fingers starting to throb and there was a pulse of something warm and wet through her hands. When Elsie looked back at the rope, she saw her blood oozing out against the bindings as she tried her quickest to free herself. She thought she was close, but

just a minute more...

All the sounds from the next room ceased. The silence stretched unpleasantly as if there was texture to it, and Elsie knew, whoever the person was next door, they were weighing their options.

And then the door handle moved, and Elsie knew she was out of time. She hastily shoved her free hand back into the rope, keen to hide her half liberty.

The woman who stood in the doorway, held the pistol that Elsie must have heard fired. There was a matching streak of blood on her hands as well as a separate one on her face as if she swatted at her cheek. Elsie felt sure these markings were less to do with struggling to free herself and more to do with her lifting and moving a body. For a brief moment Elsie had thought perhaps it was a sign of a rescue but one look at the woman's face told her there was something more complicated going on.

Wildly Elsie glanced at either side of the woman, looking for Peterson, even if he was...

"He's dead." The woman walked into the room, moving out of the dim light of the adjoining room and closer to Elsie. She put the pistol down on the only chair in the room and stared at Elsie, her face marred with an expression that Elsie did not like.

Her tongue darted out, and Elsie tried her best to formulate a question... or just words to fill up the heavy, empty space.

"Mrs. Clarke..." her voice was dry, awkward as she attempted to speak. "You found me..."

The housekeeper grimaced before nodding. "You were never part of the plan."

“His Grace would reward you—” Even as she said the words, Elsie was already certain they would have little impact on Mrs. Clarke. There was too much calculation in her eyes to fall for such a simple attempt, and when the housekeeper raised her hand, Elsie felt silent, fear gripping her.

“Peterson was a fool.”

“He certainly paid the price,” Elsie said, seeing the lack of sympathy which oozed from Mrs Clarke.

“He must have known he would be the first suspect...”

“Is that why you killed him? To lead them astray?” Elsie asked, her mind and mouth turning away faster than she thought possible.

The housekeeper moved closer, her handsome face soft and refined in contrast to the bloody streak on her cheek. The animosity vibrated out of her until Elsie had to drop her gaze away from such hatred.

“I would not have him alive to turn traitor on me.” Her voice was so cold Elsie shivered. “I wish to God I had never heard of either of you.”

This remark made Elsie look up, her brows knitting together in confusion. Surely, the woman didn’t mean Kit.

“It’s thanks to your bloody sister that my son is dead.” Mrs. Clarke’s harsh words rang close to Elsie as she crouched down on the narrow bed. From her apron, she slipped dozens of letters out across the sheets, and Elsie recognised Margot’s handwriting, as well as her own, across the envelopes. They were all undelivered but had been opened and read, their secrets and news shared only to Mrs. Clarke it seemed.

Elsie looked up into the housekeeper's face, trying to guess at what the woman meant, but the older woman whispered words that removed any lingering hope she might be reasoned with. "I suppose it's only fair that I kill you in return."

CHAPTER 22

It was a similar sensation, Kit realised, to the feeling he'd experienced when he'd rounded the corner and seen his parents' ruined carriage all those months ago. A wreck that had no chance of survival, with only his sister thrown clear.

It was the feeling of utter hopelessness.

Far worse than the pain of his injury because he feared this might be permanent. The kind of emotion that encircled him swirled around Elsie's bedroom where he was standing, as if the feeling was drawing a tighter and tighter pincer movement around him, threatening to cut off his breath and all feeling of logic.

He wanted to cry, scream, and rant just as Samson and Flora were indulging in the former. Hell, he wanted to kill anyone and everyone who threatened the peace and tranquillity he had found with Elsie. After she had agreed to marry him, after discovering what Peterson had been doing, Kit had believed this half-life of his was over, but no... It would never be.

He had imagined after making love to her, after the proposal, there would be a softness and ease to their existence, but this burning all-consuming need for Elsie wasn't something that he could hide from her. After all, it was not an emotion most young ladies would wish to manage. And now all that strength of feeling was alive in him. The murderous fury simmered through him, but the only people present were a hysterical maid and his younger sister who had followed him into the chamber.

Kit picked through the items of paraphernalia that littered the chamber, including a

half-written letter, and a collection of poetry that had her looping scrawl on the first page of the book. Elsie's discarded belongings scattered here and there, including the ripped ballgown that he had torn when they had first made love... he had never told her that. Never said the truth, why he wished to marry her, hoping instead the sexual connection and the promised stability of marriage would be enough for the pair of them. No, it was more than that, worse than that, for he had hoped. Instead, she merely thought he loved her since he had been a coward who could not muster the courage to admit his feelings.

"Kit?" The voice was soft, low, and called him back to the present moment. Kit looked up from the pile of belongings that remained of Elsie. Her fresh-air scent clung tauntingly in the air, and his eyes moved to his sister. For once he would have liked to be alone. To be able to dismiss his younger sister and be selfish. Flora might be his responsibility, but at this moment, he could not manage her as well as everything else that was thundering through him. Would he—should he send for the local magistrate? Or would it be better to hire an investigator? No, perhaps all the servants could scour the estate for her... unless...

Flora was hugging herself, her face wan from the sight of the bedroom. As she moved and made herself look at him, Kit saw there was a secret bubbling up in her, and for one crazed second, he wondered if she was somehow involved in Elsie's disappearance. What could his innocent, clueless sister know what she had not said to him when she'd had the opportunity previously?

"What is it?" he asked.

"There is something you should know." Flora took a tentative step forward, and every wild thing that Kit had been envisioning doing next crumbled away because of his sister's expression. Doubt and guilt clouded her face. Before he knew what he was about, Kit had closed the distance between Flora and himself, his fingers biting into her forearms.

“What do you know?”

“I—” the tears were increasing, and she swiped at her face, in part attempting to push him away from her. “That hurts, Kit.” She wriggled against his grip, but Kit did not release her. Flora knew something, and she had to tell him.

“Does it concern Elsie? If there is something I need to know—a chance that she might be found...”

