



# The Foundling (Rags to Richmonds #3)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** The Foundling is the love story of Miss Frederica Richmond, left alone to grow to adulthood in an orphanage after her parents' death. It is the third book in the Rags to Richmonds series co-authored by Jessie Lewis and Amy D'Orazio.

MISS FREDERICA CHILD KNOWS EXACTLY WHO SHE IS. She has always known, for as long as she can remember, that she is the granddaughter of the Earl of Tipton, from whom her father had been estranged prior to his death. But she does not begrudge the life of luxury she never had; her work at the Taverstock Orphanage, creating a sort of adoptive family, is all the reward she desires.

ALAS, JUST AS SHE BECOMES AN ADULT, her contentment is due to be shattered. A new patron of the orphanage—the handsome, young, and recently bereaved Duke of Penrith—discovers her secret and reveals her whereabouts to her estranged family. The reunion is a surprise to everyone, but in one thing the Richmonds are sure: Frederica must return to her family and the life she is due as the granddaughter of nobility.

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## CHAPTER ONE

Taverstock Orphanage, Bicester

January 1819

A strand of blonde hair fell in Frederica Child's face as she crouched next to the newest admission to the orphanage. She blew it aside and asked gently, "Are you not hungry?"

"Won't eat a bite," Mrs Digby interrupted in her usual, brusque manner. "Waste of good food, if you ask me. There's plenty who'd give their eyeteeth for a bowl of summat hot in their bellies."

Mrs Digby was Taverstock Orphanage's cook, and though she was not a hard woman, she had a hard manner. It was not uncommon for the younger children to be terrified of her, even if Frederica herself never had been. The cook was more frightening to those who had known a mother's love, which she herself never had.

Poor Emily seemed to be terrified of everything, which was no great surprise, given that one week ago, she had lost her mother and sister to a house fire, which she herself had barely escaped. With no other family to take her in, she had been at the orphanage ever since. She had yet to utter a word.

"Thank you, Mrs Digby." Frederica replied.

The cook sighed and retreated, shaking her head.

Frederica returned her attention to Emily. “I know it is all a bit scary, petal, but you must eat. You will have a sore tummy otherwise.”

Emily said nothing, and her bottom lip began to tremble.

“Do you not like porridge?”

The girl let out a stifled sob.

“You did not like it either when you first came, did you, Jennifer?” Frederica asked of an older girl, sitting opposite.

“No, miss.” To Emily, Jennifer said, “You get used to it.”

“There, see?” Frederica scooped a small amount onto a spoon and held it out for the little girl, smiling hopefully. “Why not try a mouthful? ’Tis tastier than it looks.”

Emily reluctantly took the spoon and licked the very tip. Hunger took over thereafter, and she was soon shovelling porridge down her throat at a rate of knots.

“Good girl,” Frederica whispered. With a reminder to all the other girls to be especially kind to Emily, she removed to stand with the cook at the serving table. “It must be overwhelming for her.”

Mrs Digby clicked her tongue, but whatever opinion she had been about to give was curtailed when one of the maids, Daisy, burst through the door, gesturing urgently. “Make haste, Miss Child! Mr Mulligan says he has been waiting these past ten minutes!”

“Oh, heavens, I completely lost track of time!” Frederica untied her apron and passed it into Mrs Digby’s outstretched hand, then hurried out of the dining hall. Mr

Mulligan was the Chair of Governors—a good man, in his own way, but not one to be kept waiting.

“Forgive me, Mr Mulligan, I was helping the new girl,” she explained as she bustled into the office.

He grunted his displeasure and indicated that she should sit, all without pausing in his present endeavour of lighting his pipe. “You do not mind, do you?” he asked, raising it towards her slightly as though in a toast.

In fact, Frederica despised the smell of tobacco smoke, but since he was already puffing on the pipe to get it going, she knew her objection would carry no weight and mutely shook her head.

“Good, good. Is the girl speaking yet?”

“Sadly not.”

“Have you tried Mrs Woods’s suggestion?”

Frederica kept her face blank. Mrs Woods was one of the schoolmistresses, and she was of the firm belief that a good thrashing would ‘beat the words out of’ Emily. Frederica thought such a notion was absurd at best, and barbarous at worst, but she knew better than to say so.

“Not yet,” she said instead, “but she has only been with us for one week. I am hopeful that she will find her own tongue before long. ”

Mr Mulligan grunted again and promptly forgot the matter entirely. “Now! About our visitor this morning. He wishes to see what we do here, how we manage the children, what principles we are governed by, and so on. I shall explain the work of the

governors. I should like you to show us around.”

“Of course,” Frederica replied, although in truth, there was nobody else Mr Mulligan might have asked. Until three years ago, Taverstock had been overseen by Mrs Cromarty, but upon her death, a lack of funds meant she had not been replaced—at least, not officially. Having lived at Taverstock since she was seven and being a faithful help to Mrs Cromarty all that time, Frederica had learnt enough about running the place to act as her *de facto* substitute. It was a position she continued to hold—and cherish—to this day. “Is there anything in particular you should like him to see?”

“Yes, make sure to show him the leaking roof. It might inspire him to give us more money. But in general, if he wishes to see a thing, then you must show it to him. We are not in a position to refuse the demands of a duke.”

“A duke?” Frederica said in surprise.

“Yes! Devon Buchanan, the fifth Duke of Penrith—I told you. I do not know how you could forget such a thing—he is one of the most illustrious men in the country!”

Frederica was not overly surprised that she had forgotten, for she had never been much awed by consequence and was far more interested in the prospect of the visitor giving his patronage than the elevated sphere from which he did it.

Mr Mulligan lowered his pipe to peer at her. “Best that you do not mention your full story, eh? He may be the sort to take objection to such an association.”

Frederica acknowledged him with a smile, though he need not have worried. Her full story had been consigned to the annals of Taverstock’s files for so long, it had almost ceased to be hers.

“Now, you have not been in the presence of a duke before, have you?” Mr Mulligan continued. When she shook her head, he stood up and began pacing up and down the room, puffing on his pipe between edicts. “Then attend closely! Do not look him in the eye for too long—he will think you impertinent. Beyond showing him around, do not speak to him directly unless he invites it. If you must address him, call him ‘Your Grace’.”

He went on for some time in this fashion until, at length, he looked at his watch and announced with great agitation that it was time they made their way to greet him. Beads of perspiration broke out on his forehead when they opened the door to see the duke’s carriage already at a halt on the drive. Frederica pretended not to notice and instead turned to watch His Grace ascend the front steps.

She had never given any consideration to what a duke might look like, but had she been asked to guess, she would not have envisioned the Duke of Penrith. He was young, for a start—certainly not past thirty. Lean, with luxuriant brown hair and an unsmiling mien, he had an angular face that would have been exceedingly handsome were it not that he looked too thin. He had not Mr Mulligan’s height, but he had presence such that he seemed to fill the hall regardless, entering with an air of consequence that made even Frederica’s usually imperturbable heart dance about erratically.

He greeted Mr Mulligan with a quiet but commanding voice. Frederica almost gasped when Penrith turned to look at her. She had expected his gaze to be stern in keeping with his dour bearing. Instead, his unusually dark blue eyes were soft, contemplative, and profoundly unhappy. She only remembered to curtsy when Mr Mulligan cleared his throat.

“This is Miss Child. She will be conducting our tour of Taverstock today.”

The duke inclined his head in acknowledgement and looked away, and Frederica felt

momentarily off-balance. Shaking her head to dispel her discomposure, she directed both men towards the stairs. While Mr Mulligan launched into a much-practised speech, she sneaked the occasional glance at the duke, fascinated and a little saddened by what she had glimpsed in him. Without staring, however, she could make out only a figure of compelling stateliness and poise.

Her contemplations were interrupted when it became apparent that Mr Mulligan's nerves had rendered him uncommonly stupid. Asked by the duke how many children were presently homed at Taverstock, both his oration and his steps faltered, his countenance set in a frieze of panic .

“We have twenty-three as of yesterday,” Frederica reminded him quietly.

“Yes! Twenty-three,” he repeated. “They are split between three dormitories?—”

“Four,” Frederica whispered.

“My apologies—four dormitories, and a nursery.”

“How many rooms does the house have in total?” Penrith enquired.

“Rooms? Well now, let me see, there must be...” Mr Mulligan glanced again at Frederica, who mouthed the answer that he might claim the information as his own. She had never seen him thus; he seemed to grow more flustered the longer he was in the duke's company, and it was necessary for her to assist him several more times with details that he would ordinarily have been able to recite in his sleep. She hoped the duke would not hold it against him. It was difficult to tell whether Penrith had even noticed, for his eyes might have been sorrowful, but his demeanour was inscrutable.

They visited Mr Carnegie's classroom, where the boys were instructed to welcome

His Grace in unison, and the schoolmaster explained the focus of their lesson. Then Frederica led the way through the dormitories, nursery, sick room, attic—complete with leaking roof—and workrooms. She explained the workings of the house and the children's daily routines, and finished the tour by taking the gentlemen through the dining hall to the kitchen and stores, and describing the children's usual fare.

“There is a boy alone in this room,” Penrith said as they passed the last door in the hall of servants' chambers. Somewhat more severely, he enquired, “Is he being punished?”

Frederica hastened to look into the room to see who it was. Her heart sank a little when she recognised Geoffrey, a boy of nine who repeatedly found himself in trouble for his inability to sit still and attend to his lessons. It was probable that he had run here to avoid a punishment; it would not be the first time. She gave him a reassuring smile and pulled the door shut.

“No, Your Grace. That is Master Geoffrey. He has been with us a few months now, and he has not settled at all well. He has likely come in search of comfort.”

Mr Mulligan puffed up loftily. “That is not to say that we shy away from appropriate discipline here at Taverstock, Your Grace. But if a child were in need of chastisement, he or she would not be sent here to receive it.”

“This is my chamber,” Frederica added, because the duke looked puzzled.

Her explanation did not help; the duke's frown only deepened. “What did you say your role here was, Miss Child?”

He was regarding her directly, and she took the opportunity to search for another glimpse of the vulnerability she had seen in him before. “I do not hold a specific position, Your Grace,” she replied distractedly. “I do whatever work needs doing.”



“And, other than comforting distressed children, what does that involve?”

“Comforting distressed children is a significant part of it,” she replied with a rueful smile. “As Your Grace might expect, they are often deeply troubled when they come to us.”

There! A flash of something in Penrith’s gaze, and it was most certainly not a happy sentiment.

“Thank you, Miss Child!” Mr Mulligan said with an almost hysterical laugh. “You may attend Master Geoffrey now.” He turned to Penrith. “If Your Grace would like to come to the office, I shall show you Taverstock’s accounts.”

They walked away, and Frederica did as she was told, comforting Geoffrey until he felt able to return to the schoolroom.

Later, when she was having tea with some of the rest of the household, she had cause to reflect on her impression of Penrith.

“Do you think he’ll help us?” Mrs Digby enquired.

“Hard to tell,” Mr Mulligan replied. “He was not forthcoming.”

“Aye, I thought him very reserved,” Mr Carnegie agreed. “Although not objectionably so. Dignified, I should say. Not the sort to effuse.”

“What did you think, Fred?” asked Rupert Dalton. He was Taverstock’s gardener and general labourer, and Frederica’s good friend.

“He was quiet,” she agreed, “but perhaps because...well, I thought he seemed extraordinarily sad.”

“Sad?” Rupert scoffed. “What’s a duke got to be sad about?”

“He lost his wife the year before last,” Mr Mulligan said. “I daresay if he has a bit of melancholia about him, it is justified.”

“Trust you to see it,” Mrs Digby said to Frederica. “There’s no hiding anything from you, is there?”

Frederica smiled but said nothing. It was true that she perceived people’s feelings more often than her colleagues, but she fancied that was only because she took the trouble to look for them. She had not been looking for Penrith’s sadness—it had leapt out at her, unbidden. She hoped he would decide to become a patron of Taverstock. If it brought him half the joy that working here brought her, he could not remain that unhappy for long.

### CHAPTER TWO

January was the worst time of year to be bereaved, in Frederica's opinion. In the depths of winter and the clutches of grief, hope could be a difficult thing to cling to. It was with a heavy heart, therefore, that she set out that morning to collect two newly orphaned children whose father had been found drowned. The walk back took an hour, but they coped remarkably well considering their youth—Tom was ten; his sister, Lucy, was but six. Frederica took care not to mention their father on the walk. The task of explaining the altered course of their lives would be broached once they were settled at Taverstock, but until then, she tried to distract them with games and stories.

All her efforts to keep them calm were rendered worthless when they arrived to a scene of pandemonium. The children ought to have been in the workrooms, but at least ten were milling about in the entrance hall, most arguing with each other and several weeping. Two ran directly to her, clamouring for her attention. The younger of the two new children, Lucy, began to whimper. Frederica picked her up, then called to the eldest boy present, "Matthew, what has happened?"

"Mr Patterson has taken ill, miss. He fell over sudden-like, and he's not got up again."

"Good heavens!"

"Mr Carnegie is trying to rouse him. Mrs Woods sent us to find you."

"I see." Her mind raced to think what to do for the best. Mrs Pargeter would be in the

nursery with the three infants currently in Taverstock's care. Mr Wisley did not teach on a Wednesday, and neither Mrs Digby nor the maids would be up from the village for another hour at least. That left Rupert.

With a decisive nod, she attempted to shepherd the children towards the stairs, that she might temporarily deposit them in the dormitory. Several enquiries as to the likelihood of Mr Patterson dying led to a renewal of panicked tears and a cry of "I want to go home!" from Lucy, who was clinging desperately to Frederica's neck.

"Looks like this is your home now," one of the boys tactfully informed her. She promptly began to wail, and her brother was not long in joining her.

"Come now, children. This will not do. I want you all to take deep breaths and calm yourselves."

"Can I be of assistance, Miss Child?"

With a start, Frederica turned to see the Duke of Penrith framed by the open front door. Her immediate thought was for Mr Mulligan's vexation that His Grace should have witnessed such a chaotic scene—but she cared infinitely more about the children's distress than the Chair of Governor's pride.

"Would you?" she said without hesitation. "One of the schoolmasters has taken ill. I must summon the apothecary and send word to Mr Mulligan."

"Consider it done, madam." And, indeed, within moments, the duke's coachman had been dispatched to deliver both messages.

"I am much obliged, Your Grace, but I beg you would excuse me for a moment. I must deal with the children. Would you care to wait in the office? I am afraid the fire will not be lit, for the governors are not meeting today, so it may be a little cold."

“I am sure I shall withstand it.” He gave a little nod and walked away.

Frederica turned to the fractious gaggle and attempted to impose some order. “Matthew? Peter? Will one of you go to?—”

“I do not want to live here,” Lucy said tearfully.

Frederica set her down and knelt to speak to her. “I promise, it is not as loud or as busy as this usually.”

“Stop crying, you big baby!” one of the boys shouted—not at Lucy, as Frederica first feared, but at one of his fellow orphans. “It weren’t you who keeled over!”

“I’m not a baby!” came the snivelling reply, accompanied by a hard shove.

“That is enough, boys!” Frederica said firmly, reaching to separate them.

“I want my pa!” Tom cried, bottom lip aquiver .

“I know you do, petal.” Frederica consoled him with a gentle squeeze to his arm. Over the escalating din, she called, “Children, I need you to listen!”

“Miss Child, it seems to me that I could be of far more assistance to you if I were not simply sitting in an empty room getting cold.”

Frederica lurched to her feet. She thought the duke had gone into the office. “I beg your pardon. We are not usually this unruly, only the children are upset, and”—she lowered her voice and gestured at Lucy and Tom—“these two have only this moment arrived at Taverstock for the very first time. They have just lost their father.”

He had not been smiling before, but he nevertheless seemed to grow more serious

when he heard this, reminding Frederica of the sense of poignancy she had perceived in him on his last visit. He regarded the brother and sister sombrely for a moment or two, then said, "Allow me to sit with them whilst you make the necessary arrangements for the other children. It is not as though I can go anywhere until my man returns. I may as well make myself useful."

Frederica did then hesitate. She was not aware that being useful to others was something with which dukes generally concerned themselves, and goodness only knew how well Lucy and Tom would bear the encounter—but the right or wrong of it soon became the lesser of her concerns. Jennifer appeared at the top of the stairs, calling desperately for her to attend Mrs Woods, who was having difficulty settling the other children. That would inevitably lead to one or more of them receiving a hiding unless the situation could be calmed.

"Thank you, Your Grace," Frederica said with an apologetic smile. "I should be exceedingly grateful for your help."

After a quick introduction between the three and a promise to come back quickly, she shepherded the other children away.

It was longer than she would have liked before she was able to return. She might not be awed by rank, but that did not mean she was insensible to it, nor disrespectful of it, and she grew increasingly impatient to relieve the duke of his charges. Yet, her plan to enlist Rupert's help was severely delayed on account of him taking an age to find. Eventually, once order was restored and she had prepared a tray of chocolate and cake for Tom and Lucy, she hastened back to the office, anxious as to what she might discover.

She could not have been more pleasantly surprised. The duke had lit the fire, so the room had none of its usual chill. The large table around which the governors conducted their business was empty; the children were seated on the rug before the

hearth, each concentrating intently on building a house of cards. Penrith was perched on the edge of a nearby armchair, leaning forwards to give quiet instruction to both. It was a sweet scene; Frederica was sorry to interrupt, though the children hastened to her as soon as they heard her set the tray on the table.

Penrith came at a more dignified pace to join them. He did not smile, but neither did he seem displeased to have been kept waiting. Indeed, he had a sedateness about him that greatly softened his serious demeanour. “We found something to entertain us,” he said, inclining his head towards the cards. “I trust whoever owns them will not object.”

“Certainly not. They will be as grateful as I am,” Frederica replied. She handed the children their drinks and a plate of cake each and encouraged them to take their food and return to their game. Pointing to the tray, she asked, “Would you like anything, Your Grace?”

He declined the offer. “Is there any news on the schoolmaster who fell ill?”

“He is somewhat revived—enough to be escorted home. The apothecary could not account for his sudden turn but hopes bedrest will see him on his feet again.”

“That is good news for him and the orphanage.”

“It is, although we can make do for a short while. I can help with some of the younger children’s lessons until he returns. Would you prefer some tea? It would not take long for me to prepare some.”

“Pray do not trouble yourself. My man ought to be here soon with Mr Mulligan.”

“I am terribly sorry he was not here to greet you. It is most unlike him to forget an engagement.”

“The fault is mine. I had not realised he was not here all the time.”

“Oh! No, the governors only come to Taverstock for meetings. They are not involved in the day-to-day running of the orphanage.”

Tom’s card tower abruptly collapsed, and he and his sister both laughed gaily. It filled Frederica’s heart with relief to see it. “I thank you, most sincerely, for giving them some distraction,” she told Penrith quietly. “It was very unfortunate that their first experience of Taverstock was so unsettling.”

He frowned slightly and, after a quick glance at Tom and Lucy, asked in a low voice, “About that—you had to bring these two to Taverstock yourself? The children are not brought to you here?”

“Usually they are, but there is not always someone to perform the task. Some children are entirely alone. Often, people do not know about us or have not the means to travel so far. That was the case with the elderly neighbour who has been looking after these two. In those circumstances, it is necessary for them to be collected.”

“And you do that?”

“When the governors are unavailable, yes.”

“Are the governors often unavailable?”

“They do as much as they can, Your Grace, but they all have concerns outside of Taverstock, and orphaned children cannot always wait for business to be concluded.”

She thought he looked somewhat taken aback, but his countenance had such poise, the fleeting look was gone too soon for her to be sure. Perhaps she had spoken too freely, but she thought it more sensible that she answered his questions fully than



flatter him with deference and timidity.

“Are you, then, the only person who lives on site?” he enquired .

“Permanently, I suppose I am, although the schoolmasters and mistresses take turns sleeping here, to help watch over the children at night. The maids and the cook live in Bicester and come up as and when they are needed, as does Mr Dalton, the gardener. Mrs Pargeter stays in the nursery whenever we have infants with us, but she has a cottage in the next village, where she will return once I have found families to take the babies.”

“You will find them families?”

Penrith’s tone gave her pause. Envisaging Mr Mulligan’s displeasure if the duke were to be put off by anything she had said, she hastily explained, “The orphanage homes children until they are fourteen—but I think they are always happier with families. If I can find homes for them sooner, I do.”

“I am acquainted with the orphanage’s policies. I was questioning it being you who secures those placements and not the governors. It is clear that a great number of tasks fall to your lot, Miss Child. It is a lot of responsibility for one so young.”

Frederica blushed hotly. She was old enough to be married and have children of her own; she knew not why she should be deemed too young to look after the children at Taverstock. “I am nearly twenty, Your Grace.”

He winced wryly and shook his head. “I beg your pardon. It was not my intention to question either your age or your ability, madam. Only to express my surprise. I had not realised you all but ran Taverstock.”

“I did not mean to give that impression.” Mr Mulligan was going to spit! “We are a

small company here, and we share the work as practicably as we can between us. I suppose, because I live here, I am naturally more involved—but happily so. I am excessively fond of children.”

She felt certain she had said too much then, for Penrith fixed her with a searching look.

“You are to be commended. Choosing to live here, rather than returning to your home as the others do, shows remarkable dedication.”

“Oh, but this is my home, Your Grace. That is—I am dedicated to the children, but I have no other home to go to. I was orphaned myself, so I have grown up here.”

It was odd; Penrith never smiled, Frederica noticed, yet there were times when his solemnity faded from notice, as he took an interest in this or began talking about that . There were also times—this being such a one—when it returned in full force.

“A home was never found for you?”

“They found several for me, but none of the families were able to keep me for longer than a few years. Taverstock was the third orphanage at which I was abandoned, at the age of seven, and I begged not to be sent away again. It has been my home ever since.”

“These are heavy misfortunes,” he said gravely.

Frederica shook her head. “I have nothing to repine. My work at Taverstock is the most gratifying thing in the world.”

“Does it never make you sad that you have lost your parents?”

“I have never known a life any different—I was orphaned too young to remember them. What makes me sad is to see the children here, struggling with their losses, for theirs is a much fresher grief.”

Penrith nodded, still regarding her intently. “And what do you do to comfort them, when they are distressed?”

Frederica smiled more broadly and pointed to the tray on the table. “I give them cake.”

“Cake?” he said indignantly, as though he had been expecting a far more intuitive answer.

“We do, of course, offer the children whatever succour they require—but there are times when only cake will do. Mrs Digby usually obliges us, though there is a tearoom in Bicester that sells the most wonderful confections. Sometimes, if a child is particularly wretched, I take them there and treat them to one. It never fails to cheer them.”

They were interrupted by the opening of the door and Mr Mulligan’s frenetic entrance. He came in already apologising, but once he noticed Frederica and the two children on the hearth rug, his address altered from apology to rebuke.

“Miss Child, what are you about? Remove these children at once ! His Grace has not come here to be embroiled in orphanage business.”

“On the contrary, Mr Mulligan, that is precisely why I have come,” Penrith replied, his gravity now giving him an air of imposing authority. “I have decided to patronise Taverstock. Miss Child has been of infinite use in convincing me to do so.” He inclined his head towards her in silent recognition, and she could think of nothing to say or do in reply but curtsy and follow Mr Mulligan’s instruction to take the

children away.

She felt a little disquieted as she walked them towards the stairs. It was true that she treasured her work above all things, but she did not meet many people outside of Taverstock, and talking to Penrith had given her a rare reminder of what she was missing by not living out in the world. Not a duke, of course; such exalted personages would not be part of any world she might inhabit. But someone like Penrith—someone generous, worldly, and handsome—she could very easily esteem a man like that. And she was not likely to meet one in the dormitories and sick rooms of a small country orphanage.

She looked down when Tom slipped his hand into hers, and his tentative smile instantly diminished her wistfulness. When he turned to his sister and said, “I do not think it will be so bad to live here, Lu-Lu,” Frederica’s wistfulness melted away entirely.

### CHAPTER THREE

Winter gradually began to loosen its cruel grip; snowdrops littered the roadsides, and the sunshine, though it contained little heat, was regularly as bright as a summer's day. Frederica delighted in the early promise of spring and was pleased when the opportunity arose one February afternoon to walk into Bicester while the blackthorns were still in blossom. Mr Patterson had recovered from his indisposition and returned to the schoolroom, freeing her from her temporary role as schoolmistress. Thus, wrapped up in her warmest clothes and abuzz with anticipation, she fairly skipped into town.

It was busy; people dashed impatiently between shops, and carriages and carts rolled past in both directions. With only one or two errands to run and no reason to rush, Frederica meandered through Market Square, stopping first at the stationer's and then at the bookshop. Upon exiting the druggist's, she noticed some manner of commotion across the way .

An ornate chaise-and-four had stopped on the corner of Sheep Street, and whomever it conveyed was attracting a good deal of attention. People all around the square had paused to crane their necks and whisper to each other in animated voices. One or two proprietors had come to stand in the doorways of their shops; several more could be seen rearranging the wares in their windows to better advantage.

Smiling at their fascination, Frederica hitched her skirts and stepped over a puddle. Her next and last errand was at the draper's, on the same side of the square as the carriage. Her approach gave her a clear view of the family that stepped down from it. First to exit, with the help of a footman in elaborate livery, was a woman of middling

years, whose attire, though handsome, did not seem fine enough to match her conveyance. A domestic of some sort, then, Frederica deduced. This guess was borne out when the woman turned to lift a young child of perhaps three or four from the carriage and set him at her feet. The footman then passed an even younger child—a girl—from the interior of the carriage into her arms. With the girl propped on her hip, and the little boy's hand firmly grasped in her own, the woman—who must be their nanny—stepped back from the carriage door.

Frederica stopped mid-stride when another occupant stepped down onto the pavement—this one with a child of perhaps a twelvemonth in his arms. She better comprehended the townsfolk's excitement now, for she had never heard of the Duke of Penrith coming into Bicester to shop before. She frowned as she attempted to make sense of the grouping—and then gave a small gasp at the flash of sorrow that accompanied her dawning understanding. Mr Mulligan had told her the duke was a widower; he had not mentioned that he had children.

She had not thought Penrith old enough to be father to three. He must have married uncommonly young. As it always did, the intelligence that any child had lost their mother tugged at her heart, though she was gladdened to see the duke engaging with them. He seemed, if not wholly at ease with the task of toting a wriggling infant, at least not embarrassed to be doing so in public. It was most unusual for a man, and a nobleman at that, to go out in society with his young children. Still, a duke could do as he pleased and to the devil with convention, she supposed.

“Miss Child!”

Frederica started. She had been staring for so long, the duke had noticed. Mortification flooded her cheeks with heat—she would never have presumed to impose upon his notice deliberately. Yet now that he had seen her, she could hardly ignore him. She curtsied deeply and, when he gestured for her to approach, did so.

“You are not out to collect more children, I hope,” he said solemnly.

“No, Your Grace. I am happy to report that we have not been required to take any more children since Tom and Lucy Baxter—and they have settled remarkably well.”

To see the nanny’s expression, one would have thought she had uttered a string of expletives. What had the woman expected—that someone of Frederica’s station would be too dazzled by the duke to answer him fully? She suppressed a smile at the thought.

“I am pleased to hear it,” he replied. “It is serendipitous that we should see you here.” He indicated the tearoom with a glance. “We are come to sample some of the delights you told me about when we last spoke.” His face abruptly clouded, and he looked at his infant son. “The children needed some diversion.”

Aware that she had recommended the tearoom as an antidote for grief, Frederica was heartily sorry for them all, but it could not outweigh the pleasure she felt to see a father do such a fine thing for his children. She smiled brightly. “You will not be disappointed. Mrs Tulley’s cakes can remedy all manner of woes. Might I recommend some of her tried and tested cure-alls?”

The nanny looked on aghast, but Frederica paid her no mind.

Penrith appeared momentarily surprised before a more contented sentiment suffused his face. “That would be appreciated, I thank you. Allow me to introduce everybody.” He reached down to touch the shoulder of his eldest. “This is William, Marquess Ryde.” Stroking the cheek of the toddler in the nanny’s arms, he said, “This is Delphine.” Shuffling his youngest forwards as though showing off a trophy, he concluded, “And this is Felix. Oh, and this is their nanny, Mrs Coombs.”

Frederica curtsyed. “An honour to meet you all.”

Lord Ryde looked up at his father with endearing confusion .

“This is Miss Child,” Penrith told him. “She is going to show you which cakes are the best.”

The boy lit up with glee and all but pulled his nanny into the shop. Within, poor Mrs Tulley stood dumbstruck behind the counter. Frederica greeted her, then turned her attention to Penrith’s children. Lady Delphine was sucking her thumb and staring wide-eyed at the array of cakes on the counter. Lord Ryde was peering up at Frederica expectantly.

“Did your mother like flowers?” she asked him.

He nodded uncertainly. His father, on the other hand, looked absolutely shocked, and his nanny sucked in her breath sharply. “Madam, I do not know what you think you are about—” But her objection was cut short when Lord Ryde piped up in the sweet, over-enunciated diction of all children still in leading strings.

“And she liked honey. She put it on her toast.”

His sister pulled her thumb from her mouth with a wet pop and announced triumphantly, “Honey!”

Frederica beamed at them. “Then I know just the treat for you. Mrs Tulley, do you have any of your delicious lavender and honey cakes?”

Mrs Tulley looked between her and the duke in confusion and stammered an answer in the affirmative.

“Then we shall have two, if you please,” Penrith interjected. “And for the baby, Nanny?”



Mrs Coombs hesitated, running her eyes over the confections on display.

Despite the duke's epithet, Frederica could see now that the boy was nearer two than one—certainly old enough for an oat biscuit. She suggested it, adding, "They are a favourite with the younger children at the orphanage."

Mrs Coombs nodded her grudging approval, and it was settled. While Mrs Tulley hastened to oblige them, Penrith said quietly, "Miss Child, that was..." He grimaced slightly. "I have not heard Ryde speak about his mother for months. I began to think he did not remember her."

She smiled ruefully. "I find that children invariably want to talk about their mothers, even if they cannot recall a thing about them. And I love to hear it, for I cannot remember mine, either. I was a newborn when I was orphaned—too little even for a name, for I had not yet been christened. My name was recorded as 'Female Child'." Noticing that Lord Ryde was listening, she said her next words to him, making them as playful as she could. "It stuck, and I am still known as Miss Child today. Is that not funny?"

The little boy grinned and nodded, but the duke had reverted to being sombre and was regarding Frederica with a small frown. Comprehending that she likely had now overstepped, she backed away from the party.

"I ought to be going, Your Grace. I thank you for the honour of meeting your charming family." She curtsied and left the shop, a powerful feeling of warmth lingering in her breast at the unexpected encounter. She cherished the company of all children, but the duke's young family had been especially delightful. Being herself an orphan and working at an orphanage, paternal affection was not something she often had the privilege of witnessing, yet Penrith's concern for his children's happiness seemed to her everything a father ought to feel. She smiled tenderly to herself as she entered the draper's shop and waited to be served. Indeed, her feeling of quiet pride

in the duke was such that it kept her smiling all the way back to Taverstock.

### CHAPTER FOUR

“Do my eyes deceive me, or is that the elusive Miss Child?”

Frederica picked one last crocus and stood up, turning with a smile at the familiar voice. Rupert approached with his customary, lopsided smile and his flat cap pushing his scruffy brown hair into his eyes.

“It is I,” she replied merrily. Her shawl slipped off her shoulder as she held up her handful of crocuses and primroses. She pulled it back up and explained, “I had a rare half an hour to myself. You have caught me pillaging your garden for flowers.”

“Pillage away,” he replied. “There are daffodils on the front lawn if you want?”

Frederica nodded enthusiastically and hopped over a tuft of long grass to join him on the path. “What have you got growing in there?” she asked as they passed the small kitchen garden. There seemed to be an abundance of vegetation for so early in the year.

Rupert pointed. “Them’s leeks. At the back, that’s cabbage. And this is cauliflower.”

“I see. All the things the children dislike most, then?”

He gave her a wry look and shrugged. “Until the governors decide to build me a hothouse, it’s the best they’ll get in February. Mrs Digby will do something tasty with it, I’m sure.”

Frederica gave him a dubious look that made him laugh.

“I’ve missed you, Fred. It feels like an age since we’ve talked.”

“Not quite an age, Rupert, but it has been a hectic few weeks.”

She had been excessively busy of late on account of Mr Patterson’s recovery being a very short-lived affair. After less than a month back in the schoolroom, the complaint that had struck him down in January returned with far greater severity, this time unmistakably an apoplexy. There was no possibility of him returning, and Frederica’s time was once more being split between her usual work and teaching the younger girls and boys until a replacement could be found.

“It will not be forever, though,” she added. “We will find somebody eventually who does not object to a meagre stipend and lowborn pupils.”

Rupert grunted a small laugh and glanced at her sidelong. “You know you could always marry me. Then you wouldn’t have to put up with them either.”

She wished he would not do that. They had been friends for many years—he had been at Taverstock, too, as a boy—but to her mind, that made them more brother and sister than potential spouses. Rupert was hardworking and affable—and good-looking in a rugged, tanned sort of way—but she never looked at him like that. Indeed, if she looked too hard, she was more likely to be reminded of his propensity to drink too much and ridicule too freely—traits that were tolerable in a friend, but which would very quickly become tiresome in a husband.

She had always assumed that he did not look at her with any peculiar feelings of admiration either, but of late, his talk of their one day marrying had become more insistent and distinctly less teasing. Moreover, his every mention of her being his wife seemed to come hand in hand with the idea of her leaving Taverstock, which

only proved how little he truly understood her.

She did not answer him other than to roll her eyes, and she was pleased to have reached the daffodils, for crouching to pick some put an end to the topic. The sound of horses distracted her from the endeavour; she looked up and saw a carriage roll through the gates.

“Blow me if it ain’t that duke again,” Rupert exclaimed. “He’ll be wanting a bed in the dormitory soon, he’s here that often.”

Frederica came to her feet, peering at—and recognising—Penrith’s carriage. “So it is. He will be disappointed—none of the governors are here again.” She tutted. “I told him on his last visit that they only came for meetings. Would you be a dear and put these somewhere for me please?” She passed her posy of flowers to Rupert, then gave her skirts a quick brush off and checked that all the pins in her hair were secure.

“What are you making such a fuss for if you’re only planning to send him on his way again?”

“Better to give him as few reasons as possible to be displeased.” She did not wait for him to reply, for the duke was already striding towards the front door. With quick steps, she hastened across the lawn to intercept him.

He stopped upon noticing her approach, his previous haste apparently forgotten as he bowed and waited for her to reach him. “Good day to you, Miss Child.”

She caught up and curtsied. “Good day, Your Grace. I am very sorry, but Mr Mulligan is not at Taverstock again today. None of the governors are.”

“That is well, for it is you I have come to see.”

“Me?” A flicker of pleasure briefly warmed her stomach until reason doused it.

“Yes.” He looked around. “Would you do me the honour of showing me the gardens? I have not yet seen them, and we can talk whilst we walk.”

Frederica agreed, not quite able to keep the puzzlement from her voice, and gestured along the path that led around the house. Penrith walked next to her at a sedate pace with his hands clasped behind his back, the picture of nobility. Caught up in admiring the way his nose met his brow in a perfect curve, Frederica was startled when he asked, “Does that chap have business here, or should I have my man see him off?”

She followed his gaze to the oak tree at the edge of the lawn. Rupert had moved there from the patch of daffodils and now leant casually against the trunk, her flowers held carelessly upside down against one leg as he watched them walking. No doubt wondering, as she was, what the duke wanted. “That is Mr Dalton, the gardener.”

“Very good,” the duke replied, though he cast one more dubious look at Rupert before they turned the corner of the house.

The lawn in this area was less well tended than at the front, churned up by dozens of little feet.

“This is where the children take their exercise,” Frederica explained. “The older children also have lessons in the garden when the weather allows. The boys are taught gardening and tool maintenance, and the girls learn about herbs and flowers.”

“It is an impressive arrangement.” He seemed preoccupied—certainly not much interested in the gardens he had asked to see. Indeed, his next remark confirmed it. “It was a happy coincidence to see you in Bicester last week. Advantageous, too, for my children very much enjoyed the cakes you recommended.”

Frederica smiled, genuinely delighted. “I am glad to hear it. I shall be sure to tell Mrs Tulley when I see her. It was a pleasure to meet your children. I was not aware you had any.”

He looked at her with surprise. “Were you not? They were the reason I wished to become a patron. I thought I had made that clear to Mr Mulligan.”

“I am not privy to any details about the patrons other than their names. ”

“Well, it is no secret. I have no objection to you knowing my purpose.” He fixed his gaze on the path ahead, obscuring his expression—though the stiffness in his tone betrayed the discomfort he claimed not to feel. “When the duchess died, I became my children’s only living relative in England. I have no surviving family, and my wife’s people are on the Continent. It made me consider, as I never truly had before, that if anything were to happen to me, my children would be brought up by nannies and governesses. A sad prospect, but by no means as desperate as it must be for all the other bereaved children in the world who do not have the luxury of a duke’s household.”

He glanced at her, a sardonic turn to his countenance. “I am sure you can appreciate that the fate of orphans in this country was not something to which I had ever given much consideration as a single young man. As a father, I found the notion a good deal more distressing.”

“It can be extremely difficult for some of them,” Frederica agreed. “But we help as many as we can here at Taverstock. And children, you know, are exceedingly resilient creatures. They adapt far more rapidly than most adults.”

“That is exactly the response I ought to have expected,” he said. “Melancholy holds no sway with you, does it, Miss Child?”

She was distracted briefly by his expression. It could not have been called a smile, but it was the closest she had seen him come to one, and it had done something quite extraordinary to his countenance, softening his features, making them less angular and more animated. “There is a time and a place for sadness, Your Grace,” she said, shaking off her inattention, “but I never saw pity heal anyone’s heart. What these children need is kindness, patience, and love.”

He regarded her for a moment or two before conceding with a nod. “It is a sound philosophy. I was certainly grateful for your more sanguine approach at the tearoom, when I told you my children needed cheering. One never knows what to do with pity. It is such an unwieldy sentiment.”

With a sympathetic smile, Frederica directed Penrith away from the house and through the kitchen garden, pointing out Rupert’s vegetables until they reached the gate at the far end. The trees in the orchard beyond were all bare at present, but she thought he might like to see the efforts made for Taverstock to sustain itself. Again, however, he did not seem inclined to discuss the garden.

“Speaking of our meeting in Bicester,” he said instead, “something you said to me that day gave me pause. I have thought on it long and hard this past week, and I have come to the conclusion that I cannot justly withhold my suspicions from you.”

“Suspicions, Your Grace?”

He nodded gravely. “Miss Child, I am acquainted with a family—the Richmonds.”

Frederica started at the name but held her tongue and kept walking, thinking it best to say nothing until she could be sure what was coming.

“The head of that family, the Earl of Tipton, has recently discovered that he has a niece, orphaned when his estranged brother died, and now missing beyond trace. All



that is known of her is that she was born locally, twenty years ago, in 1799, and that she was referred to in his brother's will only as 'Female Child'."

Frederica pretended not to notice that Penrith was watching her and waited for him to finish.

"If my memory serves me correctly, you said something to that effect of your own history the other day." He came to a halt, forcing her to do the same. "Madam, I think you might be that niece."

Mr Mulligan would have preferred Frederica to prevaricate, for tarnished connections were anathema to nobility, and he had already expressed concern that Taverstock might be tainted, in the duke's eyes, by association with her. Yet, it was not in her nature to lie. She met the duke's eye and nodded. "I am."

### CHAPTER FIVE

Everything in Penrith's demeanour evinced his shock; confusion suffused his face, and he held himself improbably still. "Pardon?"

"I am Frederica Richmond, granddaughter of the late Lord Tipton. Niece to the present one."

For the longest time, he said nothing—only regarded her with his customary gravity. "How long have you known?" he asked at length.

"Since I was old enough to read my adoption papers."

He could not conceal his surprise. "You have papers proving this?"

"Yes."

"Why, then, did you tell me you were known only as Female Child?"

"Pardon me, Your Grace—I said my name was recorded as such, which it was. The full entry is, 'Female Child, born to the Honourable Mr and Mrs Robert Richmond'. 'Frederica' was added to the earliest document in pencil, though I know not when, exactly, or by whom."

He opened his mouth to reply, then closed it again and observably checked himself before making another attempt. "Pray, pardon me—I recognise you have no obligation to explain yourself to me. But might I enquire how you came to be known

as Miss Child if your true identity was known?”

She smiled at his manner, for it showed he had already accepted her history despite his questions. Not even the most liberal duke would show such courtesy to a foundling of obscure birth. “As I told Lord Ryde, it stuck. ‘Female Child’ had been changed to ‘Frederica Child’ by the time my second adoption papers were drawn up, and that is the name on all subsequent documentation.”

Again, Penrith regarded her intently, and had Frederica not been watching him just as closely, she might have missed the return of the same ghost of a smile that had flitted across his lips before—equally fleeting, equally captivating. “I knew there was something distinctive in your address.”

“Your Grace?”

“My consequence commonly produces a nervousness in people of your station. You have never exhibited anything of the sort. Despite the pains you have taken to disguise your descent, you gave yourself away in your bearing.”

Frederica shook her head, frowning; he did not seem reproachful, but she was nevertheless anxious at the thought of him thinking her deceitful. “I have never lied about it. My papers are filed with every other orphan’s in the office for anyone to look at who wishes to.”

“That may be so, but neither have you advertised it. Why have you never told anyone?”

“There was nothing to tell. I have no claim to nobility.” She could not have, for she would not have been passed from pillar to post all her childhood years otherwise. Mr Mulligan and Mrs Cromarty would never have agreed to allow her to stay at Taverstock if she belonged to somebody. They had seen her papers when she was

brought here, and both had drawn the same conclusion as everybody else before them—that her Richmond connections were useless to her.

A stiff breeze whipped through the orchard; Frederica pulled her shawl more tightly about her shoulders and set off walking again. When Penrith fell in beside her, she said, “My father was disinherited. My true family would not recognise me any more than they did him—but pray, do not think for a moment that it troubles me. I do not covet a privileged life, and I have no desire to impose upon anyone for favours. I am more than content here.”

There was a short pause before Penrith spoke, and when he did, he sounded unaccountably cautious. “I would never presume to question your wishes, madam. But you are wrong about your family. They are looking for you.”

She glanced at him sharply, then away again, disquieted by his earnestness. “I cannot imagine why they would have begun a search after twenty years. There must be some mistake.”

“There is no mistake, Miss Richmo?—”

“Please, call me Miss Child. It is the only name I have ever known.”

“I beg your pardon.” He sighed softly and added, “Might we sit?”

They had come full circle, through the orchard to the other side of the house, where several benches were nestled amongst a small rose garden. Frederica acceded with a nod and sat on the nearest one. Penrith joined her, a respectful distance away but turned slightly towards her.

“Your uncle, Lord Tipton, has a son, Viscount Oakley. Two summers ago, he discovered a young woman working as a maid at a house in Southampton who greatly

resembled his late grandmother. Investigations revealed that she was, in fact, the daughter of the earl's estranged brother, Robert Richmond."

Frederica felt her skin prickle and stared at him, prodigiously glad now of the solidity of the bench. "Do you mean to tell me I have a sister?"

"You have two. Once the first was restored to her family and began moving in higher circles, her sister was not long after discovered, for they are twins, and their likeness such that discovery was inevitable."

"Twin sisters!"

"Scarlett and Adelaide—though they are both married now and styled Lady Worthe and Lady Kemerton respectively. Indeed, I was at Lord and Lady Worthe's wedding in October, where the mystery of the remaining lost Richmond sister was all anybody was talking about. I believe I can safely say they would be overjoyed to meet you."

Frederica knew not what to say or think. She probably ought to be elated, or at least shocked, but she felt unaccountably numb. She had never had a sister—she had never had a family—and she knew not what to do with the information.

"Miss Child? I apologise if I have distressed you."

"Oh no, I am not...That is, I...it..." She huffed a small, self-conscious laugh. "I am not sure what to make of it. Contacting my uncle has never been a consideration, but I never knew I had sisters. That changes everything." On a whim, she asked, "Do I look like them?"

"No, I confess, you do not. But they are twins, so their more obvious similarity to each other is to be expected." After a brief pause, during which he looked at her with uncommon gentleness, he asked, "Would you like me to let them know you are

here?”

Would I? I hardly know. Not five minutes ago, she had been Frederica Child, foundling girl, sister to nobody, picking flowers for the vase in her small, unadorned bedchamber. Now, it seemed the world wanted her to be Miss Richmond, niece to an earl, sister to twins who were impatient to know her, and with a duke offering to put himself at her service. It was too much!

She became intensely aware of Penrith’s gaze and could not help but question his part in it all. “Your Grace is very kind, but...I hope you will not think me ungrateful if I ask why you are doing this for me?”

He gave a small shrug. “I happen to be the person to discover you. But the Richmonds are good people—as are Lord Worthe and Lord Kemerton. As are you. I would help bring you all together.” Sadness abruptly overtook his face, filling his eyes with sorrow that was awful to look at. “There has been too much loss in my own family for me to sit back and allow another to be kept apart when it could be so easily avoided. I can never have my wife back, but you can regain your family. It is not a chance anyone should throw away.”

His vehemence took Frederica’s breath away; his misery made her want to hold him as she sometimes cradled the children when they first came to Taverstock, bewildered and grieving. “What was her name?” she asked gently.

He was visibly taken aback, but she did not quail from his incredulous gaze, and after a moment, he shook his head with some wonder. “There you go again, talking on subjects no one else dares to broach.”

“She deserves to be talked about, Your Grace. She gave you three beautiful children. And you loved her, did you not?”

His incredulity increased, but so did his sadness. Together, they gave him the appearance of utter despair. “What makes you say that?”

“I spend my days tending to those who have lost loved ones. I recognise a broken heart when I see one.”

He averted his eyes abruptly, and sat, staring at the ground, completely still. Frederica did not apologise or retract her remark. She only waited, as experience had taught her would serve best—and, at length, Penrith’s shoulders rose and fell with the deep breath he required to bolster his courage.

“It was not a love match. My father knew he was dying and wished to see me wed before he passed away, so he arranged it. But we grew to care for each other very deeply.” He raised his eyes to hers. “Her name was Margot.”

Frederica smiled, faintly but sincerely. “It is a beautiful name. You must say it to your children as often as you can. That way, they will never forget. I wish I knew my mother’s name.”

He twisted to face her more fully. “Should you like to find out? I am sure your uncle will be able to tell you if your sisters cannot.”

There was nothing for it. Her qualms notwithstanding, the duke’s argument was compelling. And in truth, she doubted she could ever be content, aware that she had sisters alive in the world whom she did not know. She nodded, for it was easier than saying aloud that she gave her consent for him to turn her whole world on its head.

She took him to the office and showed him her papers before he left, in order that he could confirm to Lord Tipton that he had seen them. Then she accompanied him back to his carriage, where he bade her farewell and promised to act on the matter in the next few days. After which, she returned inside and joined Mrs Woods in preparing

the workroom for the girls' sewing lesson. Her head was awlirl with all that she had learnt, but her heart was soothed the instant the children began filing in to take their seats. All of them were pleased to see her—a few observably buoyed by her presence. She did not regret agreeing to meet her sisters, but there was no denying that in the absence of her real one, Taverstock's children had always been her true family.



### CHAPTER SIX

The week following the duke's visit gave Frederica little time to ponder his revelation. There did not seem enough hours in the day to undo a lifetime under the assumption that she did not belong to anyone, or to wonder that the family she had always believed would not recognise her were, in truth, desirous of knowing her. She was too busy to sit about, imagining what they thought about her discovery.

She did find herself watching the few brothers and sisters presently homed at Taverstock. She noticed the affinity they seemed to share beyond that of the other children and worried whether she and her sisters had any hope of achieving such an understanding, having been so long separated. In a quiet moment, she asked Mrs Digby whether she had any cousins, and what that was like, for she supposed that if she could not find an affinity with the twins, perhaps she would have more luck with her cousin, the viscount. Once—and only once—she stood before her mirror, looking at her wheat-coloured hair, green eyes, and small button nose, wondering: if she was as unlike her sisters as Penrith had said, then whom did she take after?

Yet, those moments were few and far between. On the whole, life continued as it always had—as she had every intention that it always should—safe and secure in her place at Taverstock, nurturing the orphans whose welfare and happiness she had made it her life's work to protect.

When eight days had passed without word, she began to think that Penrith was mistaken after all—that the Richmonds had not been searching for her, or perhaps that they did not believe her story. When a letter arrived on the ninth day addressed to Miss F Richmond, with quite the grandest seal she had ever seen and postmarked

from Bedfordshire, she was surprised by the strength of feeling it provoked. She had told herself she would not be troubled if the Richmonds declined to acknowledge her. She had not expected to feel relief, nor indeed anticipation, at being written to.

She opened the letter where she stood in the hall, too anxious to wait for a more private setting, but relief altered very rapidly to dismay as she read. The letter was from Lord Tipton and exceedingly short. His hand was fine and his words kind, if formal. He expressed his delight at Penrith's fortuitous discovery and his anticipation to make Frederica's acquaintance, but more than that, he suggested, could and should wait to be discussed until they were in company. He therefore extended an invitation for her to come to Chiltern Court the se'nnight after next for a stay of three weeks.

Frederica dropped her hands, the letter still held tightly in both, and let out a whimper of dismay. She could not leave Taverstock for three weeks ! She could not leave it for three days and hope to return to anything resembling order. Indeed, the necessity of leaving Taverstock at all had simply not occurred to her—foolishly, she had assumed Lord Tipton would come to her—and she was dismayed that her very first communication with him must be to refuse his kind invitation.

The office door opened nearby, and Mr Mulligan came out, muttering to those on the inside. "...have to start without them if they do not arrive soon. Ah, Miss Child! Have you—I say, is something the matter?"

If she had not known that he was about to convene a meeting and that most of the other governors and patrons were gathered around the table on the other side of the door, Frederica might have unburdened herself to him. He was, after all, the only person who would not be surprised by her disclosure. As it was, she shook her head and forced herself to smile.

"I was just on my way out and noticed the clouds. I hope I shan't get drenched!" She did not give him time to reply and hastened out of the front door—barrelling directly

into Rupert, who was digging in the front border.

He let out a soft “Oof!” as Frederica stumbled, unable to catch her footing. He left his fork in the soil and steadied her with both hands. “Whoa! What’s got you in such a state? ”

“’Tis nothing.”

Frederica could not explain her present distress to Rupert without first revealing her history, and she balked at the notion. She had spoken truthfully when she told Penrith she had never lied about her descent—but she had never needed to. Somebody else had made the decision to call her Miss Child, not she. Faced with disclosing the truth, her first inclination was to lie. Rupert had no love of swells, as he called them, and the prospect that she might lose his esteem only added to her distress.

“What’s that say, then?” Rupert asked, pointing to the letter in her hand. “Is there someone who needs a talking-to?”

That drew a fraught laugh from her. Dear Rupert! For all his silly talk of marriage, he was a dear friend—and an old one; she could not deceive him. “It is from my uncle,” she admitted. “The Earl of Tipton.”

“Eh?” He let go of her arms as though she had burnt him and stepped back from her, shoving his hands in his pockets. His cheeks and neck had flared blotchy red. “You’ve got an uncle who’s an earl?”