“I don’t know—but I think so...”

“Her room—this is what Peterson did to you, but perhaps he managed —”

“It was never solely him.” Flora’s words were said loudly enough to stop Kit’s thoughts and silence him before every one of them suddenly crowded back in. Of course, there had to be others. Of course, there needed to be another person. People—perhaps the whole household, the whole county. “Mrs. Clarke, at first I thought—” Flora sniffed and sucked in a long breath. “I was a fool. I thought she was my friend. You see, I was sure the crash and your injury were my fault, and I went to her...”

“She told you it was your mistake?”

“Always through implication and allusion, I see that now. I should have said something but... I thought if we were leaving, it didn’t matter. But between them—the butler and Mrs. Clarke—they would procure me a means to be able to sleep. Until that evening when only he came...”

“I’ve seen them together.” Samson suddenly spoke up, her utterance causing both Kit and Flora to turn towards her questioningly. “My Clary—that is, I mean,” she stammered as she looked between Kit and Lady Flora. “I’ve heard several people say,

and I witnessed them exchange a kiss or two. Nothing worth mentioning. At least, I never thought it was.” Stricken, she looked down at the floor. “That is before now.”

“It isn’t just your fault.” His sister sucked in a breath and gripped Kit’s arm. “Mrs. Clarke... it was always her.” Lifting pleading eyes up to his face, Flora seemed to come alive as she wetted her lips and proceeded after he nodded. “She found me after the carriage crash. When I was frozen in place, and no words would come to me. At first, I thought she meant to comfort me, but I see now that was never her intention.”

“She meant ill?” The question, though an obvious one, slipped from his mouth before Kit could stop himself. It jarred with his recollections and interactions with Mrs. Clarke, which had been polite and perfunctory. Meaning he could think of no reason why the woman—he conjured up the image of her before him: sleek dark hair, over fifty, with a strong handsome face—would have meant ill towards Flora. After all, the woman had been in the family’s employ for a good five years before the crash, her opaque eyes and practical responses making her a perfect servant. One which Kit would never have turned towards her in accusation.

“At first, she was so kind. The model of the mother I had just lost and needed so dearly. She made me believe, as the weeks slipped by, that staying silent was a strong weapon to use to get what I wanted. Embracing a quality so I would stay under her control.” Flora cast her gaze down and paced to the fireplace, her hands twisting. “She made me believe that you blamed me too.”

Mutely, Kit shook his head. The same guilt had pumped angrily through him, and he had not had an older and manipulative woman tricking him to believe such things. The memory of the housekeeper proved to be a hollow mask that he reasoned was all he had ever been designed to see, and the truth was soon uttered forth from his sister.

“When Miss Keating arrived and spoke of London, of leaving, it was close to redemption—I thought we all would be trapped in the manor house forever. ”

But she was gone. Stolen away by the woman who'd poisoned it...

Moving to his sister's side, Kit placed a quick kiss on her forehead. "None of this was your fault. Or mine." The words said aloud thrummed through him, and through the chamber, and felt close to a godsend. So much so that Kit gave himself the grace to believe it. Then he released Flora and turned towards the wet eyed maid. "Take us to Mrs. Clarke's room and then go fetch your man, Clary, you said?"

In the servant's wake, both Kit and Flora followed, down dark passages of the manor house, that neither were familiar with until a door was pushed open, and Kit was greeted by a wave of sunshine. The sheer brightness was in such a contrast to what he'd expected, he had to hold up his hand to block it out. Some of the day had been lost already and slipping away from him, along with all his hoped-for plans of departing the manor. To his disappointment but not surprise the little room was bare of people or clues.

On stepping inside Kit surveyed the space with as much attention as he could, hoping against reason or logic for some rationale of where Mrs. Clarke might have taken Elsie. Desperately he tried to cling to the hope that the housekeeper could not be entirely mad—perhaps it was merely money she wanted for Peterson, her lover and herself. For a long trip, say, or a magnificent house somewhere. Well, if that was so, she could have it, provided Elsie was returned without a hair on her head hurt. Kit would barter, beg, steal, and sell anything that remained in the manor in order to have Elsie back. If required, he would give himself...

The room though, with its simple bed pushed against the far wall, its white sheets tucked in neatly, its wooden table and chair in the other corner, gave away nothing.

Behind him, Kit could hear a whispered conversation between his sister and the maid, where Flora asked the girl to fetch the London driver discreetly. How much of the household had to be aware of what Mrs. Clarke had done? That was why he needed

the man, Clary as an outsider could be trusted, Kit reasoned. The rest of the staff, he was not so sure.

Surely this had to be an explanation for Elsie's absence, didn't it? The question gnawed through Kit, and he pushed it away as he tipped the bed over, checking the other side for some kind of clue. Fear started to trick its way up his back. If what the housekeeper wanted was money, then surely, she would have left a note or a list of demands, some way of communicating with him.

"Kit?" Flora's question pulled him back to himself, out of the grim darkness that was threatening to claim him without Elsie's presence. His sister walked forward, slipping an arm around him and pressing her head against his chest. "I knew I should have said something sooner, but I was scared. The woman frightened me."

In truth, Mrs. Clarke was scaring him too. Nothing about her actions made sense. Absent, he patted his sister's back. "I would never blame you."

"That is just as well as you look ready to commit a murder," Flora said. She slipped out of his arms and walked closer to the discarded bed and thin blanket left in a sprawled mess before them. Crouching down, Flora ran her hand over the cotton as Kit opened his mouth to speak, thinking Flora meant to tidy up the bedding. He saw her tear a hole in the mattress, ripping the white seams wide. Out spilled bits of cotton, pieces of straw and feather, and a heavy jumble of letters. Marked and posted from London. Addressed to his Elsie and even to himself. But also, to a woman called Nettley .

Turning wide eyes up to him, Flora gazed in confusion at him. There were dozens of pieces of information here, and it might take hours to read this. His sister's hand snaked out to the closest letter. Fury burnt through him, and fear that this would be the only way to find his love. With a defeated nod, Kit grabbed up a letter too. If it were the best way of finding Elsie, then he would help.