At her nod, he added, “You kept that quiet.”

“He and my father were estranged, so he was an uncle in name only. At least, I thought he was. It turns out, he has been looking for me.”

“You’re not leaving, are you?”

“No! I could never leave Taverstock. He only wishes me to visit.” A knot of alarm abruptly formed in Frederica’s stomach. Would Lord Tipton expect her to leave permanently ?

“Well, tell him you ain’t interested!”

“I am interested in meeting him—but that is all. I do not wish to go anywhere. I never dreamt he would expect it of me.” Yet, would an earl ever consent to his niece residing at an orphanage? “But now, I...I do not know what he wants me to do. And I do not know whether I can refuse.”

Rupert rubbed the back of his neck. “Damned if I know what to suggest, then, Fred. But I don’t see why you should be doing all the running around after some uncle who left you to rot in this place all your life.”

“He did not leave me to rot. He had no notion I was here.”

Rupert scoffed. “He’d have found you if he wanted you.”

“You do not understand.”

It was the wrong thing to say; his face twisted with a mix of hurt and loathing. “Why? Am I too common?”

“No!” Frederica drew a deep breath, trying to quell her rioting emotions. More steadily, she said, “I am not explaining it well.”

“Is this why you never wanted to marry me? My blood not blue enough for you?”

“Rupert, that is not?—”

“Jesus wept, he’s here again !” Rupert spat. He was looking over Frederica’s shoulder. She followed his gaze. She had been too distressed to notice the carriage driving up to the house, but her heart lifted to see Penrith alighting. He would be able to offer her counsel, for he would know what had been said to and by her uncle .

Rupert gave a sudden, bitter bark of laughter. “Is that why this one’s been sniffing around—because he knows who you really are?”

Frederica shook her head, revolted to hear such a crude phrase applied to the impeccably mannered duke. “He is here for the governors’ meeting.” She did not realise she had begun moving towards Penrith until Rupert grabbed her arm.

“Leave him to talk to them , then. You don’t have to go running every time he turns up here.”

“I want to talk to him.”

Rupert dropped her arm a second time. “Of course. Why take comfort from a gardener when you can make a fool of yourself over a duke.” He bowed overly low and stormed away.

“Rupert! I only meant because he might know how to help me!”

But he was gone, marching around the corner of the house in long, angry strides. The wind blew, and Lord Tipton’s letter flapped about in Frederica’s hand, reminding her of his generous invitation. Her heart sank. She had made it the business of her life to be a source of hope and compassion; she was not used to disappointing people. The feeling was horrible, and after a few shuddering breaths, she burst into tears.

“Miss Child! Can I be of assistance? What has happened?”

Frederica’s misery increased tenfold, for now here was the Duke of Penrith in all his state to observe her weeping like the child she was named for. She took a deep breath and tried to speak collectedly. “Pray, do not let me delay you. You are expected?—”

“Nonsense. The governors will do perfectly well without me. Has Mr Dalton said something to upset you?”

She shook her head and held up her letter. “My uncle wrote to me.” She could say no more, for her tears would not be held at bay.

Penrith frowned in obvious confusion. “Tipton?” Then he gave up questioning it and held his arm out for her instead. “Come, let us get you inside. The heavens are about to open.”

Frederica was by then so wretched, she had not the wits to do anything but nod her consent and be led inside. She stood, red-eyed and mortified, as Penrith saw to everything. A room was secured for his use and tea sent for. Mr Mulligan was encouraged to conduct his meeting without him, then join him in said room afterwards. Daisy was stationed on a chair outside the slightly ajar door for propriety’s sake—though that only increased Frederica’s sense of falling headlong into a world that was not her own, for a chaperon was not something she had ever had to consider before. Nobody tended to care what women of her situation in life did behind closed doors.

At length, with a hot drink in her hands and her equanimity somewhat restored, Frederica watched as Penrith sat down opposite her and raised his eyebrows in question. “Better? ”

With all the worries occupying her mind, she least expected his good looks to be her

prevailing consideration, but this close, with his distinctive dark blue eyes fixed on her, she could not help but stare. His beauty was not the first thing one noticed about him, for there was so much else that drew one's notice, from his commanding stateliness to his vague yet persistent melancholy. But she noticed it now, and felt a little breathless to be in such close proximity to possibly the handsomest man she had ever known.

"Yes, thank you," she said quietly. "I beg you would forgive me for causing you so much trouble."

"Not at all—I am only concerned that my interference in your affairs has been the cause of your distress. If Lord Tipton has not responded kindly, I can only apologise."

"Oh, no, that is not it at all. He has been exceedingly generous. He has invited me to Chiltern Court to meet him and all his—all my family." She took a deep breath as she felt tears threaten again. "I am distressed because I cannot even contemplate going."

"You have changed your mind about knowing them?"

"By no means. Only, I did not consider, when I agreed to Your Grace contacting them, that I should need to leave Taverstock."

Penrith frowned. "I doubt whether Lord Tipton meant for you to move to Chiltern Court permanently—only to visit."

"Indeed, that is what he has suggested, but the more I think on it, the less easily I can believe an earl would allow his niece to live and work at an orphanage. It may be a short visit on this occasion, but what then? I cannot bear the thought of leaving, but I am not yet of age—he might give me no choice."

“Tipton is a reasonable man. I am sure he will be willing to consider your wishes.”

Frederica shook her head. “It is hopeless either way. I cannot go to Chiltern Court even for a brief stay. It would mean being away from the children for a week at least. There is too much to do. We have yet to replace Mr Patterson, I have three adoptions on the cusp of completion, Geoffrey still cries every night and cannot be left, Emily has only recently begun to speak again but will not do it unless I am with her...I am needed here.”

She sighed miserably. “And so, I must disappoint my new family from the very first moment of meeting them. It grieves me to know how it will offend them. Lord Tipton is, as we speak, making arrangements for my travel. What will they think of me? It is the worst possible beginning.”

Penrith sat back in his chair and exhaled heavily through his nose, his mouth set in a hard line and his brow furrowed. “This is my fault. I wrote to your uncle, as I promised I would, but I gave little context of your work here. That was careless, given what I know of your importance to Taverstock.” In a gentler tone, he added, “And Taverstock’s importance to you. I hope you will allow me to remedy the situation.”

Frederica had no objection—it was what she had hoped for. “But how?”

He was pensive for a moment or two before speaking. “It might be prudent for me to speak to Lord Kemerton—your sister’s husband. His estate is not far from mine. If I can speak to him in person, I might better explain the situation. He and Lady Kemerton might then smooth the way with the rest of the family. Allow me to try, before you reply to your uncle?”

It would not fix everything, but it was a start—and certainly a better start than the one presently to hand. “Thank you,” Frederica replied. “I should be exceedingly grateful.”



She was grateful, also, for the way in which he dealt with Mr Mulligan. Despite her assurances that it changed nothing, the chair of governors made it abundantly clear that he was uncomfortable with the acknowledged granddaughter of an earl remaining in Taverstock's employ—particularly if doing so would make an enemy of her uncle, Lord Tipton. Yet, when he expressed his disinclination to act in any way that might displease the earl, Penrith calmly asked him if he would rather displease a duke who also happened to be a patron, for it was his wish that Frederica be allowed to remain, if that was her desire. After that, Mr Mulligan found a new peace with the situation.

Frederica's most profound gratitude was for the duke's kindness. He did not make her feel a fool for responding with such feeling to her uncle's letter. He made no mention of her aberrant bout of nerves or her tear-stained countenance. He showed no vexation at having missed his meeting. He only listened, comforted, and offered to help her—again. She sighed wistfully whenever she thought on it later. There was no doubt she could love a man like Penrith. If only men like him existed in worlds like hers.

### CHAPTER SEVEN

Frederica had been meant to go the next morning with one of the governors, Reverend Thorne, to visit some of his parishioners, but they were waylaid when Mr Mulligan and two of the other governors arrived to complete an unfinished order of business from their meeting the previous day. At Reverend Thorne's request, Frederica went alone, and had an entirely frustrating morning, receiving complaints about every delinquent child in the area whose misbehaviour the townspeople seemed determined to lay at Taverstock's charge.

The exercise put her in an ill humour—so much so that when somebody rang the bell mere moments after she returned to Taverstock, her patience was stretched altogether too thin. With a deep sigh, she hastened to the hall and tugged the door open—or tried to. It had stuck, as it always did when it had been raining, and that only exacerbated her vexation .

“Oh!” She tugged again, more firmly, then stilled, both hands still on the door handle. Vexation was not a sentiment with which Frederica was familiar; she was generally too collected to allow her temper to rule her. After another, steadier inhalation, she leant forwards until her forehead rested against the cold iron door handle and closed her eyes. It was neither the townsfolk who had upset her, nor the door. It was this business with Lord Tipton, and whomever the unexpected visitor might be, he or she ought not to be punished for it. She stood straight and tugged again at the door.

A man stood on the threshold. He wore a brown greatcoat and a tatty top hat made of straw, and he had a satchel slung over one shoulder. He appeared somewhat taken aback to be greeted by her, though Frederica was not sure what or whom he had

expected.

“Can I help you, sir?” she asked.

He abruptly broke into a beaming smile, which overtook his entire face, and bowed. “I sincerely hope that I can help you, madam,” he said in accents that revealed him to be of better breeding than his attire suggested. “My name is Mr Milliard. I had the good fortune to meet Mr Dalton in Bicester yesterday, and he informed me you are in want of a new schoolmaster. I should like to present myself for your consideration.”

“Goodness! In that case, please, come in.” Frederica stepped back, widening the door and gesturing for him to come inside. To think that she had been ready to carp at him when he was here to alleviate her duties! “You are fortunate, for the governors are here today. If you would be so good as to wait a moment, I shall let them know you are here.”

He stepped into the hall, removing his hat and dipping his head in thanks as he came. “You are most kind, Miss...?”

“Miss Child,” she answered. She could see him better without the door frame making a silhouette of him. He looked about the same age as Mr Carnegie—perhaps in his fifties—with hair that was mostly white and a weathered complexion. She could see now why it had seemed that he smiled with his whole face, for it wrinkled deeply everywhere whenever the corners of his mouth turned up. It gave his eyes a kindly, cheerful aspect. “Might I tell them something about you, sir? Your previous position?”

“But of course! I was schoolmaster to the children of Mr and Mrs Aldermaston in Baynards Green, until last month. They have gone off to India now, but I have a character.” He patted his satchel. “Pray, tell the governors, also, that I was blessed with a gentleman’s education. And they might like to know that I was for many years

in the army, which ought to give me the mettle to deal with any trouble, eh?"

He grinned, but Frederica's alarm must have shown, for he raised a hand to allay her qualms. "Do not be alarmed, madam. I would never lay a finger on a child. I only ask that you inform your superiors of my credentials, for they will like to hear it."

He was not wrong. Mr Mulligan was himself a former officer, and he thought very highly of his fellow militiamen—and equally highly of the importance of discipline. Too highly for Frederica's liking, for he actively encouraged the use of the cane as a means of correction amongst the boys. The prospect of a gentler schoolmaster coming to Taverstock who might influence opinions on the matter was a welcome boon. "I shall make sure they know," she told him and had turned towards the office door when he called her back.

"I say, Miss Child, have we met before?"

"I do not believe so, sir."

He pressed his lips together and frowned as he continued to peer at her. "You look familiar, but I cannot place where from."

"I have lived at Taverstock most of my life, so it is all but impossible that we should have met."

He clicked his tongue and gave up staring with a shake of his head. "I daresay you must just have one of those faces."

He meant 'common', and Frederica almost laughed at the irony. With a quick dip of a curtsy, she hastened away to alert the governors to their caller. They interviewed him immediately and, their need being rather urgent, agreed that he should begin as soon as he could secure himself lodgings nearby. His character was exemplary, Mr

Mulligan informed Frederica afterwards, though as a formality, he would write to the Aldermastons in India. The governors had agreed that they could not wait for a reply before taking Mr Milliard on, however, for fear of losing Mr Carnegie as well as Mr Patterson.

“I agree,” she replied. “The boys are growing ill-behaved, grouped together as they have been. Mr Carnegie will be delighted with this news.”

“As are we all, for the duke would not have liked to discover that we could not provide the children with a proper education. Well then, I ought to be off home. Will you tidy up in here, Miss Child?” Mr Mulligan asked, pointing to the coffee cups and papers left strewn on the table in the office. He immediately coloured and stammered, “That is...I beg your pardon, Miss Richmond. Pray, forgive me, I meant no disrespect. Old habits die hard. Of course, I do not expect you to clear the table, I?—”

“Please do not apologise.” Frederica pitied the man his obvious discomfort. To him, she had always been a foundling girl, as insignificant as the next orphan, whom it was perfectly acceptable to order about. He had never been unkind, but he had always expected—and received—her obedience. He had certainly never come to his feet when she walked into a room as he might for a lady of true breeding, or grown flustered when he spoke to her as he did with Penrith. She wished he would not begin now. “I beg you would treat me as you always have done, for nothing has changed.”

He regarded her incredulously. “Everything has changed. Your uncle has recognised you. By rights, you ought not to even be here. Were it not for the duke?—”

“I am not leaving,” Frederica said firmly. She prayed he would not overrule her and was vastly comforted to see that, on the contrary, he looked relieved. It occurred to her then that it might be as difficult to replace her as it had been to replace Mr Patterson—at least in the immediate future.

“Can I at least arrange for a more comfortable room for you?” he asked.

She smiled gratefully and shook her head. “I am very fond of my room. It being next to the kitchen means it is always cosy, even in winter.” Perceiving that he remained unconvinced, she ventured, “Mr Mulligan, working at Taverstock is all I have ever known. I do not know how to be a great lady. I only know how to care for the children here, and to that end, how to carry out the wishes of the governors. That is what I intend to continue doing. If you will let me.”

He stared at her for a little longer, his scepticism in no way diminished. “You must be the only person alive who would rather stay in such a place than go to whatever luxury awaits you with your family.” Then he chuckled, very slightly. “But this is the second time you have begged me to allow you to stay here, and I cannot but reward such loyalty.”

“Thank you!” Frederica said—almost cried—in relief.

“Yes, yes,” Mr Mulligan said awkwardly. “We shall continue as before, for now . Your name, however?—”

“Must not change. The children know me as Miss Child. Please, let us carry on with it. At least for the time being.”

He sighed again and shook his head some more and eventually consented with the barest enthusiasm. She suspected he would not tolerate the situation forever; he was too scrupulously observant of rank. She meant to hang on to her life at Taverstock with all her might for now, though, for by no means did she feel ready to be Miss Frederica Richmond.

### CHAPTER EIGHT

That panicked apprehension had barely diminished before she met the first member of her family, later that very afternoon. It happened quite unexpectedly, giving her no opportunity to prepare herself for it. She had gone to her room to fetch a shawl when there came a knock at the door, and Daisy poked her head around it, announcing that there was someone to see her.

“Thank you. Tell them I shall come directly.”

“She wouldn’t hear of waiting in the hall. Wanted to come to you.”

Frederica stood up from her chest, her shawl half-forgotten in her hand. “Here?” she whispered with a glance at the door.

Daisy nodded. “Says her name is Lady Kemerton.”

Frederica’s hands began to tremble. She did not wish to receive her sister in this state—in her drabbest dress that was slightly too short and her hair in an ugly chignon—yet she could not refuse. Not again! She nodded and held her breath as the maid departed, leaving the door ajar behind her—then gasped to see the lady who stepped into the room.

No wonder Penrith had said they did not look alike; Lady Kemerton was the handsomest woman Frederica had ever seen—an inch or so taller than she was herself, with hair so blonde it was almost white, skin that looked as smooth and fragile as porcelain, and fine, delicate features. Frederica was spellbound.

The apparition held out both hands and smiled joyously. “Frederica? I am Adelaide. Your sister.”

Frederica fumbled with her shawl for a moment or two before tossing it back into the open chest and giving Adelaide her hands. She began to dip into a curtsy, but her sister shook her head and pulled her up.

“None of that. Not for me. Not ever.”

Frederica nodded but knew not what to say. She could not stop looking at Adelaide, searching for some similarity, no matter how small. She had a kind face; beauty had not made it cold, as it sometimes did to the prettiest women. Her smile was genuine and easy; her eyes—Frederica peered harder. She had not noticed before, for the light was not good in her small room, but now they were closer, she could see that Adelaide’s eyes were the most extraordinary shade of blue. Violet, almost.

“My eyes are green,” she said, then hated herself for being so vapid.

Adelaide only smiled more broadly. “As are Lord Tipton’s. As were our father’s, apparently.”

Frederica inhaled shakily, unexpectedly affected by the revelation. “I did not think I would have anything in common with any of you.”

“Oh, we have far more in common than you realise. May we sit?” At Adelaide’s insistence, they were soon settled side by side against the bedstead with pillows behind them and their knees bent up in front. She took Frederica’s hand in hers and held it while she talked. “I had to come. As soon as His Grace informed us of your distress, I had to come right away.”

“It was good of you to come all this way for me.”



“It was not far. That is, I would have come no matter the distance—we are all coming, everyone is on their way—I just happened to be nearest. Can you believe we have been so close to each other all this time and not known it? Avonwyke, my home since I married, is but eleven miles from here.”

Frederica glanced at her in surprise. “Eleven miles! That is close.” The sudden movement made the pillow behind her slip and the iron bars of the bedstead dig into her back. It made her acutely aware of how inferior her situation must appear. “Though we move in such different circles, we might have been in the same town and never known it.”

“Perhaps they are different now,” Adelaide answered, “but until two years ago, I was working as a housemaid in Southampton. I suppose His Grace told you that?”

Frederica nodded.

“And Scarlett was living as the spinster daughter of a clergyman in Stanbridge. She lives in Harpenden now—at Ashworthe Park. She and Worthe will arrive in the next few days, as will Oakley. They are all coming to Avonwyke. That way, we can be near you without you having to leave Taverstock for any great length of time. His Grace explained that you are quite troubled by the prospect of abandoning your duties.”

“I confess I am—though I am equally distressed at the prospect of having to decline Lord Tipton’s invitation. Do you think he will be very offended that I cannot go?”

Adelaide squeezed Frederica’s hand. “I can guarantee he will not be, for we have already exchanged expresses on the matter. I have explained the situation, and he has given his blessing to the idea of us all coming here instead. He cannot come himself, sadly. He suffers in the winter months with rheumatism, and he has been particularly unwell this year. A jolting carriage ride would be agonising for the poor dear. Aunt

Louisa will remain with him, for she is devoted to his care, but I beg you would not take it personally. They will come as soon as they can.”

“I understand. He did believe me, though? When the duke first wrote to say that he had found me—he did not question my parentage?”

“Faith! We all believed you! The family has been through so many convolutions to reach this point—after everything, your history was the simplest of all. You had papers, you had your name, you knew who your parents were. There is not a shred of doubt in any of our minds.”

“My name is...I do not know that my name is the one my parents chose.” She explained how it had been added to her documents in pencil .

Adelaide beamed at her. “Well, let me tell you something you do not know, in that case. In looks, Scarlett and I take after our grandmother on our father’s side. You will see a portrait of her when you do eventually go to Chiltern Court. The resemblance is how Oakley discovered me in the first place. But you , dear Sister, are named for her. She was Lady Frederica Tipton.”

“Truly?”

“Yes! Who knows? Perhaps one of us addressed you as that, before we were separated, and it was overheard and added to your papers. We might never know, but it seemed too much of a coincidence for any of us to overlook. It is not a common name for a foundling.”

Frederica could not argue with that. Those children who came to Taverstock without a name of their own were never given highborn names; the governors frowned upon it. And she had received more than her share of teasing for her lofty moniker as a child. “The other orphans used to call me Fred.”

Adelaide smiled sympathetically. “When I was a housemaid, everybody called me Sarah, and I always wished they would not.”

“I am not surprised—Adelaide is a beautiful name. It suits you.”

Frederica was surprised to see her sister grow self-conscious; she would have thought such a handsome woman would be used to compliments. “Can I ask you a question?” she said, partly to ease Adelaide’s embarrassment and partly because the mention of her sister’s time as a maid had put her in mind of another matter. “Did you leave service because you wished to, or because Lord Tipton insisted upon it?”

“I left because Oakley suggested it. We have both since agreed that we did not go about it in the best way, but I was not sorry to go.”

“You wanted to be with your family?”

“Well, in truth, not at first, no. I took some convincing that I was a Richmond. But I will not pretend that a maid’s work is enjoyable. The chance to leave it for a better life was one I could not turn down.”

“That is my quandary,” Frederica said. “I do wish to know you all, but I should be desolate to leave Taverstock. The children, the people who work here, they are all the family I have ever known. The thought of leaving it all behind is insupportable.” She could not bring herself to look at Adelaide and instead squeezed her eyes shut. “You must think me the most ungrateful wretch.”

“I should be a terrible hypocrite if I did,” Adelaide said with a note of laughter in her voice. “I had not been at Chiltern Court six months before I turned my back on everything our aunt and uncle had given me and ran away, back to High Brook.”

Frederica looked at her in astonishment. “You did?”

“I did, for shame! I could not accustom myself to such a different way of living. I wanted to return to a simpler time—and to see my friend, Patty, whom I missed dreadfully. Only, by then, she had left, and nobody knew where she had gone. But all that is to say that we understand. When I first came to Chiltern Court, we all thought it would be best if I forgot my old life entirely and acted as though I had always been a Richmond. It was an unmitigated disaster, and I made a complete fudge of it. But we have learnt from our mistakes. Nobody expects you to give up your attachment to Taverstock overnight.”

“But you do expect me to give it up eventually?”

She frowned. “You do not wish to leave...ever?”

“Would my uncle object, if that was what I wished?”

Adelaide puffed out her cheeks and raised her eyebrows. “I shall not lie and pretend he would be easy with it. There are things to consider. The family’s reputation has been sorely tested over the years.”

“But will he force me to leave?”

“No,” she said cautiously. “But we are running away with ourselves. Nobody is going to make you leave now , and therefore, let us content ourselves with knowing one another. I am all anticipation for you to meet the rest of the family. Will you come upstairs and meet Kem now?”

“Kem?”

“My husband—Lord Kemerton.”

“He is here, too?”

“Yes! He wanted to meet his new sister just as much as I did.”

It had not occurred to Frederica that, by her two sisters, she had also gained two brothers in their husbands. She responded to it rather more successfully than she had to the news of the twins, for it was not quite such a shock. “I should like that very well, if you think he will not mind that I look rather like an orphan myself today. ”

Adelaide turned serious. “Kem would not mind if you were dressed in rags. I pretty much was, the first time he met me—but that is by the bye. You are quite the prettiest creature! How could you think you look anything but lovely? And I shall tell you something else...you look a little like Oakley. There is something about your mouth and chin that is very similar.”

“Oh, well, I suppose looking like one’s cousin is better than looking like none of one’s family.”

It appeared as though Adelaide’s colour rose, but as they were shuffling themselves off the bed, straightening the blankets, and gathering up their belongings, Frederica supposed a slight flush was hardly to be wondered at.

Lord Kemerton was nowhere to be found inside the house. They discovered him eventually, meandering away along the path outside, deep in conversation with none other than the Duke of Penrith. Frederica wished then that she had insisted on changing into something less homely, though she scarcely knew which of her gowns would have qualified.

“You did not say His Grace was here as well,” she whispered to Adelaide.

“I did not know he was. He must have arrived while I was inside.”

And, indeed, there were two carriages in the drive, all eight horses snorting their

displeasure at the inactivity. Frederica resigned herself to it. She supposed she had been wearing similarly unflattering attire on every one of his previous visits. It ought not to concern her any more this time .

Adelaide cleared her throat; both men looked their way and immediately set out back towards them. Frederica felt a ripple of pleasure upon meeting the duke's gaze. She wondered whether, now that she had privately acknowledged his handsomeness, it was destined to be the first thing she noticed about him at every encounter. Lord Kemerton was taller than the duke and on a larger scale—altogether a rather imposing figure, in fact. Frederica was vastly relieved when he spoke in the gentlest of accents and with the warmest of smiles.

“Is this our sister?”

“It is,” Adelaide answered. “Frederica Richmond.”

He took Frederica's extended hand in both of his and shook it with great warmth. “And you must call me Kem. I am delighted to make your acquaintance.”

“Your Grace, is this serendipity, or did you plan to come at the same time as us?” Adelaide enquired of the duke.

“Quite deliberate,” he replied. “After making such a meal of my communications before, I preferred to be on hand to explain away any further misunderstandings.”

“That was a kind thought,” Frederica said. It occurred to her, as she stood in her new brother's shadow, her head barely reaching his shoulder, that a man of Penrith's stature—lean, athletic, taller than her without towering over her—would suit her far better. Then she wished it had not occurred to her, for the thought made her blush. She could just imagine the duke's affront at the notion of a foundling orphanage worker imagining any compatibility between herself and him .

“Indeed, it was, though quite unnecessary,” Adelaide added. “We understand each other perfectly, do we not, Frederica?”

“If we do not, then it is a misunderstanding so great that neither of us is aware of it.”

Her sister laughed, and Frederica felt intensely gratified to have pleased her.

Adelaide slipped her arm around her husband’s and said to him, “It is settled between us that you and I shall receive the others at Avonwyke, and Frederica will visit us all there.”

“Will you have time for that, Miss Child?” Penrith asked. “It will not interfere with your work?”

Frederica thought Adelaide looked a little vexed, though whether it was at Penrith questioning her scheme or using the name ‘Child’, she could not be sure. She did not like that her sister was offended, but she was exceedingly touched by the duke’s consideration—and particularly grateful for his adherence to her wish to be addressed thusly, even in the presence of her new family. It made her feel more secure in her connection to Taverstock, less hastened into the unfamiliar.