It felt a great deal longer than Kit would have expected to go through the letters. There were a great many of them, and every page had to be read and checked for a single detail that might provide a clue on where Mrs. Clarke had taken Elsie.

Flora read too. Then when Samson returned with Clary, who could read, he too joined in. A majority of the pages were drafted by the estate's lawyer in London, a Mr. Holt detailing Kit's role and urging him to come to Town. One included alongside the lawyer's missive was from Kit's uncle, dated around when his parents had died, explaining a mystery around a rare collection of diamonds that had blighted the family for decades. Within his letter, Kit's uncle had begged him to come to London and help protect him. A wedge of icy guilt slid into Kit's gut, especially when another letter from Elsie's sister, announcing herself to be his cousin, Margot, claimed she was on the hunt for the diamonds and the killer who had tried to rob them as well as kill his uncle. Kit's mind tucked this information away, and the remaining three gasped at the revelations.

"But is there anything about Elsie?" He had given up trying to be ducal or proper, and just called his beloved by her given name.

"Not yet." Flora had sunk onto her knees as she stared down at the pages. "It is all very exciting to hear about what's happened—piecing it all together."

"Poor Miss Keating—the older lady, I mean," Samson added, "I only got to see her briefly, but having to chase around Town like that..."

Clary, who was close to her, frowned clearly trying his best to signal to his lover that she was being far from discreet. He got to his feet and passed the letter he had been reading over to Kit. "Your Grace." He, unlike Samson, Flora, or Kit, refused to bend propriety and was sticking to convention as best he could. "I can't make head nor tail of this one. It's addressed to a Mother."

Kit scanned the page, his gaze alighting on the poorly written words, more of a scribble than a true letter, and a shift occurred within him. This was what he'd feared—the motivation for whatever Mrs. Clarke had done with Elsie.

Mamma,

It's done. Or I am. The bitch stabbed me. As you feared. I will do my best to rid you of them, but I fear that even the doctor can't do anything. I've got the keys and a theory where the stones are—in the old codger's house, but I don't know if I'll manage it.

Hopefully, the luck of the devil will continue to bless me, and if not, know I died your loving son—Francis Nettley

Flora, who had come to stand next to him, read the letter and gasped at the contents. It fit with what they'd read from their cousin Margot about a man called Francis Nettley, trying to break into the duke's townhouse, and dying in the grounds. They had been lodging the woman who had murdered Kit's uncle. She had been waiting like a spider for the perfect time to strike.

“When was that dated? The letter from Margot?” Kit scrambled forward, snatching up the most recent from the pile of letters they had designated as belonging to his cousin. Her neat feminine hand laid out much of the drama in London, whilst clearly growing increasingly keen to hear from her younger sister, or indeed from the duke himself. “Just two days.” He turned it over in his hand as he re-read Margot's words about the dead man. Mrs. Clarke's son. The housekeeper must have seen it, after all the envelope was torn and the letter stuffed in here. She had her motivation for revenge. And it seemed like she had set her targets on Elsie.

The letter was crushed in his hand as hopelessness rode through him, any lingering idea of rescuing her started to crumble. After all, Mrs. Clarke had planned everything

out. She was an adversary worthy of that name, and none of his family had even been away from her before this point.

Looking around the chamber, Kit got to his feet. “I want you to take both Lady Flora and Samson to Exeter.” He drew out his wallet, handing his sister several notes and then one to Clary and Samson each. “You will all be safer away from here. Find the magistrate and inform him of what’s happened. Once that is done, I want you to get to London. Promise me you won’t wait. You will just go.”

“What about you?” Flora looked uncertain. “Wouldn’t we be more useful looking for Elsie too?”

“I don’t want you in harm’s way.”

Flora nodded, and the four of them hurried through the manor, heading towards the stable. Dusk had fallen and the spring evening was upon them. Distantly as they headed down the stairs, Kit glanced up, his eye caught by a faint light outside. He froze, following the movement in the forest. It was moving, not towards the manor house, but out as if intending to go through the forest, out towards the bay.

“Go,” he whispered and broke away from the others, tearing through the house after the faintest of lights.

CHAPTER 23

At first Elsie had been frightened, chilled to the very bone by Mrs. Clarke, convinced by the woman's sadistic vow to kill her. To murder Kit and Flora. How she ranted as she moved through the little cottage, promising a bloody retribution against the Ashmore estate and all the Fitzsimmons who still lived. The murdering of Peterson for Elsie's abduction showed what she was capable of. The cottage did not seem wide or deep enough to encompass how much Mrs. Clarke loathed Kit's family.

As she watched the housekeeper, Elsie became aware of a new problem. Mrs. Clarke, who had seemed so certain and so arrogant when she'd entered the cottage, when she'd killed the butler and when she'd threatened Elsie, did not seem focused. She was more preoccupied with her ranting and raving than actually having a plan. Perhaps Elsie told herself she should take comfort from the fact that Mrs. Clarke was now rambling, mumbling, and waving her pistol about when she wasn't focused on scribbling something down on several pages.

That the armed woman was unhinged, brought a sense of bittersweet relief—it would be unlikely she would manage to murder all three of them without anyone suspecting a thing, and yet the very lack of clarity meant she might simply force Elsie out of the cottage and into the surrounding sea. Whilst she could claim to be a strong swimmer, having grown up by the coastline, Elsie did not know what the currents were like down here...

"Stop watching me," Mrs. Clarke said, and Elsie angled her face away quickly.

The housekeeper had moved them both into the main room of the cottage, which

served as the front room. She had tied Elsie next to the fireplace, with a piece of rope that was not especially strong. After that Mrs. Clarke had lit the fire, which Elsie was grateful for. As she was still in her chemise, which offered very little in the way of warmth. The grisly disadvantage was of course, that Peterson lay dead in the far corner of the room, his body discarded with a viciousness that Elsie marvelled at. His corpse was a constant and unpleasant reminder of what Mrs. Clarke was capable of.

With her face turned away, Elsie tried to fathom what the older woman might be intending to do with her next. Dusk had fallen and yet Mrs. Clarke still scribbled away, a low murmur slipping out of her half-opened lips as she whispered away to herself. To Elsie's mind, she had to be planning her next steps, but what good would that do Elsie and how she might rescue herself, remained elusive.

Darkness had fallen, the day of their planned departure now ticking by, as presumably Kit searched for her. would he think of the little cottage, down in the cove which had so attracted her attention when Elsie had first arrived?

There were dozens of places, far more logical to look first... or had Kit decided it was better to save his sister and himself, rather than wonder where his enemy might have taken her? After all, he had never said he loved her. She might be his fiancée, might have the promise of his title and position on offer as his wife, but neither of them had let the words of love, affection, devotion slip past their lips... She had been a coward, Elsie realised now, begging or even uttering them herself. If she closed her eyes, Elsie could picture Kit's dear face, and let herself imagine that she had told him the secrets of her heart, without the normal fear that rattled through her.

The noise of Mrs. Clarke's chair being dragged across the floor alerted Elsie and pulled her out of the daze she was currently enjoying. Whatever matters had so preoccupied Mrs. Clarke, she now seemed at peace with them as her inscrutable eyes fixed on Elsie. She placed the chair down in front of Elsie and sank into it, calculation dominating her expression.

“You won’t be the first he’ll use and abandon,” Mrs. Clarke said, her words taunting and provocative. She wanted to see the sadness and tears spoil Elsie’s face.

A momentary flash of relief warmed Elsie. She had not mentioned the engagement, and the housekeeper had no knowledge of it. So that meant it could be kept as a prize which might bring her silent comfort, or perhaps be used to barter with if needs be.

Adjusting her arms so she could look Mrs. Clarke in the face, Elsie shrugged, fully throwing herself into the role of the naïve victim in the hopes it might elicit the housekeeper’s sympathy. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Course you do—men like the duke make a habit of using women like us. Women in their employ. Something to be fucked and dismissed. We are nothing more than chuff to the mill, disposable once they’ve had their fill of us.” The bitterness of her words made Elsie shift closer. The housekeeper was the one drawing Elsie’s sympathies despite her compromised position and the danger the older woman posed. It was hard to hear of a woman suffering and not feel empathy for such a deserted creature.

“What happened to render you so?” Unable to resist asking Mrs. Clarke what had caused such fury to fester within her. It must have been a torment that had lasted years, and Elsie could understand why the housekeeper would let herself be destroyed.

“I was just like you, hopelessly besotted so much so I believed what my lover told me. That he would wed me, and I would be a lady. Free from the burdens of my class, free to give my child an honest name, his father’s name.”

“But he left you?”

The housekeeper nodded as with her foot she nudged another piece of wood into the fire. “Not before I heard him discussing what his family had.” A malicious smile

curved her lips as she warmed her hands. “The Ashmoreton Diamonds. That might make them some of the wealthiest amongst the ton . But nothing could be spared for me. Oh, how Barnabas liked to talk about them, the family heirlooms, destined to the firstborn child...” The memories claimed her as Elsie watched her.

She knew that one of Kit’s uncles had been called Barnabas, so it was not hard to realise that it had been Kit’s own family who had betrayed Mrs. Clarke and left her pregnant and alone. Just as Elsie’s mother was abandoned when she was pregnant with Margot. It seemed the Fitzsimmons men had a pattern of behaviour, and what was to say that Kit would honour his proposal? He might abandon her, after all he had made no mention of love. Would she be doomed to repeat the cycle her mother and Mrs. Clarke had endured, with a similar broken heart and ruined reputation as her only rewards?

The small room filled with such thoughts, and the sparks from the fire, as well as a little ash, swirled around Elsie, enfolding her in fear until she doubted her release.

When Elsie looked up, she found that Mrs. Clarke was watching her and nodding. “You see how you are just like me? Missed your first bleed yet? He won’t stay long past that.” Mrs. Clarke’s eyes flew to Elsie’s belly, and fear swelled inside her. If Mrs. Clarke thought her pregnant, would the housekeeper feel sorry for Elsie or think that murdering her sooner was the best course of action.

With a deepening sense of fear less for her position in the cottage, Elsie said quickly, “I’m not with child. He asked me to marry him. His Grace will be honourable. So, I’m not like the others. I’m not like you—I will be his wife. He has given his word.”

With a crowing noise of laughter, Mrs. Clarke shrieked and leant back, seeming to forget her idea about Elsie being pregnant. “They have not changed at all. Barnabas Fitzsimmons told me quite the same. And as a fool I believed him.”

“Kit means it,” Elsie said, lifting her chin up and fixing Mrs. Clarke with what she hoped was a look of her certainty. Whilst they had been talking, she had been working her hands against the bindings that held her, rubbing away with tiny movements, easing the tightness of the rope, in the hope that finally Mrs. Clarke would look away and she could move.

But now was not that moment because the housekeeper, seemingly spurred on by annoyance at Elsie’s defiance, jumped to her feet and grabbed Elsie’s face. “If you think that, then you are a bigger fool than any woman living. Why would a duke marry you? You’re no better than me.” Her dark eyebrow cocked in dismissal, and Elsie was forcefully reminded of her grandmother’s dismissals and cruel comments after Elsie’s apparent fall from grace.

How Elsie wished she could reply with the answer that formed on her tongue, “because he loves me” but the words did not come, as they were not true. So, she lowered her eyes away from the desperate insanity that seemed to grip the older woman as she waited for Elsie to admit how mistaken she was.

She tried to suck in a breath, and then Elsie saw what Mrs. Clarke had been doing. There was a low level of smoke which had drifted from the fire—it seemed that the housekeeper meant for them to die in a burning cottage. Or Elsie, at least, since Mrs. Clarke had a piece of material up in front of her mouth. The mad woman had started a fire, it was spreading rapidly, leaping from rags to curtains with an ease which was frightening.