“I shall have time,” she assured them all. “The governors have just appointed a new schoolmaster, so I shall be a little more at liberty to make short visits.”

“Only a little?” Penrith replied wryly. “Might I suggest that, since Miss Child’s time is evidently still in high demand, you all come to Cedarvale for this first gathering? It is five miles nearer than Avonwyke—and neutral territory, so to speak. ”

“That is excessively generous,” Kem said after a quick glance at Adelaide.

“It would be my pleasure, though I regret that you will have to excuse the want of a

hostess.”

There was an awkward silence, which Frederica did not allow to persist. “Of course, though perhaps Lady Delphine might grace us with her presence for some part of the evening?”

Penrith fixed his eyes on her, and the moroseness that had stolen over him with his last words seemed to ebb away again. “It can certainly be arranged, but unless you have a fondness for oat biscuits and sugar mice, I shall not be asking her to arrange the menu.”

She laughed merrily, and even the duke chuckled slightly. With his poise returned, he suggested that the dinner should be that Friday. “I shall send my carriage for you, Miss Child.”

Frederica thought she saw Adelaide and Kem exchange a look at that, but it was soon forgotten when the duke asked another question.

“Was Lady Kemerton able to tell you your mother’s name?”

“I have only ever known her as Mrs Robert Richmond,” Frederica explained for the others’ benefit.

Fondness suffused Adelaide’s face. “Her name was Susan. She was Susan Browning before she married our father.”

Susan Browning. It was the sort of name the governors would think wholly appropriate for one of the orphans—unremarkable, with no pretensions to grandeur. Frederica felt a smile spread wide over her face. It was the closest affinity she had ever felt to her mother in all of her twenty years. She thanked Adelaide warmly, after which the party said their farewells and went their separate ways.



Frederica returned to the office to continue with the correspondence she had been in the middle of before going in search of a shawl. It was a pointless endeavour, for she could not concentrate and found herself staring out of the window, running over in her mind again and again everything that had just occurred.

She could not have been more delighted by her first meeting with her new family. Adelaide was everything a sister ought to be—thoughtful, understanding, patient, and with no airs at all, despite her elevation to countess. Kem had been similarly welcoming, all civility and friendliness. They were worlds away from the cold-hearted people she had always imagined her Richmond relations to be. If the rest of her family were as amiable, Frederica would consider herself fortunate indeed.

Penrith's kindness had made its mark also. He surely had better things with which to concern himself than her family reunion, yet he had come all the way to Taverstock merely to ensure its success. It reminded her of what he had once said—that his reason for helping was to prevent another family being separated as his had been. It saddened her to think of it in that context, for to go to such lengths for her only proved how painful his loss must have been. It made her more determined, for his sake, to learn to love her new family.

### CHAPTER NINE

As promised, the duke sent his carriage, along with a waiting woman to accompany Frederica to Cedarvale. The journey was at once nerve-racking and tedious. She had rarely travelled by any means other than by foot, except on the few occasions she had ridden in the back of a dog cart. This equipage, with its plush squabs and gentle, rolling motion that did not rattle her bones with every rut or stone in the road, made for an uncomfortable reminder of the disparity between the world she had left behind and the one towards which she was headed. She would have preferred to occupy her mind with something other than trepidation, but darkness put paid to reading or watching the passing scenery, and her companion was reluctant to make conversation. It was a little while before Frederica comprehended that the woman perceived her as someone of rank, too superior to exchange pleasantries with.

She thought it absurd, given her appearance. She had worn her Sunday best, but it was above four years old, faded, patched, and plain. She owned only one pair of boots, though she had polished them as well as she could. Her hair was arranged into a larger, looser chignon than usual, but more than that, she had been unable to achieve on her own. She was content that her family would not think her a disgrace, but without doubt, passers-by would have been forgiven for mistaking her for the servant, and the waiting woman for her mistress.

Cedarvale appeared out of the darkness as a vast bank of light. There was an impossible number of windows all lit by blazing candles, leaving the building itself masked in shadow, but the sheer bulk of it was unmistakable. Inside, the glare of the candles was almost blinding. She lowered her eyes, blinking furiously, and saw with dismay how very dull her gown looked in this light—more pale grey than the violet it

had once been.

After passing through several lofty and finely decorated rooms, the butler slowed in front of a large pair of double doors. Frederica was heartened to hear laughter from within, but it ceased when the handle was turned, and that made her hands clammy with nerves.

“Miss Frederica Child,” the butler announced.

Frederica flinched to hear her foundling name spoken in such a grand setting. It was yet another reminder of how far from her sphere she had strayed.

Everybody stood up when she entered, ladies and gentlemen alike. The first face she recognised was Penrith’s. He came towards her, his reliably steady countenance a balm to her rattled nerves, and bowed .

“You are very welcome, Miss Child.”

“Thank you.” She curtseyed. “Um...if it pleases Your Grace, ‘Miss Richmond’ will do just as well now—at least while I am away from the orphanage. It seems silly to persist with ‘Miss Child’ when I am amongst my family.”

He inclined his head in acknowledgement. “As you wish, madam. Please, join us.”

Frederica wished the duke would stay near her, but he gestured for her to precede him into the centre of the room, where five eager faces awaited her. Adelaide and Kem she knew, and Scarlett was unmissable next to her twin. She guessed who Oakley and Worthe must be; the former was identifiable by his fair Richmond hair, and the latter was the only gentleman she had not yet met. Both were smiling welcomingly, but before either could speak, one of the twins stepped forwards.

“Dear Frederica!”

Frederica was touched to see the almost teary gleam in her eyes. “You must be Scarlett.”

Murmurs of surprise and appreciation rippled through the party, and Scarlett gave a little jolt. “How did you know? Nobody can ever tell us apart. Sometimes even our husbands get us muddled.”

“Oh, well...upon my word, I cannot easily account for it. You just did not seem like Adelaide.” Frederica did not like to say that Scarlett had seemed more timid than her twin, with a shyer smile and less firm grip. The likeness was otherwise truly remarkable. From crown to chin, they were the double of each other. Her gaze travelled to Scarlett’s frame to compare her height and build to Adelaide’s, but there, her attention was captured by something entirely different. She could not help but stare at the singularly ugly gown her sister was wearing—a plain muslin day dress that was formless and unflattering.

Adelaide stepped forwards, her gown plainer still and evidently much laundered, rendering it even greyer than Frederica’s own. She broke into a small but triumphant smile. “We guessed you might not have much in the way of full dress, for neither did we used to. We did not want you to feel out of place.”

“These are the gowns we wore in our previous lives,” Scarlett added. “And I must say, yours is much prettier.”

Frederica was deeply moved by their thoughtfulness. She mumbled a thank you and worried that it sounded underwhelming but knew not what else to say.

“If you two have finished explaining your hare-brained scheme, might I get a word in edgeways?” Oakley enquired gamely, coming forwards to bodily elbow himself into

their conversation. He took up Frederica's hands and beamed happily at her, his eyes bright with merriment. "I am Oakley, and I cannot tell you how delighted I am to meet you at last."

His joviality was infectious; before long, he had completed the introductions, passed on Lord and Lady Tipton's sincerest wishes, and—once they were all seated—told Frederica more information about the Richmond family than she was ever likely to remember. She was captivated by his ebullience, and Adelaide was right; there was something familiar about his mouth when he talked.

Throughout it all, the duke kept a respectful silence, allowing his guests to talk to—and sometimes over—each other without interference. He kept his eyes on Frederica, once or twice raising his eyebrows in question of her comfort, to which each time she nodded in the affirmative. In truth, she did occasionally feel overwhelmed, but each time, either his steadfast support or some small kindness from one of her family would calm her nerves. She had relaxed enough to begin to enjoy herself when Mrs Coombs, the nanny, came to speak quietly to the duke. He nodded and then turned to address the group.

"Miss Richmond expressed a wish to see my daughter at some point this evening. I hope none of you will object if Delphine and her brothers join us for a few minutes before we go through to dinner."

So far from objecting, everybody was charmed by the idea, and the children were duly ushered into the room. To Frederica's delight, Lord Ryde recognised her and ran forwards to show her his wooden horse. Lady Delphine clung shyly to her nanny's hand until Scarlett complimented her on her ribbons, at which point the little girl ventured to toddle around the room and show them—and her new back tooth—to everyone present. Lord Ryde did not wish to cede his place at Frederica's knees when his sister reached his side, and she resorted to having them count each other's teeth to avoid a squabble.

“You two seem very at home with a little one,” Worthe observed .

Frederica looked up, espying a wry sort of smile on Worthe’s lips; her gaze shifted to see that Adelaide was holding little Lord Felix in her lap. Kem was leaning close to them, smiling at the toddler’s sweet babbling. At Worthe’s tease, both reddened slightly and exchanged a look.

“I suppose this is as good a time to tell them as any,” Adelaide said.

Kem smiled at her tenderly, then turned to everyone else. “We are to be blessed soon ourselves. Towards the end of the summer.”

A wave of enthusiastic congratulations arose, and though Frederica could not have been happier for her brother and sister, she worried for Penrith. It had not lasted—he was already shaking Kem’s hand and offering his own felicitations—but at the moment the announcement had been made, the turn of his countenance had been distressing to observe. Frederica comprehended. To see a couple so obviously in love, anticipating the joy of bringing a child into the world together, could only make his loss more painful. When he turned around, she caught his eye and sent him what she hoped was a comforting smile.

“How about that then, eh, Frederica?” Oakley called brightly from his seat. “Not with us five minutes and already you are old news. There will be a newer member of the family even than you!”

“It is perfectly well by me. I am excessively fond of all children.”

“And me? ”

She turned her attention back to Lord Ryde, diverted by his sweet question. “Of course! How could I not be when you have been so brave, coming to meet all these

new people.”

He frowned and tilted his head questioningly. “Father said you didn’ted know them, too. Are you brave?”

“Miss Richmond is very brave indeed, Ryde,” Penrith said, coming to stand next to Frederica’s chair. “But it is time for you to go with Nanny, now. Say goodnight.” As his children were led away, he added, “You have a truly special way with children, Miss Richmond.”

She felt herself colour at his praise. “Children bring me great joy. I rather think it is they who have a special way with me.”

He nodded slightly, his expression pensive, but he did not have the opportunity to reply before his butler announced that dinner was ready.

Mr Mulligan, on hearing that Frederica was to dine at Cedarvale, had drummed into her the proper etiquette for the occasion. She was surprised, therefore, when Penrith offered his arm to escort her into the dining room, for she was the lowest-ranking person present. It soon became clear, however, that the duke intended a far more informal evening than Mr Mulligan had expected. They were encouraged to choose their own seats, and conversation, far from being restricted to their nearest neighbours as she had been forewarned would be the case, was soon flowing freely and energetically around the table.

Frederica wondered, at one point, how much company Penrith had allowed himself since his wife died, for he seemed thirsty for it. He did not speak as often as the others, but he listened intently to everything that was said. As such, it was no great surprise that he noticed her discomfort when the conversation turned to her future plans. It began with an innocent question from Oakley about her work at Taverstock.

“I tend to the children,” she answered.

“Miss Richmond understates it,” Penrith interrupted. “She is responsible for every aspect of their care outside of the schoolroom and the kitchen.”

“Surely somebody else could be found to do all that?” Oakley enquired, sending a shard of panic through Frederica’s gut.

“Oakley!” Adelaide chided.

He looked up from his plate and winced as he realised his mistake. “Stuff it sideways, Frederica, I am sorry. Of course you are essential to the running of the place. I only meant...eventually.”

“You must excuse Oakley,” Kem added drily. “He has an unfortunate predisposition for being impetuous.”

“It is true,” Oakley agreed sheepishly. “I promise I shall not rush you into a decision.”

Frederica smiled but said nothing. None of them seemed to comprehend that she had already made her decision. To them, it seemed only a matter of time before she gave up her vocation and moved three counties away to live with an uncle she had never met. To her, there was no possibility of ever leaving Taverstock.

“It can be very hard to leave people behind,” Scarlett said, looking at her with concern. “We do understand. I suppose Adelaide told you about Patty?”

“She did, yes.”

Adelaide acknowledged the mention of her friend with a resigned shrug. “It is my



only regret—that I shall never see her again. I should dearly love her to know I am to be a mother.”

“And I left my childhood friend behind in Stanbridge,” Scarlett added.

“Scarlett, you have not lost Bess,” Adelaide said encouragingly.

“Have I not?”

“Who is Bess?” Frederica enquired.

“Mrs Beamish,” Oakley answered before Scarlett was able. “A wonderful young lady, who has been Scarlett’s closest friend since girlhood.” He skewered a potato and began to hack at it with his knife. “She was only lately married and omitted to invite Scarlett to the wedding breakfast—or any of the rest of us, for that matter.”

Worthe gave Scarlett a consoling look. “I am sure there is a perfectly good explanation for it.”

“Indeed, there is,” Oakley interjected heatedly. “It is clearly Beamish’s doing. Bess would never treat Scarlett so infamously were it not for his influence. Would that she had stayed in Stanbridge last Season and avoided the man altogether.”

Frederica wondered at Oakley’s tone—had ‘Bess’ disappointed him? She did not have long to think on it before Penrith cut in .

“They are making quite the case for you never leaving Taverstock, Miss Richmond.”

She laughed lightly but then sighed and shook her head. “It is not just the people I would leave behind. Many of the children are only passing through in any case. It is that...I have been there so long?—”

“And how we wish we had found you sooner!” Oakley lamented, taking hold of entirely the wrong end of the stick. “Father has positively railed at the solicitor who had Robert’s will. If he had taken the trouble to contact us, none of you would have been left unprotected for so long.”

“You have not dealt with many solicitors if you think they take trouble for anyone but themselves,” Worthe said, chuckling.

“Which solicitor was it?” Penrith enquired.

“Farnborough’s and Co., in Wykham.”

“I do not know them,” the duke replied. “But Wykham, you say? Is that where they lived? That is but fifteen miles away.”

“It is,” Adelaide answered. “Barring my years in service, we have been all but on top of each other our whole lives.”

They wanted, then, to hear Frederica’s story—the families she had lived with, the different orphanages she could remember, and her time as a child at Taverstock. It was a telling which, with all their questions, took most of the rest of the evening. To her surprise, Frederica found she did not mind. She rarely said as many words in a week as she had said this evening, but her new family were all so fascinated, it was a magnificent feeling, and she talked until she was nearly hoarse.

Penrith listened with equal attentiveness despite having far less cause to be interested in her tale. Frederica thought more than once how good of him it was to lend his home to this first meeting. He was quite right—an impartial setting and his steady advocacy had indeed made it ten times easier.

Of course, it helped that her new family had been so very kind. She savoured the

knowledge that these gentle, considerate people, all of whom were fascinating in their own right, were her family now. And all of them seemed as pleased about that as she—even Oakley, who did not appear to mind that they were only cousins. He was every bit as welcoming as her sisters and their husbands, his enthusiasm undiminished to the very end of the evening.

“Frederica, you have been fantastically patient, allowing us to interrogate you all night. I am grateful to you for allowing us to know you better. I am proud to call you my family.” He was clasping both her hands again, this time in farewell, as they climbed into their various carriages. The flickering light of two dozen scones and all the brightly lit windows from the house picked up the flash in his eyes as he said this—and Frederica started.

“I had not noticed before—your eyes are the same colour as the twins’.”

He seemed to hesitate, glanced at the duke, then laughed modestly. “’Tis the only handsome feature they saw fit to share with me, the fiends! ”

He let her go and stepped back to allow Penrith to come forwards and hand her into the carriage that would bear her home. The same waiting woman was already settled within, travel blanket at the ready to drape over Frederica as soon as she sat down, and a hot brick at her feet. The duke had thought of everything.

“I cannot thank you enough for your generosity in opening your home to us this evening,” she said to him.

“The pleasure has been all mine. And please, call me Penrith. ‘Your Grace’ gets tiresome awfully quickly when one is in frequent company.”

She felt a thrill at the idea that he anticipated them being often in each other’s company, though she soon shook the notion from her head. He referred, of course, to

seeing her at Taverstock. Still, the fleeting pleasure only confirmed what she had already begun to suspect of her own sentiments.

Nothing could ever come of it. She was an uneducated pseudo-matron who lived and worked at the small country orphanage that had been her home for most of her days—and he was a duke, who was still desperately in love with his late wife. She nevertheless sank back into the shadows where nobody could see her and allowed herself the duration of the ride home to feel the warmth of her affection for Penrith.

### CHAPTER TEN

Frederica was just locking the storeroom when the door to the garden opened, and a rush of warm spring air swirled into the cool service passage. She squinted at the darkened figure loitering on the threshold. “Rupert, is that you?”

“Aye, and I’ve something for you.” Looking behind him, he added, “Come on. Miss Child won’t bite.”

As Frederica watched, a boy emerged from behind Rupert, his shoulders slumped and his hands worrying at his shirt front. “Tom! Whatever were you doing outside?” She knelt down and prised his hands away from his shirt to still them with her own. The boy did not answer, and she looked to Rupert for an explanation.

He shrugged. “Found him hiding behind the shed. Says he’s upset about his sister being taken away.”

Frederica’s stomach dropped. It was true that a family friend of Tom and Lucy’s father had enquired about adopting Lucy—and only Lucy—but everything that could be done to persuade them that the sister ought not to be separated from the brother was being done. If it was up to Frederica, the adoption would not go ahead unless it was of both children, but either way, neither of them ought to have known about it at this stage. She could not imagine how Tom had found out.

“Oh petal! Your sister is not going anywhere,” she said comfortingly. “She is upstairs in her lesson—as you ought to be. Come along now.” She stood up and held out her hand, but he shook his head and refused to take it.

“Bertie Campbell said he got a thick ear for skipping lessons,” he mumbled disconsolately.

“Yes, well, Bertie has a nose for trouble, and he used to vex Mr Patterson something rotten. But Mr Patterson is no longer here, so you have nothing to worry about. Come on, let us get you back to the schoolroom.” Still, he hesitated to take her hand.

“Go on with you, lad. Miss Child knows what she’s about,” Rupert said cheerfully. He followed it with a shy smile in her direction, which Frederica was vastly relieved to see. It had been almost a week since their falling out, and though they had apologised to each other, this was the first indication that their friendship was returning to its previous footing. The encouragement was enough to make Tom nod and put his hand into Frederica’s; she sent Rupert an appreciative smile before setting out for the schoolrooms.

Both Mr Carnegie’s and Mr Milliard’s classes were working in orderly silence when they arrived on the landing, a far cry from the fractious unrest of the past few weeks. She knocked on the door of Mr Milliard’s room, where the boys Tom’s age were taught.

“Miss Child!” the schoolmaster said when she opened the door. “This is a welcome interruption. Boys, say good afternoon to Miss Child.”

They dutifully intoned a collective salutation and continued with their work.

“Thank you, boys. Mr Milliard, I have Master Baxter here.” She gave him a plaintive look and was pleased when he took her meaning and came to the door to speak to her quietly. “He is very sorry to have skipped his lesson—are you not, Tom?”

The boy nodded and mumbled an assent, though, perhaps wisely, he kept his head down.

“He is fretting at the prospect of being punished for his absence,” Frederica explained.

Mr Milliard looked rather offended and regarded Tom with a frown. “Have you ever seen me punish a boy, Master Baxter?” When Tom did not immediately answer, Mr Milliard said more firmly, “Look at me, now, and tell me. Have you?”

“No, sir.”

“Well then. Let us have no more of this nonsense. Back to your seat, quickly, and we’ll say no more about it.”

Tom hastened back to his chair. Frederica watched him until he had taken up his chalk, then turned to Mr Milliard. “Thank you for your forbearance.”

“Not at all. I am only concerned what you must think of me to have boys missing my lesson and talking of punishments. Might I invite you to stay and watch our lesson to put your mind at rest?”

“Thank you, but I am afraid I have a prior engagement.”

“I ought to have known,” he replied graciously. “You never seem to have a moment’s rest between all the work you do.”

“Oh...it is a personal engagement, sir.”

“Ah! Then I hope you enjoy it.” He smiled knowingly and tapped the side of his nose, as though she had let him into a secret.

Frederica swallowed the compulsion to explain that she was meeting her sisters. Other than Rupert and Mr Mulligan, nobody at Taverstock yet knew about her altered

circumstances, and she was anxious that it not be widely known lest everybody respond as they had. She curtsied and left to fetch her coat.

Adelaide and Scarlett had offered to collect Frederica on their way into Bicester, but she preferred to walk. Too many carriages bearing noble personages had arrived at Taverstock of late, and the March weather was fine enough to make the walk pleasant. She had arranged to meet them at Mrs Tulley's tearoom. Upon arriving, it occurred to her that perhaps too many noble personages had been there of late, also, for Mrs Tulley stood behind her counter, staring at her illustrious customers, looking fit to keel over with awe.

On this occasion, the Countesses of Kemerton and Worthe had dressed with all the elegance and finery appropriate to their station, and they had been joined by the sartorially impeccable Viscount Oakley. Frederica felt a twinge of pride at the sight of them. Not because of their fine clothes or the veneration of every onlooker, but because they were her family, and they were waiting on her. It was a novel and vastly gratifying sensation.

Oakley stood to greet her when she joined them at their table. "Pray, have a seat. You must be exhausted."

Frederica sat, though she was puzzled by his words. "Thank you—but no, I am not in the least tired."

"Pay him no mind," Adelaide said, waving Oakley into his own seat. "He loathes walking and cannot countenance that anybody else might enjoy it. We would not have brought him, but there was no stopping him once we mentioned there would be cake involved."

"You know full well I came to see Frederica," Oakley said with feigned affront. Then he dabbed a few crumbs from his plate and licked them off his fingertip, adding, "If



the promise of cake added extra inducement, you will never hear me admit it.”

Frederica chuckled. She was not used to the sort of teasing in which her sisters and cousin seemed to revel and was confident she would never be able to emulate it, but she liked it all the same. “I am pleased to see all of you. I should have been happy to see Kem and Worthe, too, if they had decided to come.”

“Pray, do not think for a moment that they did not want to see you,” Scarlett replied as she poured her a cup of tea. “We just thought to keep it a Richmond confab for today. Although...” she added as she placed the cup in front of Frederica, “I imagine Penrith would not have objected to an invitation.”

The insinuation in her tone brought heat to Frederica’s face. “What do you mean?”

“Come now. You must have noticed his interest in you?”

“In me ? No. He has been extremely helpful in reuniting us, I grant you, but it is only because he regrets the loss to his own family. He told me as much.”

All three of them regarded her with slightly incredulous expressions. “How do you account for his inviting us to dine at Cedarvale?” Adelaide asked.

Frederica shrugged, beginning to feel uncomfortable. “He is a kind man, and you are his friends. He was at Scarlett’s wedding, was he not?”

“We move in the same circles, it is true,” Oakley mused. “But until a few weeks ago, I should have described him as more of a respected acquaintance than a friend .”

“And what of his insistence on sending his carriage for you?” Scarlett pressed.

Frederica swallowed the sip of tea she had just taken and shook her head. “You are

making too much of it. Dinner was at his house, so naturally he was the only one of the party who did not need the use of his carriage.”

“Oh, Frederica!” Adelaide said with a little laugh. “We have carriages enough between us to have spared one for you. Penrith sending one of his was more than a mere kindness. ”

“Truly, you are mistaken.” Are they not? If there were anything to see in his behaviour towards her, Frederica was certain she would have seen it—that was her forte. She shook her head again, more decisively. “His Grace is still deeply in mourning for his late wife. Besides, he is a duke, and I am so very plain?—”

“Do not dare say you are plain,” Adelaide interrupted. “You have said it before, and I shall not allow it. You are very pretty!”

“You are generous to say so, but I meant more generally. My clothes, my situation, my accomplishments—I have not had a gentlewoman’s education.”

“You must not imagine that either of us did,” Scarlett said, though she was spoken over by Oakley.

“None of that matters, Frederica. We can buy you all the clothes you need, but the material point is, you are a Richmond. The granddaughter of an earl.”

“That may be so, but I am a Richmond who lives and works at an orphanage.”

Frederica disliked how churlish she sounded, but the prospect of Penrith having affection for her had whipped up all manner of conflicting feelings. Either she was right, and he did not admire her, in which case she would much rather not be tormented with the impossible, or her family were right, and he did , which would make the decision to stay at Taverstock even more miserably difficult, for she would

surely forfeit any esteem he might have for her when she refused to leave. Whichever it was, the situation was hopeless. It had been much better when her regard for him had been a private, unremarkable thing without any hint of promise.

Doing her best to maintain a cheerful aspect, she added, “Might we speak of something else?”

“Of course! No more talk of the duke,” Oakley said. Then he cast an expressive look at the twins. “But...we do need to speak to you about the Richmond part.”

Frederica’s forced smile was not proof against the spike of alarm this remark induced. She looked down at her cup to hide her disappointment. “You mean to persuade me to leave Taverstock after all?”

Scarlett placed a hand on her arm. “It is not that, Frederica. It is something else. Something that affects us all.”

“We thought a walk might be nice, once you have finished your tea,” Oakley said.

Frederica looked at him dubiously. “I thought you did not like walking.”

“Walking without a purpose is abhorrent to me, but I have a very good reason to wish to walk somewhere quiet with you today.” He looked nervous—they all did, which in turn made Frederica anxious to know what was afoot that could not be discussed in a busy tearoom.

“I am not thirsty. A walk sounds lovely.”

Conscious of Adelaide’s delicate condition—and Oakley’s apparently poor constitution—Frederica directed them towards King’s End Wood, for it was a less demanding route that would still take them away from the hustle and bustle of the

town. Within minutes, they emerged from between the crowded buildings onto a stretch of common land that was dotted with trees and grazing cattle.