Already it was proving hard to breathe, Elsie thought woozily.

Without wasting another moment, Elsie made for the doorway, dragging the weighty metal and pulling it behind her. The pistol lay useless and unloaded on the table, but Mrs. Clarke snatched up a wicked-looking blade. She pointed it at Elsie as she stepped in the way of Elsie’s exit. The two of them stared at each other as Elsie

circled away from the older woman, putting as much room as she could between them.

“His Grace surely won’t care what happens to me if I’m nothing more than a bit of fluff.”

“Your sister killed my son, so why shouldn’t I make sure all loose ends are done with.” With that utterance, Mrs. Clarke slashed her knife at Elsie who darted backwards, her body banging into the meagre contents of the cottage, a stack of crates which toppled over, the heavy chair she was tied to slowing her down.

The doorway was on the other side of the small room, and there was not enough time without risking a stabbing for Elsie to grab the door handle and open it wide, thereby escaping out into the sandy cove. She could picture it, but when she’d taken a step closer, Mrs. Clarke had swung at her again.

“I think you wanted Peterson to grab Flora?” That made far more sense. Elsie could see that now. Flora was a lady, the sister of a duke, and of course Kit would never leave his sibling with these two. She was the logical one to snatch up, the innocent girl who had been manipulated by Peterson for months. Far more sensible than Elsie, the despoiled and unimportant child of a vicar, whose family would never know the truth of how she died.

“They protect their women as long as—” Whatever Mrs. Clarke had been about to say was cut off when the door was thrown open, and there was Kit.

Uneasy breath flowed out of Elsie, catching in her throat and forming a half smile. Even in these circumstances, she was grateful—even when she doubted, he would be much good, that any good could come of standing in a cottage slowly filling with smoke, when fire and inhalation were a risk to them all.

He had come for her. The look he gave her—one of reassurance, of grace, and dare she hope love—meant that he would always come for her.

The three of them—the occupants of that front room stood in a triangle shape, trapped between their gazes, trapped too with the solid wooden table in the middle of the cottage.

“Mrs. Clarke.” Kit’s voice came through the thick air, gravelly and severe, just as it had been when she first met him, breaking the uneasy atmosphere, pulling all focus to him. His shirt was loose around his arms, seemingly flung on in a hurry, and Elsie saw that his clothes were wet. “I see not all sense has deserted you, and she is still alive.”

Elsie wondered, if she ran towards him through the smoke, where her chest, limbs and spirit wished to be, whether she could make it in time before the blade that Mrs. Clarke wielded found its purchase in her back. Would it perhaps be worth it? To feel his strength and reassurance one last time.

Danger swelled, though, as Elsie saw that Kit carried no weapon with him. Her eyes blinked desperately, wishing to convey the threat that Mrs. Clarke posed, but seeming to be uncaring or unaware, Kit stepped farther into the cottage. He reached out his left hand towards Elsie, and the temptation to race towards him mounted. How she wanted to smell his skin, have his hands stroke her back, and most of all get out of this place of death.

“I know your son is dead,” Kit said. “I can make amends, but if you do anything to hurt my fiancée, you will never even reach a courtroom.” He was moving closer to Mrs. Clarke, placing himself between the housekeeper and the doorway. With his free hand—the one by his side—he gestured for Elsie to move towards the doorway .

Tentatively, Elsie crept forwards, edging nearer towards freedom. She had been

working on the ties that Mrs. Clarke had made and was finally able to cast aside the chair.

Kit had left the doorway ajar and beyond the smoke and the blaze of the fireplace, Elsie could see the lapping waves creeping nearer. Soon the whole of the cove would be waterlogged. As soon as they were out of the burning cottage, they would be amongst the encircling cove with only a burning cottage as the safe spot.

“Come,” Kit tried again, “I will help you if you lower your weapon and?—”

Elsie saw the woman swipe the weapon in a slashing movement and turned from her task of moving towards the door. Instead, she shoved with all her might the table towards the housekeeper. It ricocheted into Mrs. Clarke with a resounding bang, sending her into the wall and out of reach of stabbing Kit. With a sickening crunch, Elsie heard the housekeeper’s skull crash into the cottage wall, and she fell down unmoving into the swelling smoke. The two of them stared at her for a moment, but she made no move, and Elsie felt sure she was gone.

Kit was suddenly by her side, snatching her up and pulling her towards the doorway.

Elsie’s breath was ragged, and their hair was frizzing because of the heat. Coughing and spluttering, the two of them staggered from the cottage, the residue of smoke clinging to their clothes and faces.

He yanked her to him, peppering her face with dirty kisses, and Elsie basked in the feelings of relief before Kit took a step back. Even in the darkness, she could see his shining eyes and the fearful calculation of what lay around them.

“I have you.” His voice was sore, rubbed raw from the smoke.

“You came.” She kissed him back. Fear and relief mingled together and made her

cling to Kit, desperate for them both to be anywhere else but knowing, if these were their last moments together, she wanted to savour it .

“I will always come for you. On that, have no doubt.” He held her to him so ruthlessly she could barely breathe. “I will always come for you because I love you. If you didn’t know that, then I can only apologise and say it again. I love you more than life itself because, to me, you are life.”

Elsie kissed him back, holding him tight. “I love you too.”

“Say it again,” he said. She was baffled to hear humour in his voice. But then his hands were on either side of her face, sinking into her grimy hair and smoke-blotched skin, kissing her until the horrors that they had endured to get here, seemed distant. Until she felt, despite her dirt, her cough, any of her faults, that he would always love her.

CHAPTER 24

Two weeks later

Kit paced through his London property, the carpet beneath his feet would become worn if he kept it up. Inside the bedroom was Elsie, and Kit could not imagine being anywhere else. She was being tended to by a trusted doctor and her sister, and Kit had reluctantly promised to go and sleep, but the truth was that slumber was out of reach.

So, he had made himself a nest in the nearest parlour, with only Lancelot for company. The dog huddled close to his feet, the creature's warm breath hitting against his feet created a sense of rest if only his worrying mind would allow such things.

It was impossible not to dwell on the final moments of their escape from the cove, the mad icy swim towards the pathway and the desperate grasping fingertip reaching out for land. He had thought Elsie right beside him, but when he turned it was to find her faint, and barely able to stand. So, he had carried her through the woods, talking to her all the way, promising to love her, marry her, do whatever she wished as long as she stayed with him.

The rest of the night, the journey out of Cornwall, meeting his cousin and Elsie's sister Margot, had been something of a blur. Even the momentous moment when Margot had passed the family diamonds over to him had been somewhat diminished by Kit's fears for Elsie. They were in Town where the best doctors were, but despite many a nighttime vigil, she was just starting to improve.

A tentative knock sounded, and Kit looked up to see his young sister enter the room. Flora was settling in, taking to Town with a delight that had surprised him, colour and vivaciousness flooding her once drained face. It brought a small measure of comfort to Kit.

“I have been looking for you and wondering if you might care for some supper?” Her voice was warm, and he saw she was starting to move with confidence.

“You managed to escape the clutches of Mrs. Bowley?” The London-based chaperone had been delighted to adopt Lady Flora, and plans were underway, it seemed, that she might enjoy a few delights of the Season. He had expected Flora to refuse, to wish to hide away, but he had been wrong, and Flora had even been to Vauxhall.

Kit shook his head, moving away from Flora to stand awkwardly by the fireplace, leaning on the wall as he looked at his sister, not certain what he should say to her, to allay her fears.

“I don’t think you’re actually supposed to pick at the wallpaper unless you’re an infant, and then in that case, am I supposed to play at being the nursemaid?” A leisurely voice sounded behind him, and in displeasure Kit looked to see his neighbour, the Earl of Langley, who also happened to be his future brother-in-law, enter the room.

There was something that touched on wickedness in the way Langley said his opening sentence, as if there was something illicit to his comment. Or just to his general being. The man was a libertine of the kind Kit had only seen from a distance at university and known second hand through his father’s tales about his uncles’ affairs.

Langley was the embodiment of the rakish ideal with all his sardonic grace, sage green waistcoat, combed blond hair, and black suit, topped off with the sort of smile

and well-rested countenance. It made Kit feel his ruffled, country appearance and very much resented the man despite all the wonderful things Margot said about the earl.

Langley wandered in closer, and as the earl came to stand next to Kit, he reached out a hand and touched the paper that Kit had been picking at. “I mean it’s not my favourite pattern. Still, I didn’t think you would be thinking of interior design at this point in time.”

Words stuck in Kit’s throat. “I’m not,” he managed to say.

“Come, both of you.” Langley took hold of Kit’s arm and started to manoeuvre Kit down the hallway. “My brother is one of the best doctors in London. You have nothing to fret about. He says she’ll be right as rain. I am sure your sister is right about food or fresh air, or whatever it was she came in here for.”

“Where are we going?” It seemed as if with all of Langley’s charm, Kit had to retreat into as many gruff and monosyllabic responses as possible. It seemed that Langley found this terribly amusing, or at least was not remotely troubled by it, since he smiled breezily, his green eyes flashing.

“Since you’ve refused all neighbourly offers to visit mine, I’ve come here under feminine duress to distract you.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“Yes, playing nursemaid, and getting underfoot apparently.” Langley managed to drag Kit into the neighbouring parlour and, none too gently, pushed him towards a padded armchair.

Flora followed after them with Lancelot at her heels, seeming to find the whole thing very amusing .

Kit surveyed the room. He hadn't been into this one yet, still learning the layout of the town mansion. His townhouse. It was clad in garish blue with peacocks, and he pivoted back to look at Langley as the datted man continued, "You know, it is at great cost to myself that I've taken off my normal activities of visiting Gentleman Jackson's to come here and intercept you. I am now cast into the role of..." He waved his languid arm in such a manner that Kit was certain it was supposed to be appealing, but it just annoyed him.

"Miss Keating has been informing on me," Kit said, shifting in his seat. He was not certain what the arrangement should be in terms of granting permission for their wedding, but he had his doubts it would matter, Langley would have Margot come hell or high water. The metaphor plunged Kit back down into the memory of Elsie struggling in the waves, and he hardly responded when Langley shoved a glass of whisky into his hands. The smell was sharp, and alcoholic, and Kit lowered the glass, certain it would put him to sleep.

"I did too," Flora added, "when I called yesterday."

"My fiancée wrote to the parents," Langley said, swirling his glass as he leant against the sideboard. "And my brother complained when he left an hour ago."

"Because—" Fear gripped him.

"Because Margot was concerned for you," Langley said.

"Miss Keating," Kit corrected him, fixing Langley with a hard look.

"I hope you're not displaying signs of hypocrisy," Langley replied sweetly, and internally, Kit cursed him. The earl had been present when the earl's half-brother, boasted the "best" doctor in London, had arrived and asked Kit a series of questions concerning Elsie's health, including whether she might be with child. The look of smug humour that had decorated Langley's face, when Kit had said it was a

possibility, still plagued him.

Before Kit could think of a suitable reply, there was a knock at the door, and it swung silently open to admit Miss Margot Keating. She was a tall woman with thick dark hair worn loose around her shoulders and a wan expression on her face, but despite this, she had an appealing face with clever eyes that brightened when they landed on Langley.

“My love,” the earl said. It was half endearment, half command, and she moved like a moth to a flame by his side. His lordship’s leisurely ease vanished as he enfolded her in his arms. His lips brushed her hair before administering on her forehead a tender kiss, and she nestled there as if she never wished to depart.

Kit had stood and watched them awkwardly. Apart, the two of them could not seem more dissimilar, and yet together, they seemed to fit, to be happy, to love each other as if no one else would ever do. He liked to think of the ways Elsie made him feel just the same. The ache in his chest, he realised, was gone, and he could only thank Elsie for that.

“Shall I—” Kit indicted towards the door, intending to go back to Elsie’s bedside.