“Perfect,” Oakley said with a satisfied sigh. “I shall not keep you in suspense any longer, then, Frederica. Indeed, I can only apologise for having kept you in the dark for this long. There has not been an opportunity to broach the matter before now. Not after Penrith commandeered our first meeting. But never mind that—the thing is, I...that is, there are...I am...dash it! I am not your cousin, Frederica. I am your brother.”

Frederica was not entirely sure she had heard him correctly, but her sisters’ encouraging nods confirmed it. She listened at first with disbelief and then with increasing wonder as Oakley laid out their family’s history—from Robert Richmond’s estrangement and tragic demise to the cruel separation of his orphaned children; from Lord and Lady Tipton’s poignant desire for a child and heir, to the ruse that had fooled the ton for the past two decades.

When he was done, Oakley stopped walking and peered at her expectantly. Always, he was so very eager! Adelaide and Scarlett looked on with more obvious concern, but Oakley appeared only to be waiting for confirmation that she was as delighted as he, the expression in his eyes as kindly and hopeful as ever. It was touching, and Frederica did not wish to disappoint him, though she was rather too surprised to think of a meaningful reply.

“Goodness,” she said at length. “And I thought I had been concealing a lot all these years. ”

Oakley gave a bark of laughter. “And I am sorry to say that you must continue to conceal it—at all costs. Else it will all have been for nothing. You do comprehend that, do you not? If our uncle Damian were to find out that he is the true heir, it would all be lost.”

Frederica gave her word that she understood, and he nodded—and was almost solemn for a moment or two. Then he clapped his hands together loudly and set off walking again. “And so, I must content myself with being your cousin in public, but you will know the truth that only our family knows. We three, our brothers Kem and Worthe, Lord and Lady Tipton, and Lady Tipton’s sister, Lady Carbrooke—and a very few trusted servants—are the only people alive who know that I am your older brother.”

It made sense, now, that he had insisted on inserting himself into all Frederica’s conversations with the twins. And that he had raced to Avonwyke with as much haste as Scarlett to meet her. And—now that she thought about it...

“Was it our mother, then, who gave you three such striking eyes?”

Scarlett and Adelaide nodded. Frederica felt a pang of sadness to be the odd one out, though she told herself not to be absurd.

“Would you like to know what our father gave us?” Oakley asked, grinning. He did not wait for her to reply before answering his own question. “A small fortune. It turns out he set up a successful brewery after he eloped. His share of the proceeds has been held in trust since his death. And you, Sister, own a quarter of it.”

“I have my own money?”

“You do! Or at least, you will, when you come of age.”

“Then I can afford to stay at Taverstock forever?” Frederica exclaimed, as a wave of relief washed over her.

The whole party stopped walking and stared at her in confusion.

“I have always worried that I would one day be obliged to leave,” she explained,

breathless in her excitement. “I am only given a nominal stipend—not enough to save for the future. I feared at some point I would need to find other work, but I wanted so dearly to stay—and now I can!”

They continued to stare, and Frederica realised abruptly that it was not confusion creasing their brows; it was dismay. “Unless...well, that is, unless Lord Tipton disinherits me.”

“Disinherits you?” Adelaide repeated, now very much puzzled.

“If he does not consent to me staying—if I oppose his wishes to do so—I suppose he might...cut me off?”

“Our uncle will not disown you, no matter what you decide,” Scarlett said gently. “There is no doubt that he would rather see you returned to Chiltern Court, but he would never repeat his father’s mistakes. Losing his brother is the greatest regret of his life.”

“But in any case, it is not up to him,” Adelaide added, glancing briefly at Oakley. “The money is yours to do with as you choose as soon as you turn one-and-twenty. Until then, our father stipulated in his will that our older brother should have control of it.”

Frederica looked at Oakley; he grinned broadly. “I am your legal guardian. And I could not disinherit you if I wished to, because Adelaide would run me through if I so much as hinted at it.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Scarlett said, “He is not exaggerating. That is how our dear, sweet sister responded when he first suggested they might be related—by stabbing him with a letter opener.”

Another slight pause was followed by a burst of hilarity from all four of them. A vastly diverting account of Oakley and Adelaide's first rendezvous followed, the telling of which revealed that, while Frederica had not been blessed with her mother's eyes, she did possess the same uneven toes as her brother.

Time quite ran away with them after that, and they walked and talked for far longer than any of them had planned. Only when Adelaide conceded defeat and begged to be allowed to sit down did they return to Market Square. This time, Frederica accepted their offer to take her home in their carriage. It had been a whirlwind of an afternoon, and she returned to Taverstock exhausted and still shocked, but more hopeful for her future than she had ever dared allow herself to be before.

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

The following day was a Gold Day—Frederica's term for those rare and special times when children left Taverstock to begin a new life with a new family. They were few and far between, and each one incredibly hard won, but they marked the pinnacle of her work at the orphanage and always left her with a feeling of bittersweet elation. She would miss Nancy dearly, for she had been a darling, but the high-spirited little four-year-old was so well suited to her new mother and father, sadness could not persist for long.

In recognition of the success, Mr Mulligan had allowed Mrs Digby to purchase a ham for those who were dining at the house that evening, and Reverend Thorne had provided a bottle of wine for them to share. Everybody who worked at Taverstock was entitled to a hot meal at the end of the day, but commonly, only Frederica, the cook, and whichever of the schoolmasters and mistresses were on night watch did so—though Mr Milliard had taken to eating there every day, regardless. Frederica fancied it was because he was lonely. To her amusement, the promise of a hearty meal that day drew a far larger contingent than usual, thus they all received but a pitiful thimbleful of wine each.

“When will you visit Nancy?” Daisy asked.

“I'll not be able to,” Frederica replied. “The family are moving to the north, so that will be the last we see of her.”

“Why would you want to visit her? She ain't your concern no more,” Mrs Pargeter said. The nurse was a funny old stick, doting on the infants in the nursery as though



they were her own until it came time for them to move on, at which point she handed them over with a dry eye and nary a backwards glance.

“I try to visit all the children who are adopted locally at least once,” Frederica said. “These things do not always go as planned. The governors have had to readmit more than one child.”

“You are very conscientious,” Mr Milliard observed. “I cannot say that I ever heard of other orphanages taking such an interest in their charges.”

“’Tis something close to your heart, though, is it not, Miss Child?” Mrs Digby said. “How many times was you abandoned ’twixt being orphaned and ending up here?”

“Mrs Digby, really ,” Mr Carnegie said in a low voice, gesturing with an expressive sideways nod to everyone around the table.

Frederica smiled; the stained and pockmarked table in the back corner of an orphanage’s kitchen was hardly the place to be precious about such things. “It is well, sir. I am not ashamed of my past.”

“Quite right,” Mr Milliard said, not looking up but nodding at his plate. “Too many people feel the need to conceal their beginnings, when there ought to be no shame in it, for none of us can help where we come from, can we?”

Rupert caught Frederica’s eye and smiled ruefully. “Mr Milliard is right. You oughtn’t to be ashamed. And anyone who makes you feel as though you should be, is a dunderhead.”

She smiled warmly to hear his implicit apology. “Thank you, Rupert.”

“Are you going to tell us about them, then?” he asked.

Her heart lurched. “Who?”

“Your family. I should have asked before now. I am sorry. But you met them yesterday, did you not? How did you get on?”

Rupert grinned broadly as he said this, evidently pleased with himself; Frederica was certain his question was asked with the best of intentions. She still wished profoundly that he had not said anything. Her cheeks flamed under the weight of every pair of eyes around the table.

“What does he mean?” Daisy asked. “What family? I thought you were an orphan?”

Frederica swallowed. “I...well, I...”

She looked helplessly at Rupert, but he misunderstood the cause of her distress and announced, “Turns out our Fred’s only Miss Frederica Richmond, long-lost granddaughter of an earl!”

Everybody stilled. Frederica held her breath.

“You’re a swell?” Daisy asked, wide-eyed.

Mrs Digby’s countenance reddened; Mr Carnegie’s brow furrowed; Mrs Pargeter turned up her nose. Frederica could guess what would come next, for pride made vipers of even the best people, and nobody who was used to thinking of her as an unremarkable, orphaned, servant-of-all-work was likely to be content with looking upon her as nobility.

“I would not like any of you to treat me any differently,” she said emphatically.

“I should hope not!” Mrs Pargeter scoffed. “Because if you think I’m going to start

bowing and scraping to you, you've another think coming!"

"It is highly doubtful to be true, Mrs Pargeter," Mr Carnegie said. "I expect somebody is playing a trick on the poor lass." He shook his head pityingly at Frederica. "I thought you were cleverer than to fall for such a ruse."

"It is not a ruse?—"

But the schoolmaster spoke over her, berating her for having ideas above her station. Rupert's face fell as he watched her flounder. He leant closer to say, quietly, "I'm sorry. I was trying to make amends."

"I know. 'Tis not your fault."

"You'll be leaving, then, will you?" Mrs Digby said sharply. "Would that you'd said your goodbyes before we shared out the wine, then us humble folk might've had our fair share. "

"I am not going anywhere, Mrs Digby. I have no wish to leave Taverstock."

"You cannot imagine you will be able to stay," Mr Carnegie said disparagingly. "The governors would never agree to it."

"The governors are aware?—"

"I'd never agree to it!" Mrs Pargeter interrupted with an incredulous huff. "And Mrs Woods certainly won't. She's not going to like this. Not one bit."

"You think you know someone!" Mrs Digby said. "All this time you've been lying to us!"

“I did not lie,” Frederica insisted, shaking her head and feeling the sting of tears in her eyes. She had known the news would come as a surprise and might even be disliked, but she had not imagined anything as unpleasant as this. It was as though they thought it nothing more than a cruel trick she had played on them. It grieved her that these people, whom she had known and worked with for so many years, comprehended her no better.

“Come, come, now. Have we not just agreed that nobody can help where they come from?”

Everybody looked at Mr Milliard, who had said this in a quiet, unruffled voice, and who continued to cut up his meat as though nothing were amiss. He glanced up at them all, a look of mild surprise on his face. “Does Miss Child’s descent make her endeavours at Taverstock any less meaningful? Does her grandfather’s title make young Nancy’s adoption today any less real?”

“There’ll be no more adoptions if you leave,” Mrs Digby said to her bitterly. “Or those that do happen will be all wrong. What about those poor Baxter children, eh? There’ll be no keeping them together without you to fight their corner.”

“Miss Child has just said she has no intention of leaving Taverstock,” Mr Milliard said.

“She ain’t Miss Child, is she?” Mrs Pargeter retorted. “She’s Miss Richmond—granddaughter of an earl! How are we to get along, what with her being so high and mighty?”

“Exactly as you always have, I imagine,” he replied. “Did you not hear Miss Child—or Miss Richmond, if you will—say that she hoped none of you would treat her any differently? Is that not a fine concession? I am sure I should not be so liberal in her situation.”

After an uncomfortable silence, some of the party began to grudgingly mumble their agreement that it was, indeed, a fine concession, although the nurse continued to stare away at her ham with pursed lips.

Frederica scarcely had the words to express how deeply she appreciated Mr Milliard's assistance. "Thank you, sir."

He shrugged and gave her an easy smile. "You would not be the first person to end up in a life different to the one destined for them at birth. It does not follow that you ought to feel ashamed of who you are. I second Mr Dalton's request for you to tell us about your family. I should like to hear all about them."

Frederica glanced at everyone nervously. Most of the party studiously avoided her gaze, but Daisy piped up, "I'd like to hear, too. "

As it turned out, an estranged father, a titled uncle, two twin sisters who had begun life in drudgery and were both now married to earls, and a cousin—she was careful to refer to him as such—who was a viscount, was sufficient intrigue to banish much of everybody's surliness. Mrs Pargeter's ears pricked at the news that Adelaide was with child, shamelessly requesting that Frederica recommend her as a nurse. Mrs Digby thought it the most romantic thing in the world that Frederica's mother and father had shunned the Tipton fortune to elope.

"The apple don't fall far from the tree, do it, dear? For you mean to do the same and shun their money to stay here with us."

Frederica thought it wisest not to mention the inheritance due from her father.

"I say!" Mr Milliard exclaimed. "Your uncle is the Earl of Tipton , you say? His seat is near Barford, in Bedfordshire, is it not?"

“I believe so,” Frederica replied. “Although I have never been there.”

“I have! I lived there in my younger days. Many years ago, now, but...pray, who did you say your mother was?”

“Miss Susan Browning.”

He slapped his palm on the table. “That’s it! I thought you were familiar! I knew Miss Browning.”

“You knew my mother?” Frederica asked tremulously, her heart racing.

“Not well, admittedly, but well enough to say how do you do. Well enough to remember her face—and I must say, my dear, you are the picture of her.”

Frederica inhaled sharply with the rush of pleasure that suffused her at his words. “Truly?”

“Truly,” he said, nodding.

“That means a great deal to me, sir. I confess I was a little dismayed to have only the slightest resemblance to Lord Oakley and none at all to either of my sisters—particularly with them being twins. To know it is because I take after my mother instead is—well, it is a gift! Thank you.”

“I can take no credit—it was a coincidence quite outside my control, but I am glad it has given you relief.” He set his knife and fork down and pushed his empty plate away. “Do they look like each other, then, your sisters and cousin?”

His question made her consider, as she had not before, the convenience of the want of a strong resemblance between Oakley and his sisters. It diverted her, then flustered

her, for she stood a far better chance of keeping his secret if she did not dwell on it so! Praying that her discomposure would not make her blush, she answered, “Not noticeably so. My sisters tell me they take after their— our —paternal grandmother, and Lord Oakley apparently takes after his father, but I cannot vouch for it, for I have never set eyes on either.”

“But you have a slight resemblance to the viscount, you said.”

She nodded shyly. “There seems to be a little something similar about our mouths.”

“Well then, now you have a family resemblance on both sides,” he said with a warm smile .

She beamed at him, bursting with gratitude.

“Is he much older than you?” Mr Milliard asked.

Frederica baulked upon realising she did not know. Come to think of it, she knew not how old the twins were, either. It was a mortifying revelation. “Um...not much older, I do not think. I am ashamed to say, I did not think to ask.”

“That is to be expected, seeing as how you’ve only just met them,” Mrs Digby said, her words and her tone significantly kinder now. “It’s only the same as it is with the littl’uns when they come to us. Takes time to get to know them, that’s all. Can’t find out every detail on the first day.”

Mrs Pargeter gave a grunt and nodded sagely as though she had been advocating this approach all along. “Best way is not to rush the matter. You’ve a lifetime to catch up on, Miss Richmond. Take your time.”

They took it in turns, thereafter, to advise Frederica on how best to proceed with her

family. It felt as though they were giving her permission to have one outside of Taverstock—as though the two might, after all, be compatible. Frederica felt herself relax. It was a profound relief not to have permanently lost her friends' good opinion—to know they only required time to overcome their shock. She was sensible to the fact that Mr Milliard's well-judged intervention had smoothed away their initial hostility. For that, and for the priceless information about her mother, she would be forever indebted to him.



### CHAPTER TWELVE

Before they parted ways last time, Adelaide had invited Frederica to dine at Avonwyke the following week—and this time to stay overnight, for the estate was too far away to comfortably journey there and back in an evening. It was a daunting prospect, which grew more formidable the closer it came.

Rarely did a night go by at Taverstock without at least one of the children requiring attention. Whichever schoolmaster or mistress was on duty would assist with more serious problems—unexpected arrivals, fights, and the like. For home matters, however—night terrors, illness, or simple distress—Frederica was always called upon. The prospect of leaving that to the likes of Mrs Woods, who was more likely to silence a child with the back of her hand than with a kind word, or Mr Carnegie, who would rather leave a child to wail than leave his own bed, was unappealing to say the least—though it was not Frederica's only qualm.

It would also be the first night she had ever spent away from Taverstock since she arrived there thirteen years ago. She could not help but be alarmed by the notion of sleeping and waking in a bed that was not her own. She was generally calm and assured by nature, but her mettle had never been tested beyond the bounds of Taverstock. No matter how many times she told herself all would be well, she could not rid herself of her nerves.

Yet, she did wish to go. Her brothers and sisters were such kind, generous people, so infectiously desirous of her company, that to be a part of their family became a prospect dearer to her by the moment. Moreover, with her friends at Taverstock seeming to adjust, gradually—reluctantly in some cases—to the truth of her

parentage, she felt ever freer to pursue the connection without fear of being severed from her world.

Perhaps most importantly of all, Adelaide had written with the news that Penrith was to join their party. Frederica tried to tell herself there was no significance in it beyond the pleasure of spending time with somebody who was fast becoming a dear friend, but she was nevertheless eaten up with anticipation.

Seeking consent from the governors had been an awkward thing, for they were no longer sure of their authority, yet she was still assuredly in their employ and Taverstock remained very much in need of her services. Thus, it was more with their mutual consent than their permission that she set off on Thursday afternoon, in her sister's carriage, for Avonwyke.

"I am so pleased you came," Adelaide said, kissing her cheek the moment she stepped down from the carriage. The familiarity both surprised and pleased Frederica; she could not think of the last time someone had greeted her with such affection.

Scarlett took over where her twin left off, both having come to greet her outside. "We all are. We do understand the difficulty in your coming for a longer visit, truly. But we are delighted that you agreed."

The rest of the party awaited Frederica inside—all but Penrith. She swallowed her foolish disappointment and allowed herself to be swept up in the whirlwind of greetings and chatter that followed. Adelaide had arranged for an exquisite array of refreshments by way of welcome: pyramids of cake, fruit, and sweetmeats such as would make the children's eyes pop were they to be served at Taverstock. Frederica did not wish to disappoint her sister and took a biscuit to have with her tea, though she had not much of a sweet tooth. She noticed that Adelaide and Oakley both put several items on their plates, while Scarlett refrained from eating anything. Now that she thought of it, she had not had any cake at Mrs Tulley's shop either.

“You do not like sweet things?” she asked her quietly.

“Not a great deal, no,” Scarlett replied. “My upbringing was very frugal, and I cannot get used to rich foods, even now.”

Frederica felt a little thrill at the discovery of something new in common with one of her sisters. “I am the same. But pray do not tell Adelaide. I should hate to appear ungrateful. ”

Scarlett laughed lightly. “You had much better tell her now, or she will be forever trying to feed you things you do not like. Take it from me, the deprivation of her childhood had a very different effect on her. She despises the idea of anyone going hungry and will ply you with all manner of foods until she is satisfied that you are replete.”

“What are you two conspiring about so energetically over there?” Worthe asked genially, bringing their whispered conversation to the attention of the whole room.

Frederica froze, dreading offending Adelaide mere minutes into her visit, but she need not have worried; Scarlett managed the matter with perfect delicacy. After her explanation, all three men expressed their satisfaction at having more treats for themselves, while Adelaide declared that being with child had increased her appetite such that she was perfectly ready to fight for her share of whatever Frederica and Scarlett did not want.

So it continued for another hour at least. There was no topic on which Frederica was permitted to err; her brothers and sisters were all too intent on ensuring she was at ease. At length, the refreshments were cleared away, and Adelaide invited Frederica upstairs to see her bedchamber. Scarlett accompanied them, each twin taking one of her arms as they walked through the house, pointing out the different rooms as they went. It was very different to Cedarvale—equally as grand but in a different style.

Frederica thought both houses were handsomely decorated and, while she did not covet greater luxury, she was perfectly able to appreciate the elegant taste. Taverstock was deliberately unadorned; it made it easier to keep clean and harder to catch fire.

“This will be your room—on this and any future visits,” Adelaide announced, throwing open a door on the gallery that overlooked the staircase. “Kem has agreed that it should be kept for your use alone, so that you feel at home whenever you come here.”

That meant a great deal to Frederica, though the kindness was instantly superseded by another. Upon entering the room, she saw half a dozen beautiful gowns laid out on the bed, which her sisters informed her were hers to borrow, keep, or reject as she chose. It was on her lips to demur, but she stopped herself. As with the house, she was sensible enough to comprehend that not coveting a thing did not mean one could not enjoy it when presented with it.

“Thank you, that is tremendously generous, both of you.”

“It is our pleasure,” Adelaide replied. “After all, you will want to look your best for the duke.”

Frederica’s heart gave a little jolt, flooded with relief. “I thought he must have decided against coming.”

“No, he is only coming a little later.”

Frederica wished she would not blush but knew she had, for both her sisters were grinning at her knowingly.

“I knew you liked him,” Scarlett said but, perhaps perceiving Frederica’s embarrassment, immediately threw up her hands and said, “But no more on that from

us! We shall just make certain that you look as well as you possibly can and say nothing of the whys or wherefores, hm?"

Frederica could scarcely believe the difference in herself when they were finished with her. They had settled on a bottle-green gown that accentuated her colouring, and to which Adelaide's maid had sewn some hasty adjustments to ensure a perfect fit. Scarlett's maid had arranged Frederica's hair in a style more elegant than anything she had ever seen. As she stood, staring in wonder at her reflection in the mirror, Adelaide came to her side and held something out for her. It was a box and a letter.

"To complete the effect," she said. "But read the letter first."

Frederica thanked her and took both to the bed, where she sat and gingerly opened the letter.

To my dear niece, Frederica,

Please accept my deepest apologies that your uncle and I cannot be there with you this evening. We had hoped to be, but though his lordship is improving, it is a slow recovery. Adelaide has assured me that you are being well looked after, and I do not doubt it, but I shall not be able to rest until I have seen you with my own eyes. Pray trust that despite our delayed reunion, your uncle and I welcome you with open arms into our family. Our home is henceforth yours, and I hope you will come to treat it as such before long.

Your visit to Avonwyke gives me to hope that a slightly longer absence from the Taverstock Orphanage might now be arranged. As such, and since we cannot come to you at the present time, I hope you will consent to visit us here at Chiltern Court sooner rather than later. Perhaps a short visit of about a week would be acceptable in the first instance?

In the meantime, I hope you will accept the gift Adelaide has given to you with this letter as a token of our affection. It belonged to your grandmother and namesake, the late Lady Frederica Tipton. She gave it to me when I married your uncle. It is yours now, Frederica. I hope you will wear it with pride and remember, whenever you do, that we are inexpressibly proud to recognise you as one of our own.

Yours affectionately,

Your doting aunt, Lady Louisa Tipton

The letter was at once perfectly splendid and deeply distressing. Such a generous welcome was more than any foundling dared dream of. Yet, with her renewed invitation to visit and talk of making a home of Chiltern Court, Lady Tipton had reanimated all Frederica's greatest fears. She set the letter aside and took up the box instead, determined to keep a cool head. When she saw the exquisite emerald and pearl necklace within, her resolve wavered. Such a gift was surely not intended for a niece they thought would continue to live at an establishment such as Taverstock. Her heart hammered loudly in her ears, muffling the sound of her sisters' voices as they exclaimed over the necklace, marvelled at how it complimented her chosen gown, and placed it carefully around her neck.

"Aunt Louisa is excessively fond of jewellery," Adelaide said. "She will like to hear that you have worn this piece so well."

"Will you keep it here for me, when I go home?" Frederica asked. "I do not think I shall have much cause to wear it at my work." She tried to laugh, and it seemed to convince her sisters, for they smiled with her. She did not tell them her real reasons—that it would not be safe at Taverstock; that there was nowhere to keep such a treasure secure, for she lived a life far removed from one in which jewels were of any importance; that accepting it felt like taking another step away from the only world she had ever known.

Her sisters left to dress shortly afterwards, and Frederica spent a few moments alone, disliking the slightly dazed feeling that had settled upon her. She splashed some water on her face and opened the window to feel the cool air on her cheeks. It helped a little, but the thing which truly rescued her was her brother. Oakley knocked on her door a short while later, and his response when he saw her was too heartening for her to remain unmoved.

“Well, I declare, Frederica! Gads but you look lovely!” He held out his arm for her. “Will you do me the honour of accompanying me to dinner? Say you will—I am the only fellow here without a handsome woman on my arm. You are just the tonic!”

His praise continued all the way down the stairs and through the house to the drawing room, where it was added to by Kem and Worthe who were already waiting there. Frederica was torn between awkwardness and delight, wholly unused to such attention. She began to wish everybody would desist when Scarlett and Adelaide arrived downstairs and started fussing over her all over again—though she was in no way averse to the way the Duke of Penrith responded to her appearance when he arrived.

He was announced into the drawing room at precisely seven o’clock, and upon seeing her, he stopped walking and did something she had never seen him do before. He smiled. It was a slow but glorious smile that chased away all the sadness from his eyes and made Frederica’s stomach do pirouettes. It meant more to her than all her brothers’ and sisters’ compliments put together. She answered him the only way she could think of; she smiled back.

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Frederica knew before she opened her eyes that she had woken late. She sat up with a start, but when she looked around the still-shadowy chamber, she experienced a moment of disorientation. This was not her room, and there were no sounds of children running amok in her absence. Then she groaned and flopped back into the mattress. This, then, was what it felt like to wake up in a strange place. She must have slept deeply to have so thoroughly forgotten she was at Avonwyke—and no wonder, for the bed was unfathomably soft.

Her thoughts leapt instantly to the children. Judging from the faint glow of dawn around the edge of the curtains, she guessed they would be awake by now. She hoped Geoffrey had not cried in the night or, if he had, that Mrs Woods had been forbearing. God forbid he had wet the bed again, for she dreaded to think how the crabby schoolmistress would respond to that. A jolt of panic assaulted her at the possibility that the stomach pains of which Jennifer had complained the day before had heralded the onset of her courses. That would present a far greater humiliation than a wet bed. She tried desperately to recall when the poor dear had last been indisposed and kicked herself for not reminding her where the rags were stored before she left.

“This will not do, Frederica!” she berated herself a moment later. She had made the decision to come; there was no sense in torturing herself while she was miles away, and there was nothing to be done about any of it. “It is but one night.” She sighed happily as memories from the previous evening crept into her mind. “One heavenly night.”