Margot smiled over at him. “There’s no need.” She nodded towards the door, and Kit turned to see it swing wide again, and Elsie slipped inside. She was dressed in her night clothes and moving slowly, using a cane, but for the first time, there was colour gracing her cheeks, and she looked up at him as she edged closer, the same warm smile touching on her lips.

An overpowering desire swelled in him, to rush to her side, throw his arms around her, hug her until she rested her face against his chest, and he knew she was safe. When he took a step forward, Elsie raised her free hand indicating that she was perfectly well.

“The doctor has gone for more tonic, but he said I may move around inside, and Margot said you would be close by... I followed the sound of your voices.” As she spoke, Kit hovered close by, directing her into the largest armchair, removing his jacket, and draping it carefully over her legs. The last thing she needed was to catch a chill. As soon as she was seated Lancelot hopped up into her lap.

“Quite the devoted nurse,” Langley muttered, earning an annoyed look from Kit, who knew the earl was not referring to the dog, but it was Margot who jumped to his defence.

“You were hardly better, my lord, when I was injured by Mr. Nettley,” Margot teased him, and Langley gave her an indulgent look.

“That was Mrs. Clarke’s son,” Kit said in an undertone to Elsie, who nodded sagely.

“I do believe I can piece together the arrangement,” Elsie said, slipping her small hand into his, at first Kit thought it was for her comfort but truthfully, he rather liked feeling the delicate knuckles and palm all within his grasp. “Margot explained some of it. Mrs. Clarke, an assumed name, was actually Nan Nettley, the one-time mistress of Barnabas Fitzsimmons. Her son killed the former duke. It was their plot to reclaim what they thought should have been theirs.”

“All to get his hands on the Ashmoreton Diamonds,” Margot said.

The diamonds had been sent to be valued, and Kit was baffled to discover the vast fortune he had inherited. Of course, he had informed Margot that, since she was the finder of such riches, he fully intended she should receive half of the family fortune. He hoped this would satisfy all. The irony was Kit thought he would rather have Elsie over such jewels any day, and if the Nettleys had offered him the choice, they could have departed a great deal richer, and he would have kept his fiancée. Still, there was little to be done for the Nettleys now.

“My uncle, the former duke as you say,” Kit said, looking at Margot, “commanded your presence here? Do you think he knew where the diamonds were located?”

“No,” Margot said. There was a small amount of pain in her voice, for the prior duke had been her father and his killing had prevented her from ever knowing the man. “I am convinced he had no idea that the diamonds were hidden in this very house, on his very property. Nor that his murderer was in fact his illegitimate nephew.”

“My family’s ill-reputed reputation is yet again to blame...” Kit felt the anger burn up inside him. So many people had suffered for their lack of physical restraint. “It seems that my uncles’ lusts have caused no end of pain. Never were there more selfish, dissolute, rakehells than?—”

“Easy.” Langley had stepped away from his beloved Margot to fetch another drink, which he prepared with flair before moving away from the cabinet and coming to crouch down next to Elsie and offer her the glass. “Not all such gentlemen are beyond reformation. Or that the side effects cannot eventually work out.”

“Hmph.” The response came out as more of a growl and was lost in the laugh that made Elsie and Margot grin.

“Besides,” Langley said as he wrapped an arm around Margot’s waist, pulling her closer to him, so she rested against his side. “Would you not say, my love, it was worthwhile going through reformation?”

To Kit’s surprise, Margot let out an oddly girlish laugh which was rich and humorous as she patted Langley’s chest affectionately. “For you I found it a necessity.” Langley cocked an eyebrow at her, and she laughed again. “Very well, I enjoyed elements of it.”

Elsie caught Kit’s eye and gave him a small secretive half-smile, and he moved back to be closer to her, suddenly concerned she might need something.

For the last days in London, whilst not in her presence, he had roamed the townhouse, desperate for her in some intangible way. Just to be back in presence even if she was simply sleeping. He would do anything. He needed to know immediately if there was a thing he could do, all she needed to do was ask. Elsie took his hand when he stepped closer, and Kit raised her palm up and kissed the knuckles. How he missed her, their intimacy, and the way they locked together as a couple. It killed him to think he would need to wait for that until their wedding.

“The doctor suggested I should take dinner tonight.” Elsie’s voice was soft and unused, and she interlinked her fingers through Kit’s fingers.

“I have asked the cook to prepare your favourite stew and—” Margot said as she drew from her pocket a letter which she passed across to her sister. “This arrived this morning. I thought you would wish to read it.”

Elsie took the missive and unfurled it with something of her old glint to her eye. “Mother and father are arriving on Saturday.” She looked over to Flora. “I hope you will be pleased to meet them as well?”

Flora nodded, her reluctance to see and meet new people, a trait she had cast aside now she was in Town.

“There was some talk of when the banns were to be read,” Langley said. Kit was well aware that if the earl was to have his way, Margot and he would be off on the road to Gretna Green rather than waiting for the bride’s family to arrive.

“My sister and I discussed the idea of a joint wedding if you gentleman would be agreeable?” Margot asked sweetly.

“That means waiting longer.” Langley did not look pleased, but when Margot cocked an eyebrow at him, he merely shrugged as if he was completely at ease with the proposal.

“I hope that is acceptable to Your Grace.” Margot looked at Kit. They might be cousins and soon to be in-laws, but she was still a little reserved around him, tentative as if Kit would refuse Elsie’s sister a request.

Determined not to be of a similarly disinclined disposition, Kit smiled at the group. “If that is what you would both like, I am most agreeable.” Despite the idea that standing up with Langley was far from his idea.

“I also had a request from one of your servants,” Margot said, looking at Elsie. “Elinor Samson. It seems there was an understanding...”

“Between her and my driver?” Kit asked. Clary had already requested to court the maid, and after what the two of them had done for Elsie, Flora, and himself, Kit had even offered to pay for their honeymoon.

“They are to be married?” Elsie asked. “How lovely.”