The food had been delicious, the company sparkling, the wine—oh! She had drunk



too much wine! Oakley and the twins had shared many, many anecdotes of their childhoods, flooding her head with pictures to fill the blank of the past twenty years. Kem and Worthe had added their stories of more recent times, evoking gales of laughter from everybody with their versions of Adelaide's and Scarlett's courtships, which differed hilariously from the twins' own accounts.

They had danced! Frederica had never so much as performed a jig in her life—indeed, she was not sure she could say that she had now, for she knew no steps and none of the music. But with accompaniments from Scarlett at the pianoforte, Kem on the violin, much laughter, and no shortage of teasing, her brothers and sisters had shown her the rudiments of a simple reel. And then ? —

Something fluttered powerfully in her stomach, and she pulled the coverlet up with both fists to cover the silly grin that had spread itself across her face. Then , Penrith had danced with her.

Over and above all the delights of the evening, it was his presence that had made it extraordinary. All night, he had been attentive and engaging, always seeming to know when to speak and when to listen. Occasionally, in their excitement, the others had forgotten that Frederica was new among them and not familiar with their ways or party to their jokes. Being not of a disposition to put herself forth with any authority, those moments might have run long were it not for His Grace. More than once, he redirected the conversation to include her—deftly, unobtrusively, but unfailingly effective. He had even shared some tales of his own, which Frederica was overjoyed to hear, for it gave her hope that despite his pain, he was learning to take pleasure in his memories of the past.

She had already been quite under his spell by the time he took her hands and led her patiently through the figures of the reel. Afterwards, she hardly knew what she felt—only that his beautiful, elusive smile was etched on her mind, and the feel of his warm, sure grip was impressed upon her palms.

She tried not to think about it overmuch as Adelaide's maid helped her dress for the day. She dared not, for as she was reminded by the unfamiliar reflection looking back at her from the mirror, this was not her natural sphere. Soon, she would give this fine gown back to her sister and return to plain work clothes; she would leave this sumptuous bedchamber and take up once more in her small room at the orphanage. She had no business imagining herself to be of any interest to a duke.

She waited an hour before going down so as not to put anybody out, but when a footman directed her to a bright saloon at the back of the house, she discovered that she was the last to arrive. It surprised her; she had assumed she would be the first to rise.

"No, they are all horribly early risers," Oakley complained. "And I was unceremoniously shaken from my pit at goodness knows what time to join the party."

"You should not have drunk so much brandy, man! I daresay you would not have needed shaking if you'd had less of a thick head this morning," Kem said, shoving Oakley's chair leg with his foot and making him jerk in his seat.

"It has nothing to do with how much brandy I drank and everything to do with you all keeping such unfashionable hours."

"The perquisites of a life in service," Adelaide said with a smirk.

"That does not explain everyone else's jauntiness. What is your excuse, Your Grace?"

Frederica felt excessively conscious at the duke being drawn into the conversation, despite being aware nobody could know how it had made her insides jump. She felt a good deal more conscious when he fixed his eyes on her and answered, "I did not wish to miss the party either."

“Quite right,” Worthe said. “But look, it is a fine day. What say we go for a walk before breakfast? ”

Thus, despite Oakley’s good-humoured objections to being obliged to rise early and exercise his legs, a stroll about the park was agreed upon—though, when a servant was summoned to fetch the ladies’ coats and walking shoes, Adelaide excused herself from the activity.

“I am afraid I am feeling a little delicate myself this morning,” she admitted, her hand on her midsection to emphasise her meaning. “Do not concern yourself,” she added when Scarlett expressed concern. “It will pass. Aunt Louisa assures me I ought to feel more robust in a few weeks. In plenty of time for the Season, according to her.”

“ Will you go to London this summer?” Scarlett enquired cautiously.

“Will she allow me not to?”

“In this matter, your aunt will have no say,” Kem said firmly.

Adelaide smiled at him affectionately. “Of course, we shall do whatever is best—though it is possible to be in town without partaking in the Season. I managed it every year while I worked for the Grishams.”

Kem only rolled his eyes at her, but Scarlett pressed the point. “It might be safest to stay in the country. I fear if you are in town, Aunt Louisa will want you to attend a few balls, at least. You know how she is.”

“Prepare yourself, Frederica. It will be you in her sights this Season,” Oakley said, laughing. “You had better brush up on those dance steps, for my mother will have you whirling about with every eligible man this side of the Channel come May. ”

Frederica felt the now familiar stirring of panic in her stomach at his easy mention of spending extended periods of time away from Taverstock.

“I think you might find it is you she has her sights on this year, old boy,” Worthe retorted. “You are getting a bit long in the tooth to be dithering about as you are. Her ladyship would be pleased to see you settled, I am sure.”

Oakley stopped grinning and pointed at the double doors to the garden in a disconsolate gesture for them to begin their walk. “I have decided to cry off women,” he said as he stepped out into the warm spring morning. “Every one I ever thought was worth two straws has chosen a different fellow over me—and they are always such fellows, too! I shall never comprehend Bess plumping for that lobcock, Beamish.”

“Well she had no choice, did she?” Scarlett replied. “Not after that horrid Miss Holland loosed her tongue about it.”

“Mrs Marshall chose you,” Kem said with exaggerated innocence.

Worthe snorted. “Amongst others.”

“Very droll,” Oakley replied glumly.

Frederica followed them onto the path, unable to join in with the others, for she knew neither Bess, nor Miss Holland, nor Mrs Marshall—nor any of the other women about whom they went on to tease him. She felt a gentle touch to her arm and looked around to where Penrith walked ever so slightly behind her. His serious gaze was somehow vastly comforting; she smiled and slowed her pace to match his .

“Might I be so bold as to enquire what is troubling you?” he asked quietly.

“Is it that obvious that anything is troubling me?”

“To me it is.”

That was more comforting still. With a sigh, she admitted, “I am only anxious to return to Taverstock. I worry how some of the children will have fared in my absence.”

“Your concern for them is truly commendable, but I am sure they will be well. Remember what you told me—children are exceedingly resilient creatures.”

“That is true, they are. I suppose I just wish none of them were ever required to be resilient.”

“Spoken like a true mother.”

She looked at him in confusion, dismayed at the notion that he meant to ridicule her, but it seemed he was sincere.

“I meant it as a compliment. Margot used to despise leaving the children when we travelled. But we did occasionally leave them—as I left them again last night. No harm ever came to them.”

Frederica was about to protest that the situation was entirely dissimilar but stopped herself, for regardless of the duke’s wealth and probable retinue of help, his children had still lost their mother. To them, the situation no doubt felt exactly the same. There were nevertheless still salient differences. “Your children have the benefit of a safe, happy home.”

“As do Taverstock’s children, thanks to you,” Penrith replied. “They will be well for one night. ”

“One night, perhaps—but what if I were to be absent for longer?” It was his turn to look confused, and she added, “I thank you for your assurances—truly. I have tried my best to make Taverstock a home, and it means a great deal to me that you should think it a success. But I worry what would happen were I to be away for more than one night.”

“Is that a pressing concern?” Penrith enquired.

Frederica hesitated, tried several times to frame an answer, then gave up with a sigh and a shake of her head. “I ought not to say anything. My family has been so very welcoming. I should hate for any of them to think I do not appreciate it.”

Penrith stopped walking and turned with great deliberation to face away from the path the others had taken. Holding his arm out for her to take, he said, “Your family are exceedingly good people. But sometimes what a person needs is a friend, not a brother or sister. Nothing you say to me will go any further.”

Feeling an overwhelming sense of gratitude, Frederica nodded and took his arm. It was solid and warm and exactly the crutch she needed. It was an effort not to cling to it too tightly. He led her onto a narrower path that led into the wooded copse around the lake. He said nothing, only waited with his inimitable stately poise for her to speak. She was obliged for his patience, for her thoughts were so muddled, it took her an age to order them into any sort of coherence.

“I thought I knew what the future held for me,” she said at length. “I have always believed I was born to a life dedicated to others. I was perfectly content—more than content, I was happy with my lot.”

She huffed a small laugh and gestured to the woods, the lake, and the house beyond. “Now, I have all this at my fingertips, and I like it just as well—only a fool would not. And I very much like being a Richmond. My sisters, Oakley, all of them are so

wonderfully agreeable. I have rarely enjoyed anything as much as I have enjoyed getting to know them these past few weeks. I could never forsake them now; they are my family.”

“But Taverstock is your life,” the duke said gently.

“Exactly! Oh, you do understand!”

He winced wryly. “Yes, I know perfectly well what it is to have the future you assumed would be yours altered in the blink of an eye. If I could have held on to my old life in that moment, I would have—with every ounce of my strength.”

It was a humbling observation. Frederica grimaced in chagrin. “Forgive me. The alteration of which you speak came hand in hand with tragedy, and here I am, complaining at the prospect of comfort and riches beyond my wildest dreams. You must think me absurd.”

He cast her a sideways glance, one eyebrow raised as if in challenge. “I think you are unlike anybody I have ever known. There are few people who, upon discovering that they were of noble birth, would not have immediately left Taverstock. To choose a life in the service of those less fortunate than oneself shows true nobility.”

She smiled self-consciously and was relieved when he directed them onto a bank that sloped away from the path and down to the water’s edge, for it gave her somewhere to look other than at his penetrating gaze.

“I do not mean to suggest that one ought to be afraid of change,” he continued presently. “My old life may be gone, and I may mourn it every day, but that is not to say that my future must now be devoid of happiness. Indeed, I am coming to believe—with a little help—that it is possible for unexpected and wondrous new beginnings to arise even from change born of tragedy.”

Frederica had not the courage to meet his eye and scarcely knew whether she hoped or dreaded that she might be the source of the happiness to which he alluded—which rather helpfully illustrated the crux of her dilemma. “I had convinced myself that I could have both—my old life and my new one. But no matter what my family avow, I begin to see that the two are not compatible.”

If she had disappointed him with her evasion, he showed no sign of it, answering without hesitation, “You refer, I suppose, to their talk of the Season just now.”

“Yes, that is one example—the ease with which they speak of me leaving Taverstock to attend parties and balls.”

“You do not like balls?”

She grinned at him. “I have never been to one, so I could not say. I do not object to them in principle. Indeed, if they are as much fun as the dancing was last night, I think I should enjoy one very much. But one ball is not the problem—it is what comes afterwards.”

“And what is that? ”

“More balls, more parties, more time away from the children. If I am absent from the orphanage often enough, the governors will simply replace me—they will have to. And if I spend enough time in high society, people will expect me to fit in there. I cannot be somebody who dances with dukes and marquesses and then goes home to an orphanage at the end of an evening. It would never be tolerated.”

They reached the water’s edge, and she slid her arm from his and stood, looking out across the lake, one hand shading her eyes from the glint of the sun on the surface, the other wrapped around her waist. There was a breeze this close to the water; it whisked her hair against her cheeks and her skirts against her shins. “Did you happen



to notice the necklace I was wearing last night?" she asked.

"I did," he replied softly. "You looked remarkably well in it."

"Thank you. It was a gift from Lady Tipton. I ought to be grateful, do you not think?"

"I take it you are not."

"It is only that people who live in orphanages do not wear jewels. It confirmed to me that I will have to choose at some point." She lowered her hand and turned to face him. "I feel as though I am on borrowed time."

Penrith's perennial sadness swam back into his eyes, although Frederica had the strongest sense of it being for her on this occasion. "I wish I could tell you that you were wrong, but you are too sensible to credit it," he said. "I believe you have the measure of the situation. "

She deeply appreciated his candour. It was a truth she needed to hear.

"But you do not have to choose yet," he added lightly.

"I might have to choose sooner rather than later. My aunt has repeated her invitation for me to go to Chiltern Court. She suggested I stay for a week. I do not think I can refuse again."

"I see. Well, a week is not so very long. And it might help you determine what you want. One cannot make an informed choice without all the facts, after all. I give you my word that nobody at Taverstock will be replacing you in that time. I believe as a patron, I have at least that much authority." A glimmer of playfulness sparked in his eyes. "Would it help if I promised to call there once or twice in your absence to keep an eye on the children's welfare?"

“You would do that for me?” Frederica said in surprise.

He gave her a somewhat incredulous look and then, unusually for him, he chuckled. “Miss Richmond, that is the very least I would do for you. You have been an invaluable friend to me these past few months. Assisting you in any capacity would be my honour.”

Frederica was heartened to know that she had helped him. He continued to look at her intently, piercingly, beseechingly almost, until his offer to help seemed suddenly more significant. “You could tell me what you think I ought to do,” she said quietly.

He bestowed her with another smile—this time a wry, helpless sort of smile that made him look ten years younger and accentuated every fine feature of his countenance. “Would that I could.”

He unexpectedly lifted a hand to her face. Frederica froze, not knowing what to expect, and watched with a racing heart as he tenderly unhooked a strand of hair that the breeze must have blown into the corner of her mouth. The backs of his fingers grazed her cheek and traced her jaw in a featherlight touch, and he leant towards her by the smallest fraction.

“But you must follow your heart.”

She was sure he would kiss her—and she was sure she had never wanted anything as badly in her whole life—until he lowered his hand and stood tall. Then she was as relieved as she had ever been in her whole life that he had not, for that would have forced a decision upon her that she was not ready to make. She knew with certainty that he understood as much—just as, in that moment, she knew with certainty that she loved him.

“I will,” she said, and it felt like a promise.

He took a deep breath and exhaled it heavily, then held out his arm for her once more. “We ought to be getting back. The others will be wondering what has become of us.”

Frederica suspected they knew perfectly well what had become of them, for none of them felt the need to enquire upon their return to the house, and there were plenty of expressive looks directed her way throughout breakfast. She did not oblige them with answers, even after Penrith departed. She was able to distract them instead with a request for a pen and paper with which to write a letter, accepting her aunt’s invitation to Chiltern Court. Penrith was right; she had much better find out whether she could bear to be away from Taverstock before she decided whether she could bear to be away from him.

### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“A h, Miss Richmond, you are returned to us!”

Frederica started and turned to look over her shoulder. Mr Milliard had entered the office. “I am, sir! Is there anything I can help you with?”

“Do not let me interrupt your work. I have only come in search of a book.”

“It is no trouble. I was just writing some letters, but I have finished now.” Indeed, she had just sealed both. As she set about packing away the pen and wax and pushed her chair back under the desk, she asked, “What is the book? We ought to be able to find it faster if we both look.”

“I should think we will,” he said with a smile. “Though it is not a particular book. Mr Mulligan thought I might find some mathematical problems in here to give to the boys. Anything in that vein will do.”

They each went to opposing corners of the book-lined wall at one end of the office and began their search .

“How was your visit with your family?” Mr Milliard enquired after a few moments.

“Very agreeable, thank you. I had a wonderful time.”

“I am glad to hear it. It would have been a shame if Mrs Pargeter and Mrs Digby’s prepossessions had soured the experience for you.”

Frederica grinned at him. "I think they have warmed to the idea a little now. Is this one any good?" She passed him a book whose title was faded but which, to her eye, looked as though it contained calculations. It turned out to be lessons in physics and too advanced for the boys in Mr Milliard's class; they continued looking.

"And did you manage to find out everybody's ages, in the end?" Mr Milliard asked.

"I did. The twins are two-and-twenty, and Lord Oakley is four-and-twenty."

"Your cousin is not much older than you and your sisters, then? That must be pleasant, to all be at the same stage of life. Though there must be some regret to think that you might have grown up together if you had not all been orphaned."

All? Frederica floundered slightly, unsure whether to point out Mr Milliard's mistake, for she did not wish to draw unnecessary attention to it, nor blush at correcting an error that was, in fact, a truth. "My sisters and I being orphaned was regrettable indeed," she said in the end. "But I learnt long ago not to repine things that cannot be changed."

"You are wise beyond your years," Mr Milliard mumbled into the book he had just pulled off the shelf. "Far better to focus one's energies on the things that can and ought to be changed. Still!" he said, banging the book closed. "It is a bittersweet irony that your father and uncle were blessed with children so close in age and never knew it."

"It is," Frederica agreed, "but we know it now, and we are making up for lost time."

Mr Milliard returned his book to the shelf and continued his search. "Indeed! And I must say, Lord Oakley has shown remarkable enthusiasm for his cousins' reunion by throwing over all his plans to come with as much haste to meet you as your sisters have. What an upstanding young man he must be."

In an attempt to steer the conversation away from Oakley, Frederica said, “I am fortunate indeed with all my new relations. My brothers Lord Kemerton and Lord Worthe have been every bit as welcoming.”

“I am pleased to hear it—about Lord Kemerton especially, for I confess I had heard some whispers in my younger days that the family was excessively proud. But if the son has turned out more amiable than the father, that is all to the good.”

“Strictly speaking, the son has married a maid, so I think we can say with authority that he is not the least bit proud,” Frederica said, laughing lightly.

Mr Milliard did not laugh. In fact, he looked rather vexed. She tried to ignore the discomfort of having made a poor joke and returned to searching the shelves.

“Will this do?” She passed Mr Milliard a book titled *Arithmetic Examples* .

“That will do perfectly, thank you.” He took the book, Frederica retrieved her letters from the desk, and together they quit the office. “And so,” he said as they went, “Lord Oakley shows no sign of marrying as his cousins have done? I am surprised. I would have thought he would be keen to beget an heir.”

Frederica wished he would cease talking about her family. While she appreciated his encouragement, she was not a good liar and was growing more conscious by the moment of what she must not say. “I understand he has been rather unfortunate in love,” she hedged, for speaking about Oakley’s failed romances seemed infinitely safer than talking about him.

Mr Milliard clicked his tongue. “That is difficult to credit, when he has a future earldom to offer his bride.”

“An earldom was not enough to tempt Lady Veronica Edmonton—or even Mrs

Beamish, though it would have been an excellent match for her.” She could hear herself rattling away like one of Taverstock’s girls but seemed unable to stop herself. She turned around to cover her discomfiture under the pretence of securing the office door.

“Mrs Beamish, Sir Humphrey Leighton’s daughter?” Mr Milliard asked.

“Yes, that is the one,” she said as she fumbled for the correct key in her pocket. “She quite broke his heart, to hear him talk about her.” She had no idea whether that was true—she had only a few mentions and a vague suspicion to go on—but whatever could save her from talking about the actual truth would have to do for now .

“I am not surprised his heart was broken, if he was overlooked in favour of a commoner,” Mr Milliard opined.

A commoner? That was an odd phrase for a man who could himself claim no notable consequence. “Quite,” she said as she finally shoved the correct key in the lock. “I do not think she deserved Oakley, but he obviously did.”

“Obviously, if he was as cut up as you say,” Mr Milliard replied. His voice was different—amused, somehow. When Frederica turned back to him, she was unnerved to observe him smiling almost wolfishly. Already disquieted, she jumped when another door opened, and one of the boys walked into the hall.

“Benjamin, what are you doing here?” she asked.

Benjamin looked in her direction at the same moment Mr Milliard turned around to look at him, and to Frederica’s surprise, the boy flinched.

“I ain’t doin’ nothin’!” he cried and ran away up the stairs before either Frederica or Mr Milliard could say another word.

“Goodness, what was that about?” Frederica asked. “He is not usually skittish.”

Mr Milliard shook his head dolefully. “He was obviously distressed to have disappointed you, Miss Richmond. He knows better than to leave the schoolroom, and now you have caught him at it.”

“Me?” Frederica repeated uncertainly, dismayed at the prospect. No child had ever flinched at her presence before.

“Do not concern yourself,” he said. “I shall have a word with him and ensure he knows that there is to be no repeat of such behaviour.”

“But I—” The front doorbell rang before Frederica could say any more.

“I shall leave you to attend to that, Miss Richmond. Thank you for your help with the book.” Holding it triumphantly aloft, Mr Milliard strode away across the hall and up the stairs.

Feeling thoroughly rattled, Frederica opened the door and gasped with pleasure to see Penrith on the doorstep. After such an unsettling few minutes, she could not have conceived of a more welcome sight. “It is you!”

“It is.”

She could have sworn his eyes twinkled. The memory of their encounter by Avonwyke’s lake returned to her in a flash—as it had done incessantly over the day and a half since it happened. She had vacillated between dreaming about his tender touch and affectionate gaze, attempting to imagine what it would have been like if he had kissed her, and questioning whether it had happened at all, for it savoured too much of a fairy tale to be real.



“Might I come in?”

She was barring his way, she comprehended with a start, stood on the threshold, staring at him as she was. She hastened backwards. “Yes! Pardon me.”

He stepped into the hall and removed his hat. He was wearing riding clothes, she noticed, and had a crop in his hand. “I am not interrupting your work I hope?” he asked, pointing to the letters in her hand.

Frederica had all but forgotten them in her agitation. One was another plea to the family who wished to adopt Lucy Baxter, begging them to take Tom as well. The other was altogether more frivolous.

“Not at all,” she assured him. “One of these is not even work related—merely a piece of wishful thinking on my part. Do you recall that Adelaide mentioned a friend, Patty, whom she lost touch with after leaving High Brook?”

“I do. She has mentioned her more than once in my hearing.”

“Quite—and given my own feelings about leaving Taverstock...well, I thought I would do what I could to try and find her friend. There is a foundling hospital in Southampton. I have written to the matron to ask whether anybody by the name of Patty Robins has applied for work there.” She looked at the letter, feeling all the futility of the undertaking, then shrugged. “It will likely come to nothing, but it is worth a try.”

Penrith regarded her in that way he often did, with an expression that was not quite a smile, but which nevertheless made him look pleased, or proud, or at any rate something very far removed from sad. “That is exceptionally thoughtful, Miss Richmond. Should you like me to write to my acquaintances in the area as well?”

Frederica's hopes for success soared. Her letter might achieve very little, but a duke's enquiries were sure to find something out. "Adelaide will be beside herself with gratitude."

"I am pleased, though I do not pretend to be doing it for anyone but you. "

"Oh!" Frederica looked aside, too embarrassed to maintain his gaze, and mumbled her thanks.

"There is something you could do for me in return. Say you will accompany me to a ball."

She looked up at him in surprise. "A ball? Whose?"

"Mine, at Easter. You said you thought you might enjoy one."

He withdrew a card from his inside breast pocket and presented it to her. It was ornately decorated, her name written in a handsome, masculine hand. She pictured him sitting down to write it himself and would have dismissed the notion, except she then remembered his riding clothes. Has he ridden here to give this to me in person? Her heart leapt at the thought.

"I did say that—and I meant it. Only...so soon? I know none of the dances."

"That does not matter. You do not have to dance if you do not wish to, but I should like you to be there all the same. Think of it as research in your endeavour to make an informed choice about your future, for you will never truly know whether you like balls until you have attended one."

She smiled—amazed, diverted, and humbled all at once. "Would it not look strange for me to not dance at all?"

“You may stub your toe in the first dance and sit the rest out if you like. I am in earnest—your being there is all that matters to me. Besides, I do not intend for it to be a large event.” His countenance took on a turn of awkwardness; he tapped his crop against his thigh and exhaled resignedly before adding, “It will be the first ball I have given since Margot died. I have attended a few engagements since I came out of mourning, but I have not had the heart for anything of this sort. It is expected of me, though. It would be detrimental to my children’s prospects if I were to become a recluse.”

He took her by surprise by reaching for her hand. Frederica allowed the liberty. The thought that she would have liked to allow him many more left her breathless and hot.

“You have emboldened me to take that step, Miss Richmond,” he continued. “All I want for now is the courage to see the thing through, and I believe I shall find that more easily with you there.” With a subtle squeeze, he released her hand, then added, with a seriousness that was entirely at odds with his words, “And if shameless bribery is what you require, then my children have expressed a wish to see you again.”

“Oh? Will they be attending the ball?” she asked, laughing.

“No,” he replied wryly, “but you might visit them in the nursery beforehand if you were to attend.”

Frederica pressed his card to her breast and smiled warmly. “That would be delightful, but I do not require a bribe. I should be honoured to come to your ball.”

The look of relief on his face was almost enough to allay her apprehension. She would need to apply to the governors for another night away from Taverstock, to her sisters to lend her something to wear, and to her brothers to help her learn at least one or two dances. She would be reliant on them all to accelerate the tuition they had already begun in the etiquette expected in polished society. Yet, those qualms

notwithstanding, she could not deny that attending a ball at Cedarvale as Penrith's particular guest was a prospect that filled her with joy.

### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Adelaide and Scarlett did better than to lend a gown; as soon as they learnt about the ball, they brought the best modiste in Buckingham on the twenty-two-mile round trip to Taverstock to measure Frederica in her own room, all with the purpose of minimising her time away from her duties. She did not see the finished piece until she arrived at Avonwyke on the morning of the ball. Adelaide's home was farther away than Cedarvale, but going there first was essential, for Frederica could not dress herself for such a grand event without the assistance of her sisters' maids. The gown was exquisite; pearly white satin with a green and gold embroidered drape, and a daringly low-cut bodice, perfectly complemented by Lady Tipton's necklace. Never had she felt so ladylike—at last the equal of her sisters in elegance if not in beauty.

They travelled in two carriages to Cedarvale, the Kemertons and the Worthes in one, Oakley and Frederica in the other. It was not an overly long journey— just long enough for her to dwell on all the dances she had barely learnt, all the people she would not know, and all the ways she might embarrass her family or disappoint the duke. Just long enough for her to question, for the thousandth time, what it meant that Penrith had invited her at all. She was not used to feeling nervous, but then, she was not used to much beyond the well-honed routines of Taverstock. She felt uncommonly discomposed by the time they arrived and clung tightly to Oakley's arm as they ascended the steps to the front door.