“Excellent,” Langley said with the sort of tone that both showed he approved but did not wish to linger. “Shall we go and partake of dinner?” The earl slipped his arm around Margot’s waist, then gallantly offered Flora his arm, which made the younger girl laugh.

Elsie got to her feet, ready to take Kit’s arm.

“When do you think your sister will warm to me?” Kit teased.

“Perhaps at the same time as you take to Langley?” Elsie asked in amusement. Then in an undertone, she added warmly, “You should not have been so brutally honest about the events down in Tintagel or the possibility I could be with child.”

“I certainly received the distinct impression that Langley and your sister might have the same concerns,” Kit replied sardonically, which made Elsie giggle as she pressed

closer to his side.

“There is no need to sound quite prudish,” Elsie said, and Kit wondered if he might be becoming a hypocrite. It just seemed to him that the tragedy of his uncle’s murder, the diamond conspiracy too, might all have been avoided if his various uncles’ lusts had been properly controlled. Still, at least he would ensure that error was not repeated in the next generation.

Turning as they reached the end of the corridor, he looked down at Elsie, waited until the three ahead of them were out of earshot, and then asked, “Is there any chance you might be increasing?” He had no objection to the idea of children, as many as she might care or be able to give him. In fact, he was warming to the concept—especially a dimple-faced little girl with equally becoming dark curls as her mother. But if she was, then their marriage ceremony would need to be brought forward post-haste. So, he reasoned it would not be a bad thing for all concerned if there was a dignified wait as they made their way towards the altar. That was what logic told him, although Kit was quite prepared to tell logic to go hang.

“I do not believe so,” Elsie murmured.

Leaning down Kit took her free hand and lifted her fingers up his mouth. “Plenty of time for all that.”

The following evening as Kit lay secluded in his new bedroom, the lull of nighttime darkness should have pulled him quickly into slumber. After all, the bed was as plush, grand, and wide as anything Kit had ever slept in.

The luxury of the dukedom was fully his now, the title and the nobility he had inherited still not entirely resting easily on his shoulders. It was an adjustment, one he thought he should have been prepared for, and yet he found himself desperately yearning for the reassurance of Elsie. Were she lying next to him... Kit smiled at himself in the darkness at his own amorous ideas. So, he could not fall asleep—his

mind was abuzz with all those thoughts of what he might do to her, with her, on her...

The door of his chamber slid open, and Kit sat bolt upright in his bed, reaching instinctively for the candle which still burned beside him.

“I thought”—her voice low, Elsie moved through the dark room getting closer to the bed— “after what occurred at dinner...”

Kit remembered the touch of their fingers through the silk of their gloves as he escorted her to the chair next to him. She must have felt the rush of heat through the contact, the need that had burnt through him, hours later .

“I caught you watching me during the meal,” Elsie said, a note of seduction in her voice.

“I was busy contemplating where we will reside after the wedding.”

“I thought you liked the idea of residing in the Gables Park that Langley spoke of. He said it was available to let, could we afford it?”

The idea of living just thirty miles from Langley, in Hampshire, was not an entirely welcome one. Yet it was better than returning to his family home in Cornwall. Anything was better than there.

“If you wish to let Gables, I am sure we will have more luck than anyone else in my family.”

On reaching the bed, Elsie looked down at him with such a sweet smile his chest felt tight. She nibbled her lower lip, before she changed the subject. “You have fretted that the sins of your family must play out and affect you. I have feared the same because of my mother’s mistake. With my own prior lapses too.”

Kit moved closer, unable to deny drawing nearer to her, telling himself as long as he resisted the urge to pull her down onto the coverlet, then all would be well. He could ignore the temptation of Elsie until they were wed, ignoring his growing erection. But Elsie had other ideas. She sank down onto the bedspread, her fingers reaching out and touching his bare chest, coming to rest over his heart.

“Yet without those errors, mistakes, whatever they might be, whatever you wish to call them, we would not have found our way to each other. We might not have fallen in love. I am therefore grateful for at least my part of these transgressions. Certainly, the ones that we committed together I will never regret.”

“That is different.” Kit could feel his emotions at war within his chest. “You and I are in love.”

“That’s right.” Elsie edged closer, and Kit could tell she might kiss him. Again, his mind screamed that he should refuse her, but everything else told him he was being a fool.

Elsie’s sweet mouth pressed tenderly against his lips. Kissing him, drowning him in the memories of their entwined bodies.

“Let me stay,” she whispered, and Kit knew he could not say no. He would never say no to her. He nodded when she pulled back from their second kiss to look at him, and Elsie slowly clambered on top of him, before he grabbed her up more securely into his arms. She wore only her light nightgown, and her bare legs were soon wrapped around his waist, her bottom grinding against him while their kisses grew wilder. His fingers gripped and pulled at the thin material, ruining the seams and baring her breasts. Bending down, he peppered kisses over her exposed nipples, delighting in the sound of her gasps as his whiskers grazed her skin.

“How I have missed you,” Kit said, his voice throaty and keen.

“Please.” Her voice was raw with need.

Slowly, or as slowly as he could manage, Kit rolled her beneath him, pinning and interlocking their hands over her head, fastening his mouth to hers as he positioned himself above her. When he surged inside her, his mouth captured her encouraging cries, and then as he started to rock in and out of her, the sweet sensation of being held, of being secure, and of being known, gripped him.

The momentum—the force of his need for her—meant little could have stopped the sensations. He claimed her with increasing ferocity, the movements fast and all-consuming as Elsie clung to him, her nails digging into his back, urging Kit on.

When the first waves of his release echoed around his senses, he was relieved to hear an answering response from Elsie. Her delighted mews sounded in his ears, and he drove into her more desperately, finally losing himself within her as she clung to him, sounds and movement, thought and the outside world, purged from their minds.

Still buried deep within her, Kit paused gazing down at Elsie through the darkness, realising how right she had been—that no matter what the costs of the journey to find her, it had all been worthwhile.

“Kit?” she asked, her hand loosening from his grip to reach up and touch his face. “What is wrong?”

“Nothing,” Kit said, kissing her again. “Absolutely nothing.”