Their party was not the first to arrive. From the vestibule, Frederica could see that the hall which had seemed so vast and bright on her last visit was now teeming with people. More men and women than she had ever seen together in one place mingled about, their clothes and manners as ornate as the setting. Musicians played on a high

gallery she had not noticed before, and at either side of the chamber, the doors stood open, revealing other rooms with more people.

“He said it would be a small gathering,” she said quietly.

Oakley chuckled. “That is exactly what Adelaide said to me the first time I took her to a ball.”

“Oh yes! Mr Hanson’s ball,” Adelaide said as she was relieved of her cloak by a footman. “I thought every person in London must be there, but I soon learnt it was a paltry little thing—much like its host. Still, this is a larger gathering than I was expecting, considering that we are in the country, and it is only spring. ”

“And he only had two weeks to arrange it,” Scarlett added.

“That makes no difference,” Kem remarked from behind them. “When a duke sends an invitation, it behoves a person to accept it, no matter where they are or what month it is.”

Once the party had handed over their wraps and coats, the butler announced them into the hall. Frederica felt excessively conscious when every person present seemed to stop what they were doing to stare in their direction. She ignored it as best she could—and forgot about it altogether when she saw Penrith striding towards them.

Her breath caught at the sight of him. He looked exceedingly well—as well as she had ever seen him, in fact. Perhaps because they had not been in company since he rode to Taverstock two weeks ago, she was more attuned to the change in him. The gauntness that had marred his looks when she first met him was gone without trace, removing the sharpness from his high cheekbones, giving strength to his jawline, and revealing an intrinsic beauty to his whole countenance. His distinctive dark eyes gleamed in the candlelight, and her heart lifted to see the increasingly common smile

on his lips.

“You look quite remarkably well, Miss Richmond,” he said to her once he had greeted their whole party. “I am exceedingly pleased you are here.”

“I am sorry if we are later than you were anticipating. Kem and Worthe were sure we would be among the first to arrive.”

“I fear we underestimated the ton’s eagerness to see you returned to their clutches, Duke,” Worthe said amiably.

“It is not me they have come to see,” Penrith replied, looking meaningfully at Frederica. “It seems that a lost Richmond sister is the height of fashion these days.”

Frederica baulked. “They have come to see me ?”

“A good number of them seem to have, at any rate, although I could not tell you how anyone found out you would be here. Not that I would not have announced it with pride, but I rather thought you would prefer to maintain a less conspicuous presence at your first ball.”

“That would have been nice,” Frederica agreed anxiously.

“That is quite the mystery,” Oakley said stiffly. “None of us has told anyone either. We have been deliberately circumspect while Frederica has been deciding on her future.”

He did not elaborate, but his implication was clear: it would have been awkward indeed for them to have announced her discovery, only for her to eschew the connection and remain in work. It was nothing Frederica had not already concluded for herself—she knew, now, that she could not inhabit both worlds. Nevertheless, his

admission of secrecy made her consider for the first time what detriment it would be to the family's reputation were she to choose to remain at Taverstock.

"I hope it will not detract from your enjoyment of the evening?"

Frederica shook off her distraction and focused her gaze on the duke. He was looking at her with concern—and a hint of alarm, she thought. It was a timely reminder that this evening, his courage was dependent upon hers. They would have to be brave together.

"I shall not allow it to," she told him firmly.

His smile flickered back to life, and he held out his arm for her. After encouraging nods from her sisters, Frederica took it and allowed him to lead her into the crowd. To her surprise, he evaded the first two groups of people in their path. When a third turned expectantly in their direction, only to be neatly sidestepped, she began to worry.

"You must not neglect your guests on my account. I am not so nervous that I cannot withstand a little attention."

"No, but I might be," he replied with a slight wince. "I thought perhaps we might both take solace in some less demanding company for a few minutes, before the evening really gets going."

"Your children, you mean?" At his nod, she asked, "Are you allowed to disappear from your own ball once it has already begun?"

"Let us find out, shall we? But I daresay if everyone is gone when we come back, neither of us will be overly troubled."



“True!” she replied, laughing.

He directed her to the refreshment table in the corner of the hall and took two glasses from the footman serving them, then said in a low voice something about a door. In the blink of an eye, the servant had opened a panel in the wall and the duke had ushered Frederica into a dimly lit service passage beyond it.

“I do not claim to know much about polished society, but this seems the sort of thing that would be frowned upon by our mothers, if either of us had one,” Frederica said.

“Good. It is too long since I did anything reckless.” He handed her one of the glasses. “You make me feel young again, Miss Richmond. I am not yet eight-and-twenty, but I had almost forgotten what it was like.”

Frederica could scarcely contain her pleasure to see him in such high spirits. He had been so unutterably sad but a few months ago—to see him enjoying himself, and to imagine herself as having had a part in it, was the most joyous feeling in the world. She took a sip from her glass, expecting wine, and was surprised to be greeted with bubbles. They tickled the back of her nose and made her grimace and shiver.

“Your first taste of champagne?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Do you like it?”

Frederica hesitated, then admitted, “No,” and felt a surge of happiness when he gave a hearty laugh, set both glasses down on the ground, and tugged her along the passage by the hand.

His children were out of bed awaiting them when they reached the nursery. They

rushed forwards, their arms outstretched in greeting as they called for their father and—to Frederica's surprise and delight—her. She lowered herself to the floor, smiling merrily as the youngest child, Lord Felix, toddled his way up the length of her skirt to flop himself down in her lap.

“Sit here ,” he said definitively.

Lady Delphine, busy tracing the embroidery on the hem of Frederica's drape with her finger, wished to know whether she was a princess, and Lord Ryde was interested chiefly in whether she had brought cake. Frederica managed to satisfy them all with a brief bedtime story—even Penrith, who watched with an expression of the purest contentment as his children listened attentively to her tale. Had anyone asked her at that moment whether she was enjoying her first ball, the answer would have been a resounding yes . Never mind the imposing grandeur of the nursery or the dozens of primed and starched aristocrats gathered below— this was a world in which she felt completely at home, in the company of children who wanted only for a mother's love.

The blissful interlude did not last for long. The children were tired, and Penrith could not be absent from his own ball for too long. After kissing each of his children on the head in goodnight, he escorted Frederica out of the nursery and back to the ball via a staircase she had not seen before. The hubbub of voices and music reached them when they were still only halfway down, and Penrith immediately slowed his steps.

“Thank you for coming to see them,” he said. “You have quite won their hearts.”

“They are darlings. You must be exceedingly proud of them.”

She wondered whether he was thinking of their mother when he did not answer. She grew awkward, unsure what to say, and was taken wholly by surprise to feel his gentle touch. His hand brushed against hers, the contact seeming almost inadvertent at first but quickly becoming more deliberate—not quite holding her hand but

entwining his fingers with hers in a gesture that felt reverent in its tenderness.

She had not yet summoned the courage to look at him when two gentlemen emerged through the open door at the foot of the stairs, their voices raised above the din of the crowded room behind them. They were followed by two ladies, then a footman, then what seemed to be a whole stream of people as the party spilled into this part of the house. None of them thought to look up, therefore none of them noticed their host, halfway down the stairs in a silent exchange of hearts with the Richmond orphan they were all apparently in such a rage to meet.

“Are you ready for the attention?” Penrith asked quietly.

“Are you?”

He regarded her steadily for a moment, his smile small but vastly affecting. “I am feeling better about it by the moment.”

And, indeed, Frederica could see none of his earlier disquiet in his eyes. Neither could she see any vestige of sadness. “Then yes, I am perfectly ready.”

He offered her his arm and together, they descended into the fray.

### CHAPTER SIXTEEN

People certainly were curious. Over the next several hours, Frederica lost count of the number of times she was asked for an introduction, congratulated on being returned to her family, welcomed to the ton, and—most unexpectedly of all—complimented, on everything from her looks to her dancing, both of which she found absurd. Were it not for her sisters' marriages and the duke's advocacy, she might have been persuaded to think people were laughing at her. She had spent her whole life being of no interest to anybody. To be suddenly the cynosure of all eyes was bewildering.

On Oakley's advice, she did not elaborate on her present situation, despite it clearly being all anybody wished to know. Her family had resolved that she should not be left alone even for one moment, thus one of them was always present to fend off any probing questions. To that end, they had also somehow contrived to help her evade any invitations to dance the first three sets. The two after that, she had danced—poorly—with Kem and Worthe, while for the present set, she was partnered by Oakley. Next to come was the supper dance, and she had promised that to Penrith. She was beside herself in anticipation for it, though she dearly hoped she would make less of a fudge of it than she was presently making of the dance with her brother.

"I am so sorry," she whispered after tripping him with a wrong turn. "I thought it was the other way."

"It is well," he replied with a grin. "I thought it was our turn to go around the outside, so I am hardly in a position to judge. Do not concern yourself—nobody noticed."

“I do not know how. It feels as though everybody is watching me.”

“None more so than the duke, eh?”

Frederica followed Oakley’s gaze to where Penrith danced in another group. He was, indeed, looking in her direction, quite ignoring his partner. Frederica felt herself blush—and blush again when her inattention made her miss her cue to skip forwards.

“You two seem to enjoy each other’s company exceedingly well,” Oakley said as they joined opposite arms and skipped around on the spot.

Frederica nodded, grinning broadly. Penrith, like her brothers and sisters, had spent much of the evening by her side. He had been required to dance more often than she, but he had returned to her between almost every set, heading off as many questions about her past as she had about his late wife. They made a fine team .

Oakley swapped arms with her, and they skipped back in the other direction. “If he were to speak to you at some point about wishing to spend more time with you...considerably more time...would you be amenable to such a...circumstance?”

Frederica looked at him eagerly, her heart beating even faster than the energetic dance demanded. “Has he said he wishes to...spend more time with me?”

“No—no, he has not. I only wished to know what I ought to say if he did.”

Frederica’s heart sank, and she felt a fool for having allowed it to soar—though it taught her much about her own mind that hope had been her first response to her brother’s ill-veiled hint. They stopped skipping and held their places while the other couples took their turns in the dance. In a voice for her ears only, Oakley added, “I do not mean to hasten you, Frederica—far from it. Only, I have not had a great deal of success when it comes to this side of things, and I should not like to err again.

Adelaide and Scarlett would have my guts.”

Frederica laughed lightly but did not reply, for the final figure of the dance was upon them, after which she asked Oakley to fetch her a drink and agreed to meet him at the table in the corner where they had both espied Scarlett frantically fanning herself.

“Lord but it is hot in here!” her sister said when Frederica sat next to her. “You danced well in that set, considering. If I did not know better, I would never have guessed that you were still learning that one this afternoon. ”

Frederica smiled absently but then, thinking to take advantage of their moment alone, said quietly, “Scarlett, what would happen to the family if I decided to stay at Taverstock?”

Her sister ceased fanning herself and regarded her seriously. “We would stand by you. We have told you as much. I wish you would believe us.”

“I do believe you, and I am exceedingly grateful, but that is not what I asked. I need to know what would happen to all of you if all of these people”—she gestured to the rest of the room—“ceased to think of me as a charming curiosity who grew up in an orphanage, and instead recognised me as somebody who still lived and worked there.” She put her hand on Scarlett’s arm. “I beg you would be honest with me. I need to know.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Scarlett twisted her mouth ruefully and sighed. “Very well—it could be frowned upon. Society can be unforgiving—but we would not allow it to trouble us.”

“But what would be the actual consequence? Would it affect Oakley’s chances of marrying well?”

“I suppose it is possible, but?—”

“Would you be shunned—you and Worthe, Adelaide and Kem, Lord and Lady Tipton? Would I disgrace you all in the eyes of your friends?”

“I am sure our friends would know better.”

“Everyone else, then.”

“Well...I suppose, some people might object to the association—but it does not matter!” she said with a note of exasperation in her voice that was quite unlike her. “You must remember, our aunt and uncle have lived through more than their share of scandals—our father’s elopement, Damian’s many depraved escapades, Adelaide’s broken engagement...They know how to weather such storms.”

Frederica nodded slowly, surer by the moment that she knew her heart at last. “I begin to think it would be infinitely better if they were not made to weather another.”

Scarlett peered at her shrewdly, before reiterating, “They will withstand whatever you throw at them.” Then she smirked. “But I cannot deny that if you decided to throw a duke at them, they would be very unlikely to cavil. Oh! Speak of the devil...”

“Here they are!” Oakley announced, arriving in their little corner with two glasses of wine, Scarlett’s husband, and Penrith. Frederica’s stomach began fluttering wildly.

“For you, my love,” Worthe said, handing Scarlett the glass he had brought for her and sitting in the nearest seat.

“And for you,” Oakley said, handing Frederica her glass. Gesturing to Penrith, he said, “His Grace was looking for you.”

“Forgive me,” Frederica said to him. “Scarlett found this empty corner, and I thought I might take advantage to avoid any more interrogations. I was not hiding from you.”

“I am very glad to hear it,” he said, “for I believe this next dance is mine.”

After a few sips of wine to quench her thirst—and for courage—Frederica took the duke’s hand, and together they joined the line of dancers, where she proceeded to enjoy one of the most magical half-hours of her life. She had worried she would be self-conscious, but it was exactly as it had been when they first danced together at Avonwyke. The heat of his hands lingered upon her palms even when they were not touching; the weight of his gaze made itself felt, even when she was dancing down the line away from him. Her mistakes went unremarked, and their neighbours in the dance went ignored. There was neither the necessity nor the room for nerves in her heart, for it was too full of a far more powerful sentiment.

The set came to an end but the thrall did not. Frederica felt as though she was floating as Penrith led her wordlessly towards the supper room. She met his gaze repeatedly, each time surprised at the intensity with which he was regarding her, each time discomposed by his handsomeness. When he tugged on her hand and said in a low voice, “Come with me,” she went unquestioningly. She would have followed him to the moon if he had asked it of her at that moment.

He led her to a room that was guarded by a footman—a private room, not open to the revellers—and shut the door behind them. It ought to have been alarming that they were standing toe-to-toe in a moonlit room with no chaperon and his breath coming quickly and unevenly as he stared at her—but she had never felt so sure of anything. It was as though all her deliberations had led to this moment .

“Forgive me,” he said in a voice that made Frederica shiver. “I had every intention of waiting, but I could not withstand another moment of you looking at me in that way.” He gave a small laugh and shook his head. “You are still doing it.”



“Sorry.” She closed her eyes in jest and felt him take up both her hands and lean closer.

“Have I told you how absolutely beautiful you look this evening, Frederica?”

She opened her eyes wide in surprise upon hearing him address her so familiarly. It was dark, but this close, she could see his expression—ardent and joyous. An answering smile pulled at her own lips. “Just about everybody I have spoken to this evening has told me—I am completely persuaded that it must be common ballroom parlance for ‘good evening’.”

He chuckled slightly and shook his head. “Only you could think that. Truly, I have never encountered modesty as artless as yours. People have said it to you because it is true. You are the handsomest woman here tonight.”

Frederica scoffed. “That could not be true anywhere that my sisters are present.”

His mouth quirked. “You will have to forgive me if I disagree. And I believe I am the authority on the matter, since it is your face I see every time I close my eyes—your face I look for every time I catch a glimpse of somebody I hope might be you in the street—your face I imagine whenever I think of you, which is all the time.”

Frederica’s heart was racing to hear him express thoughts that so closely mirrored her own. She had tried valiantly not to be carried away on a swell of false hope these past two weeks, but there had been no banishing him from her thoughts, and she too had found herself more often thinking of him than not. “I dared not hope that you...” She faltered and looked down, too embarrassed to say more.

Penrith put a finger under her chin and tilted her face back up to his. “I beg you would cease to doubt it this instant. Dearest Frederica, you are the kindest, gentlest, sweetest-tempered soul I have ever known. You must know I love you.”

An image sprang to Frederica's mind of his expression of pure happiness as he watched his children in the nursery—along with the comprehension that he had not only been watching his children. Yes, she realised: she had suspected it, though she had done her best not to allow herself to believe it. She thought her heart might burst to hear him say it. "And I you," she whispered back.

He exhaled forcefully, all the air leaving him in one breath. Then he cradled her face in his hands and kissed her—gently at first, but one arm soon snaked around her waist and pulled her tightly against him, and for one startling but glorious moment, a greater ardour crept into his caress. Then someone banged on the door and called for him, and Frederica's fairy tale evening came crashing down around her ears.

"What is it?" Penrith barked. He had jerked away from her the moment the knock came, but he held on to her hand.

"Someone is here looking for Miss Richmond, Your Grace, but nobody can find her."

Frederica tensed, convinced that it could only be one of her relations and dismayed that she must have displeased them by being alone with the duke.

Penrith squeezed her hand and fixed her with an earnest look. "Do not worry. One moment." He marched to the door and yanked it open. "Who is looking for her?"

"A Mr Dalton from the Taverstock Orphanage. He says it is urgent."

"Rupert!" Frederica's stomach turned over with a sickening lurch. Something dire must have happened for him to have come all this way in the middle of the night to fetch her. "What has happened?" she cried as she rushed to the door.

Penrith held it firm, preventing her from seeing out—or, she comprehended, anyone from seeing in. "Where is he?" he asked his footman.

“In the servants’ hall, Your Grace.”

Penrith hesitated; his expression, now fully lit by the candlelight streaming through the partially opened door, was grim. With a sigh, he nodded and opened the door a little farther, revealing Frederica’s presence to the footman. “Take Miss Richmond to him. I shall join you there presently.” To Frederica he said, “I shall find your cousin and bring him to you.”

She begged him to make haste and stepped around the door, blinking fiercely in the bright light as she followed the footman along the fringes of the crowd, away from the ball, and into a world that was much more familiar to her. A warren of dingy service passages led, eventually, to a large room with a table and benches, at one end of which was a huddle of servants. They fell silent when she entered. Some looked at her with curiosity, some with distaste, some with pity as they shuffled aside to reveal Rupert, sitting in their midst. The turn of his countenance told Frederica all she needed to know about the seriousness of the situation. She squeezed her eyes shut.

I should never have come!

### CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Frederica hugged herself against the cold as the carriage sped through the night. There had been no time to wait for hot bricks or blankets. There had not even been time to say goodbye to all her family. In the rush, Penrith had only been able to find Adelaide, to whom Frederica had apologised for leaving and given her jewellery for safekeeping. She hoped the others would understand when the situation was explained to them.

She sucked in a breath and squeezed her eyes shut. What had happened? “Tell me again, Rupert. What exactly did Tom say? Why has he done this?”

Rupert’s horse—or rather, Mr Mulligan’s horse—had been left to recover in Cedarvale’s stables, thus here he sat with her in the duke’s carriage, looking every bit as miserable as she felt. “Same as he’s been saying for weeks,” he replied glumly. “That he couldn’t bear to have his sister taken away from him as well as his ma and pa.”

“But she was not going to be taken away—I was in talks with Mrs Beard for her to take both of them.”

Rupert shook his head. “She didn’t want both of them, Fred. She told you that, but you wouldn’t listen, so she went to the governors.”

“What?”

“Mulligan waited ’til you were away, so you wouldn’t kick up a fuss. The family

came for Lucy yesterday afternoon.”

“No!” Frederica wrung her hands together and stared out of the window, trying in vain to see how far they had travelled. “Poor, poor Tom. He must have been absolutely desperate.”

“Desperate?” Rupert sneered. “The boy’s not right in the head. No sane person does this to their little sister.”

Frederica shuddered to consider what Lucy must be suffering. Her terror and confusion notwithstanding, it was after one o’clock in the morning; she would be freezing. For, in his distress, Tom Baxter had apparently dragged his six-year-old sister to the roof, barred the door behind him, and was threatening to push her off unless somebody promised they would not be separated. Of course, the promise had been made, but Tom had not been convinced. They had attempted to force the door, only to stop when he shoved Lucy so far over the parapet that she grew hysterical. At midnight, Mr Mulligan had sent Rupert to Cedarvale to fetch Frederica back. She was their last hope.

“I should have been there,” she said into the night. The silence that followed was devastating, for it was the sound of Rupert agreeing with her.

“You looked like you was enjoying yourself,” he said at length.

His words drove the shard of guilt deeper still into Frederica’s gut. She looked at him in dismay, only to find him looking sullenly at the sliver of ball gown that was showing through the opening of her cloak. She tugged the edges together to conceal it. She had felt like a princess wearing the gown earlier; now she felt like a charlatan.

She had been enjoying herself—it had been the happiest night of her life—but at what cost? While she had been draping herself with jewels at Avonwyke, Mrs Beard and

the governors had been conspiring to separate two children who only had each other left in the world. While she had been playing with Penrith's children, Tom had been dragging his terrified sister to the roof. While she had been dancing with the duke—while she had been kissing him—Lucy had been dangled over the parapet like a rag doll. Self-reproach made her gorge rise so violently, she thought she might choke on it.

“There's the gates,” Rupert said, sitting forwards in his seat.

Frederica could scarcely catch her breath for dread as the carriage pulled into the drive. As soon as it reached the house, Rupert threw open the door, and with a hastily shouted word of thanks to the coachman, the pair took off towards the back of the house.

What happened next remained too much of a blur for Frederica to remember clearly later. She was certain Tom had recognised her. She knew she had called out to him, because she remembered telling him everything would be well, knowing full well it was a lie. She was sure—although recollections from everyone present varied—that Tom had lifted his hand only to wave at her. Lucy had certainly called her name, though whether before or after she fell, Frederica could not recall, no matter how many times the magistrate had insisted that she try. The sight of Lucy falling was her only clear memory, and she saw it over and over again as she sat by her bedside in the sickroom, mopping the poor dear's brow while she groaned in agony.

They had caught her—the schoolmasters and some of the older boys had been standing at the foot of the house with a tarpaulin stretched taut between them for hours, apparently. Yet, though it had broken her fall and undoubtedly saved her life, it had not prevented her from making some contact with the ground, and both of her legs were broken. Whether she would ever walk again, only time would tell.

Mrs Beard had withdrawn her offer of adoption, unwilling to take on a crippled child.

Against Frederica's every heartfelt argument, and despite her every desperate plea, Tom had been taken to the gaol in Oxford. Frederica thought her heart would break whenever she pictured him there. It was unthinkable—a child of ten, imprisoned with ruffians and criminals of every age and persuasion, his only crime the desire to remain with the last surviving member of his family. The worst of it being that, one way or another, he had surely lost her forever now.

"This was my fault," Frederica whispered, her voice breaking on a sob. If only she had agreed to let Lucy go when Mrs Beard first enquired, she would never have been hurt. She and Tom would have survived the loss of their family, as every child at Taverstock always did—as Frederica herself had done! Yet, therein lay the rub. It was her own situation that had led her astray. After a lifetime alone, she had been reunited with her brother and sisters, and she had been so wrapped up in the wonder of it that she had not been willing to countenance another family being torn apart as hers had been. Only, she had forgotten that life was not a fairy tale, and as a result, she had let Tom and Lucy down in the worst conceivable way.

Just as she had let Penrith down. What a cruel thing to have done, to let him love her, when she could never consent to be with him. His expression when she insisted that she must go, refusing all offers of assistance except for the loan of his carriage and coachman, was the only other thing she remembered with any clarity from the long night. That and his kiss. She was glad of that memory at least, for it was the only kiss she would ever receive from him now.

The apothecary returned the next day to check on Lucy and administer a tincture which at last allowed her to cease writhing and fall into a deep sleep. Frederica was vastly relieved to see it. She had not left the girl's side since the accident other than to change out of her gown and boil some water with which to tend to her. She had dozed occasionally in her chair, but it was hard and uncomfortable, and she had preferred to keep her eyes open in any case, so as not to be plagued with painful remembrances. All there had been to do was watch the little girl suffer.

A short while after the apothecary left, Daisy came to the sickroom. “There’s another visitor downstairs, miss, but he can just as well wait for Mr Mulligan as you. You ought to get some rest. I’ll sit with Lucy for a bit.”

Frederica was too tired to refuse. She stroked Lucy’s hair and whispered a promise to return soon, then made her way down the stairs to the first-floor landing. She hesitated before going down the next flight upon hearing a ruckus coming from one of the schoolrooms and the sound of Mr Carnegie’s raised voice. She walked quickly to his door and knocked. Such a racket emanated from within that she was not surprised nobody heard her. She entered and immediately comprehended why there was so much noise. All the boys were crammed into this room, as they had been when Mr Patterson first took ill.

“Mr Carnegie, is there a problem?” she called over the din.

“Indeed there is!” he replied angrily. “Mr Milliard has not turned up to teach his lesson today.”

“Good!” Benjamin said from one of the seats nearest Frederica. “Might be as none of us gets a hiding, in that case. ”

Mr Carnegie admonished him to be quiet, but the boy’s remark cut through the fog of Frederica’s fatigue like a knife. “What do you mean, Benjamin?”

“Miss Richmond, I must object—” the schoolmaster began, but Benjamin spoke over him.

“Mr Milliard’s pretty happy with his fists, miss.”

“And his belt,” another boy offered.



“And his boot,” said a third.

Frederica looked at Mr Carnegie in alarm.

“Settle down, boys,” the schoolmaster said firmly. He had reddened, though Frederica knew not where his anger was directed—at Mr Milliard, the boys, or her.

“Reckon it were ’im what sent Tom over the edge,” Geoffrey said defiantly. “He was terrified of Mr Milliard.”

“That is enough! I will have quiet in my classroom,” Mr Carnegie warned, but Frederica was unable to stop herself.

“Geoffrey, I heard Tom with my own ears admit that he had never seen Mr Milliard punish a boy.” He told me he would never lay a finger on a child!

At the back of the room, Bertie snorted. “He might not have seen it, but that don’t mean he didn’t know it was coming. He’s got a right temper on him, has Mr Milliard. Who do you think gave me this?” He stood up and lifted his shirt to reveal a huge dark bruise on his side.

Frederica stared at the mark in horror.

“Master Campbell, if you do not desist, you will have a darned sight more than a sore rib to complain about, now sit down !” Mr Carnegie shouted. “Miss Richmond, if you please ! I shall have enough difficulty keeping the boys in check after the events of last night, without them being whipped up about something new.” He gestured firmly for her to leave.

She nodded numbly and exited the room, pulling the door closed with a quiet click behind her and standing motionless on the landing. Did he truly see nothing untoward

in this? None of the schoolmasters baulked at using the cane, she knew—but a fist, a boot, a belt ? Surely Mr Carnegie did not condone outright brutality?

It did not seem possible that Mr Milliard was capable of it. He had always seemed so friendly. A small sound escaped her—a sob, or a groan, or an efflux of disbelief, she knew not what. She only knew she felt sick to her stomach knowing that Tom had faced losing his sister and being left alone at Taverstock with a violent schoolmaster terrorising him—and that she had not been here to protect him from either.

She drifted down the stairs and across the hall in a daze, unsure what she ought to do. Her instinct was to speak to Mr Mulligan when he came later, but Mr Carnegie's response had made her uncertain. Would the governors who had sent a young boy to be incarcerated think Mr Milliard had done anything wrong? Was she a fool to have believed that Taverstock was a kinder place than this?

Such was her distraction that she did not notice somebody was there until they put their hands on her arms to stop her dreamlike progress across the hall. She gave a yelp of surprise and then felt a rush of the most profound relief to see that Penrith had come. She had forgotten Daisy's mention of a visitor. Yet her elation was short-lived, rapidly subsumed by the deepest despair as she contemplated what must follow.

“Forgive me, I did not mean to startle you, but we almost collided.” He removed his hands, and in her mind, Frederica cried out for him to put them back. “Are you well?” he asked gently.

Oh, how she wished he would not be kind to her! His gaze was full of concern and love, and it hurt her heart to look at it. She nodded when what she really wanted was to weep. “I am so very sorry I had to leave.”

“Think nothing of it, I am only sorry I was not at liberty to accompany you. Were you able to resolve the matter?”

She shook her head. “She fell. She has broken both her legs.”

“Good God! What has become of her?”

“She is here. The apothecary has been again this morning. He was a little more hopeful about her prospect of recovery on this visit.”

“That is a relief, but I shall nevertheless send to London for a physician.”

Frederica wanted to hug him, though whatever it was inside her that was already hurting so terribly then twisted tighter at the realisation that she would never again feel his arms around her. She thanked him, but her voice was weak with fatigue and sorrow, and she did not think it conveyed a tenth of her true gratitude .

“What of the brother?” Penrith enquired.

“He has been sent to the gaol in Oxford.”

“Gaol?” Penrith asked disbelievingly. “Surely not.”

“He did not push her, she fell, I am sure of it, but after threatening to, he was never likely to be believed. The governors summoned the magistrate, and he deemed the boy guilty. I tried to stop them from sending him there.” Frederica swallowed hard. “Gaol is no place for a ten-year-old boy.”

“Absolutely not. Who is the magistrate here?”

“Lord Humboldt.”

“Leave it with me. This will not stand.”

Frederica veritably sagged with relief. What a pleasure it was to have another to share the burdens that too often felt like hers alone. “You think you will be able to have him released?”

“I shall certainly try. I am not without influence amongst the judiciary, and whilst I am patron of this orphanage, no child housed here will be punished for a crime he did not commit.”

Frederica felt as though a vast weight had been lifted from her chest—and in the space of one beat of her heart, wretchedness had flooded in to fill the void it created, for she knew she must repay Penrith’s kindness with rejection, and it was almost too much to bear. “Again, I thank you,” she said weakly, “from the bottom of my heart on behalf of both children, for it is more than I shall ever be able to do for them.”

There was a pause that was horrible to Frederica’s mind. She stood still, waiting, wanting at once to throw herself at Penrith, to beg him to leave, and for the ground to open and swallow her. Eventually, the thing she dreaded came to pass.

“Frederica, I must talk to you in private. We were interrupted last night, but I think you know I had not finished saying what I took you into that room to say.”

“And you must not finish it.”

“What?”

“You must not say it. I...I cannot do it.” The pain in her heart was even worse than she had anticipated. She brought a hand to her chest in a vain attempt to press it away.

“You cannot...what do you mean? Cannot do what?” His confusion was awful to behold.

“Leave. I am sorry. I should never have even entertained the idea of it. I live here . I am needed here . I cannot leave. Ever.”

He closed his eyes briefly, then said, in a voice that was evidently intended to be collected but which sounded anything but, “It is I who must apologise. After we...I was anxious that you would not think I had dishonoured you—for you to know I intended to...” He began to make a gesture with his hand but instead clenched it into a fist and pressed it against his thigh. “But it was thoughtless to come so soon after what you endured last night. I did not consider...I ought to have waited longer.”

“It would not have made any difference,” Frederica said miserably. “My answer would have been the same. The events of last night have not affected me in the way you think—I am not out of my senses. I have only had my eyes opened. I see, now, what damage I have done with my foolish notions of becoming a lady. None of this would have happened if I had been here, where I belong.”

Penrith frowned. “You cannot blame yourself for what has happened.”

“But I do!” Had she only been present more often, instead of away, playing at being highborn, she could have prevented Tom from living in fear, protected Lucy from being injured, and stopped Mr Milliard from hurting anybody . She had always known whenever Mrs Woods or Mr Patterson lost their temper—the children had always used to run to her to avoid a punishment from them. She could not even say when that had stopped happening—she had not noticed!

She took a ragged breath, her guilt mingling with her heartbreak to steal her breath away. “The children need me. I will not abandon them again. This is my home, and it always will be.”

Penrith did not appear able to speak. He opened his mouth again and again, but nothing came out. Frederica wished he would go, for she knew not how much longer

she could withstand the pain of watching his heart break, knowing that it had only just begun to heal.

“Please find someone who can love you better than I can, someone who will have no reservations, no regrets. You deserve that. You deserve that and so much more. I cannot give you what you need. I am sorry.” She swallowed a sob, but her tears came regardless. She had let so many people down, but of all the people she had hurt, Penrith’s anguish cut her the deepest. Had the poor man not suffered enough? She could not bear it.

“Please go,” she begged him. The plea made, she could no longer suppress her misery and was overtaken with weeping.

The duke looked utterly bereft as he nodded and bowed to her in farewell. “I wish you well, Miss Richmond. More than you can know.” Then he left, and Frederica thought her heart would tear in two.

### CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

With trembling limbs, Frederica walked to her bedchamber and poured water from her ewer into her wash basin—but splashing her face did not clear her mind or wash away her agony. She was too exhausted, too desolate for anything to give her reprieve. Her head began to spin; images of Lucy falling and Tom being dragged away screaming were now joined by Bertie pulling up his shirt to reveal his ugly bruise and the duke’s expression as he said his final goodbye.

A knock at the door barely roused her from her misery, but whoever it was did not wait for her to answer and opened the door wide. It was Jennifer.

“Mrs Woods says can you bring her the new embroidery threads please, miss?”

Frederica said she would, and the girl departed. It felt such a mundane request in the midst of so much unhappiness, yet was that not her choice—to remain at Taverstock and serve its needs? Thus, with her legs still weak and her chest still tight with sorrow, Frederica retrieved the necessary supplies from the store cupboard. She heard the door to the garden open behind her as she turned the lock. Assuming it would be Rupert coming in, she took a deep breath to compose herself and turned around with a welcome on her lips.

She froze when she saw Mr Milliard sauntering towards her. He did not appear to have seen her and came forwards unsteadily, his gaze unfocused, and his lips alternately sneering and snarling as he muttered quietly to himself. Frederica realised with dismay that he was inebriated. She did not feel in any way equal to battling with a drunkard, but she would rather rot than allow any more harm to come to the

children because of her inaction.

“You do not need to concern yourself with teaching today, Mr Milliard,” she said as firmly as she could.

He jumped slightly and stopped walking to squint at her. “Miss Richmond. I did not see you there.”

“Mr Carnegie has taken your lesson, sir.”

“Has he? Pray, tell me, madam, why are people always taking what is mine?” His words were slurred.

“He had no choice. It has gone noon. Lessons began, as they always do, at half past eight.”

Mr Milliard frowned slightly, then made a dismissive noise and a dismissive gesture to go with it. “Well, I am going to take it back.”

“Please do not!” Frederica cried. He had taken a step forwards but stopped and turned back to her; she flinched at the look in his eye. “I beg you would not upset the children today. There was an incident last night, and?—”

“Yes, I know. You were at a ball with your family .” He all but spat the word.

“No, that is not what I was referring?—”

“How was it, then?” he interrupted. “ The ball ?”

It was too fresh a wound for Frederica to remain unaffected by its mention; she had to take a breath to keep from weeping. Mr Milliard evidently did not like the wait; he



pressed the issue with uncommon spite.

“How was Viscount Oakley ? Was he a good little lord? Did he play the part well?”

“Lord Oakley is a consummate gentleman.”

Mr Milliard scoffed. “Just like his father, eh?”

“I would not know—I still have not met Lord Tipton.”

“Tipton? Please! He is no gentleman!”

Frederica shook her head, bewildered by his meandering conversation. “You are drunk, sir. It would be better if you went home.”

“Drunk, am I?” He laughed bitterly but then without warning lunged forwards and shoved her violently against the door of the store cupboard. She was too shocked to react and could do nothing but hold herself still as he put his face so close to hers that she could smell his foul breath and see the savage glint in his once-kind but now cold, green eyes.

“I shall go home once you stop playing games and give me what I want.”

She did what she could to draw back from him which was in truth not much of anything with the door hard and unyielding against her back. She wondered if she ought to scream but worried this was one of those absurd scenarios in which someone might demand he marry her. “I do not know what you want but pray leave me?—”

“ I want what I am due! ” he shouted and banged his palm into the door beside her head.

She yelped and shied away from him. "Please, sir, let me go. Surely you have been paid fairly for your work!"

"There is nothing fair about the way I have been treated. But mark my words I shall get what I am owed. Now tell me the truth !"

"I do not know what you are talking about!" A tear slid down Frederica's cheek, with more to follow, but her tears were not for fear of the schoolmaster. They were for the sheer disgrace of having been blind to what this man truly was. They were for her abject misery at comprehending she was not capable of protecting anyone from anything, and that Taverstock would be no worse off without her. They were for her utter despair to have spurned the only man she had ever loved for no good reason at all.

"Good God," Mr Milliard spat, grabbing her arm and gripping it painfully. "You are supposed to be a Richmond! You are just as useless as every other dirty little foundling in this place who does not know where she was born or who her family is."

He was wrong. Frederica knew perfectly well where she was from and who her family were. "I am a Richmond," she said through her tears. "My parents were Robert and Susan Richmond. I was born and orphaned in Wykham." What she had absolutely no idea of, was who she was meant to be now.

"What in God's name is going on 'ere?"

As suddenly as Mr Milliard had attacked Frederica, Rupert appeared and yanked him roughly away from her. They tussled for a brief time, but Rupert was younger, stronger, and sober, and it was not long until he had kicked the schoolmaster outside and barred the door behind him. Frederica watched it all with a strange detachment. Her tears had stopped, but her eyes felt swollen and her mind was moving too slowly to fully comprehend what was happening.

“What the bleedin’ ’eck was that about?” Rupert asked, hastening back to her side.

“I do not know. He wanted something from me. Money, I think. I am not sure.”

“Did he hurt you?”

“I do not think so.” She shook her head, feeling a chill pierce her. “I thought he was going to. He hits the boys—did you know that?”

Rupert gave her a sad, lopsided shrug. “’Tis not unheard of for a boy to get a thick ear in this place, you know that. But he shouldn’t ’ave been shoving you around. You ain’t a boy.”

And a boot in the ribs is not a thick ear, Frederica thought, but she did not say so, for she no longer knew right from wrong or up from down. She could not stop shaking. Rupert gave her his arm to steady herself and offered to help her to her room.

“I’m sorry,” he said as she shuffled dazedly along the passage.

“What for?”

“It was me who brought him here, weren’t it? And the thing is, I reckon you might be right. I think he was trying to get money out of you.”

“Hmm?” was all Frederica could muster.

“Well, truth be told, when I met him in the tavern that day, I was...well, I was in high dudgeon, ’cause you’d just told me you was a Richmond. And I might have been complaining a bit that you thought you were too good for me ’cause you was highborn. I was wrong about that, I know I was, but I was jealous. Anyhow, Milliard was in there, and he heard me talking, and he was all understanding and the

like—asking about your connections and agreeing that you shouldn't 'ave kept it a secret, that sort of thing.”

They had reached her room. Rupert opened the door for her and escorted her inside, but to Frederica's dismay, he did not leave and instead continued talking.

“Next thing I know, he's turned up 'ere. I didn't think much of it at the time, but if he had the notion that he could get money out of you, might be I gave him the impression you were some sort of heiress.” He removed his cap and ran a hand through his hair. “I'm sorry, Fred.”

Frederica could scarcely stand up anymore and certainly could not think clearly enough to make head or tail of Rupert's convoluted story. All she wanted was to lie down and close her eyes and stop thinking or feeling anything. “I feel quite unwell, Rupert. Would you excuse me?”

After a long, worried look, Rupert left her alone. She lay on her bed and closed her eyes and was not surprised that all she could see was Penrith's face with all his old desolation returned to his eyes. She fancied if she were to stand up off her bed and look in the mirror, she would see the same devastation reflected back at her.

### CHAPTER NINETEEN

Frederica slept for a few hours and awoke in time to help Mrs Digby in the dinner hall. The repose did little to alleviate her exhaustion; she felt clumsy with fatigue as she attended to the usual evening routine and took her several turns in the sickroom overnight, caring for Lucy. It was a stupor that persisted the next morning, also. She tried in vain to execute her duties as though nothing was amiss, but everything felt out of kilter—she did not seem able to do anything properly.

When Mr Milliard did not turn up to teach his lessons again, she attempted to help Mr Carnegie with the boys, only for him to send her away when they grew unruly in the face of her distraction. She turned her attention to the outstanding correspondence regarding current adoptions but found she had lost all confidence in her ability to administer the process competently. She attempted to change Lucy's bedsheets, but the girl screamed in agony, and Frederica gave up, unable to bear being the cause of any more of her pain.

She felt utterly useless and, by mid-afternoon, perfectly ready to admit that it was not fatigue that mired her thoughts in treacle. It was heartache. She thought it likely that if she slept for a month, she would wake still feeling desolate and lost.

She had no idea what to do. At the ball, she had been ready to give up everything she had ever known for a new life with a new family. By the next day, she had resolved never to leave Taverstock, horrified by the selfishness that had seen her abandon the children in the pursuit of her own gratification. Neither path seemed tenable any longer. She, who had always prided herself on her conscientiousness and discernment, now knew herself to be undependable, impressionable, and deplorably

na?ve.

And she had lost Penrith. She felt it as a palpable ache, deep in her chest, which had more than once stolen her breath and sent her thoughts scattering as she reeled from the intensity of it. She had loved many people in her life—old Mrs Cromarty, each of her adoptive parents before they gave her up, every child who had ever come through Taverstock's doors—but never had she experienced an attachment such as she felt for Penrith. She loved everything about him; from his devotion to his children to the compassion he had shown towards her and her family; from the dignity with which he bore his grief to the courageous way he had learnt to smile again. She did not think she could bear her loss as bravely—certainly not if her present state of incompetence and inattention was any indication.

She had just been sent away from the kitchen by Mrs Digby after miscounting the grocer's delivery for the third time, when Daisy informed her there was a carriage rolling into the drive. Irrationally hopeful that it might be Penrith, Frederica set off for the front door, her quick steps rapidly becoming a run as she abandoned decorum and tore through the house with her heart in her mouth. She stopped in her tracks upon arriving on the doorstep, for she could see straight away that it was not the duke's carriage—at least not the one she had ridden in either time he had sent one for her. She stood still, breathless with exertion and dismay.

Yet, in the next moment, the occupant of the carriage stepped down and looked at her, and Frederica let out a small cry to feel her heart ease by the smallest but most desperately needed degree.

“Oh Frederica, you look positively wretched,” Oakley said, his expression etched with pity. His compassion brought every ounce of her misery to the fore, and she ran to him, racked by sobs too violent for sound, her shoulders shaking silently as he hugged her, rubbing her back and whispering gentle words of solace. At one point, he broke his hold to lead her into the privacy of his carriage, then he hugged her again

until her tears ran dry.

“There now,” he said, passing her his handkerchief as she tried to compose herself. “Should you like something to settle your nerves? My coachman always carries a hip flask with something warming in it, if you think it would help.”

Frederica chuckled faintly, vastly grateful for his attempt at levity. “No, thank you. I am sorry for making such an exhibition of myself, only it has been a difficult few days, and I am ever so relieved to see you.”

“Do not apologise. I regret not coming sooner, now that I see how unhappy you are. We all thought it best not to trouble you yesterday, for we had been given to understand that you would be receiving a different visitor, and that things might have turned out rather happier. But we guessed when we did not hear anything that no such visit had taken place.”

Frederica took a deep, shaky breath and her voice wavered as she admitted, quietly, “I have made a terrible mistake.”

She explained to him the whole of it—Lucy’s accident and Tom’s arrest, her guilt, and Penrith’s interrupted proposal. Her brother listened quietly, his dismay at hearing her relate so much unpleasantness obvious.

“You called it a mistake,” he said when she was done. “May I take it that you regret your decision?”

“I regretted it instantly. I would never have refused him under any other circumstances, but I was upset and tired, and I felt terrible about what had happened to Lucy. I could not even think about getting engaged at such a moment.”

“Surely he must understand that. He is a reasonable man.”

“He did, but I told him he was wrong, assured him I was thinking clearly—though I know now that I was doing anything but.” Frederica grew more agitated as she spoke, her sentences coming in staccato beats. “I told him I would never leave Taverstock. That he should find somebody else to love him. I told him to leave. I have ruined everything.”

Oakley did not argue. Instead, he patted her knee and quirked his mouth sympathetically. “It seems you have inherited my luck when it comes to matters of the heart. But you must not despair. This is by no means a hopeless situation. I am certain that when you next see him, you will be able to make it clear that you spoke in haste.”

“If I have not made him hate me, you mean? I cannot imagine he will care two straws for my regrets after the way I have treated him.” She plucked at the corner of Oakley’s handkerchief and shook her head. “I doubt I shall be seeing much of him here from now on.”

Her brother regarded her pensively for a moment, then spoke with exceeding gentleness. “Then why not come to Chiltern Court with me?”

Frederica looked at him, taken aback by the suggestion but not as panicked by it as she had been by every previous mention.

“You are due to visit at the end of the month in any case,” he went on. “Why not come early? Meet your aunt and uncle, take stock for a week or two—perhaps longer. You never know, if Penrith hears that you have left Taverstock, perhaps he will comprehend that you are willing to step away from this world after all. Unless...” he added cautiously, “you really do feel unable to leave. ”

Frederica turned to the window, nudging the curtain a little farther aside with one finger and staring sadly at the building that had been her home for most of her life. “I



used to think I was indispensable, but you were right. Anyone could do what I do here. And I daresay there are some who could do it much better.”

“That is not quite what I meant.”

“It is true, though. The governors have taken to arranging the adoptions without my knowledge, and they have decided to send Lucy to a convalescent hospital to be properly cared for. One of the schoolmasters has been brutalising the children, and I never even suspected it. I am of minimal use in the schoolroom, and I am more hindrance than help in the kitchen. They do not need me.”

Oakley took up one of her hands in both of his and squeezed it. “That does not mean you are not valued, Frederica. You have made a difference to the lives of countless children with the work you have done here. But you might allow it to lessen your guilt for wanting to leave. You are who you are. You cannot change it.”

“Our father did.”

“Except, he did not, and when he died, his problems were passed on to his children. We four have had to live with the consequences of his decisions, all of us battling some evil, be it neglect, hardship, or lies—but we have found each other at last. We have the opportunity to set things to rights.”

He paused for a moment, while she considered that, then urged her again, “Come to Chiltern Court, Sister. Be with your family. ”

After all Frederica’s soul-searching and dread, the decision to leave was, in the end, a ludicrously uneventful matter. She nodded quietly to her brother, he smiled kindly at her, and that was that. It was agreed that he would return the next day, giving her time to pack her things and make the necessary arrangements. That, too, proved to be a dispiritingly simple endeavour; Mr Mulligan readily agreed to her going, announcing

that temporary hands would be hired in her absence. Frederica thought he seemed rather more relieved than inconvenienced, proving that his patience with the arrangement had been waning—as she had always suspected it would.

Oakley returned as agreed to collect her and take her to Avonwyke, where they would stay overnight before travelling the next day, in convoy with the others, to Bedfordshire. She left with the promise of returning in two or three weeks. Nevertheless, it felt inescapably final as her trunk was loaded onto the carriage, and she watched Taverstock shrink into the distance behind her.

### CHAPTER TWENTY

Scarlett and Adelaide were every bit as sympathetic to Frederica's misery as Oakley had been, though at her request, the matter was touched on but lightly. She simply could not bring herself to dwell on it. She wanted to—dearly. Who better, after all, to share the excitement of a first kiss with than one's sisters? Yet every mention of Penrith brought with it the memory of his confusion and pain as she begged him to leave, and the shame of it was overpowering. Frederica had devoted her life to looking after people; hurting somebody she loved was the worst feeling she had ever known.

The twins insisted upon the three of them travelling in the same carriage to Chiltern Court, informing the gentlemen that they must decide amongst themselves who would travel with whom—as long as it was not with them. The arrangement proved to be precisely the balm Frederica's battered spirits needed. Unlike Oakley's generous-hearted but occasionally overwhelming talkativeness, Scarlett and Adelaide felt no compunction to fill the journey with chatter. They made the occasional observation as to their whereabouts en route, and a few gentle enquiries as to Frederica's anticipated wardrobe requirements—but for the most part, miles and miles passed by during which nothing was said by anyone.

Their party took a light luncheon at Newport Pagnell while the horses were baited, but it was not a leisurely stop. Oakley left the parlour several times to check on the horses and hasten the dawdling servants. After his third visit to the stables, he announced with great energy that it was time to depart, and then nothing would do but for them to leave what was left of their food and hasten to their carriages.

“It is because Chiltern Court is the family seat,” Scarlett explained as they made their way outside. “He is excessively proud of it—and excessively fond of you . He wants to take you home.”

“He was the same with both of us, when we first came to the family,” Adelaide said as she climbed into the carriage first.

“He is a better brother than I could ever have dared hope for,” Frederica said, following Adelaide inside. As she twisted around to sit next to her sister, her back—and the new tender spot on it—brushed against the door frame, making her wince and suck in her breath.

“What is wrong?” Adelaide asked, all concern.

“Oh...n-nothing,” she stammered.

Scarlett climbed up last and took her place opposite them both in the front-facing seat. “It did not look like nothing.”

Adelaide fixed Frederica with a hard stare that did not waver even when a footman slammed the door shut. “I am coming to learn something about you, Frederica—that you are an exceedingly poor liar. You are altogether too earnest to fool anybody. What pained you, and more to the point, why do you not want to tell us about it?”

Frederica felt herself redden. “I have a bruise,” she admitted grudgingly. “And I did not want to tell you about it because...well, it no longer matters, for he has gone.”

Scarlett gasped, and Adelaide’s temper flared. “Somebody hurt you? Who? When?”

The carriage jolted into motion and over the clatter of the wheels, Frederica said reluctantly, “It was one of the schoolmasters. It happened the day after the ball,

although I did not realise that I had a bruise until I saw it in the mirror in my room at Avonwyke last night.”

“One of the schoolmasters!” Scarlett cried. “This is awful ! Are you hurt anywhere else?”

“No.”

“That is a relief but hardly makes it better.”

“Indeed not!” Adelaide agreed. “If Oakley had known you were in physical danger, he would not have agreed to your staying at the orphanage a second longer!”

“I was not in danger—this has never happened before.”

“Why did it happen this time?”

Frederica looked down at her lap, unhappy to be giving the incident any consideration at all, for she would far sooner forget ever knowing Mr Milliard. “He was drunk, and when I tried to prevent him from going near the children, he shoved me into a cupboard door. I think I must have caught my shoulder blade on the handle.”

Adelaide exhaled furiously. “The brute!”

Frederica put a hand on her sister’s knee and said urgently, “ Please do not excite yourself. It would not be good for your baby—and Mr Milliard is certainly not worth your energy. Besides, he cannot hurt me again, for he has left Taverstock now.”

“Arrested, I hope!” Scarlett said angrily.

Frederica shook her head. “No—disappeared. He did not come back again after...

this , and when the governors sent someone to see what had become of him, it turned out he had left his lodgings, too.”

“I should think he was too ashamed to show his face again,” Scarlett replied. “But Frederica, why did you not tell us about this?”

“Truly, it has not been uppermost in my mind—so much else has happened these past few days.” She paused, then sighed resignedly and added, “And I was embarrassed.”

“Embarrassed?” Adelaide exclaimed, showing no sign of trying to remain calm for her baby’s sake. “What had you to be embarrassed about? The man sounds like a monster!”

“Well, that is the crux of it. He is a monster, who, it transpires, has been beating the boys from the moment he started working at Taverstock—and I was oblivious to it. I, whose purpose in life was to protect those children!”

“Dearest Frederica?—”

“Worse, I was his greatest advocate! I listened to his stories, I ignored any word that the children said against him, I thought his every kind word was genuinely meant. I even believed him when he said he had known my mother. He told me I looked like her, and I was so desperate for it to be true that I fell for it. Of course, I know now that he only said it to make me like him. So yes, I am embarrassed. I am mortified by my own credulity.”

“You must not be,” Adelaide said. “This is what men do when they want to...you know. When they want favours. They can be very convincing.”

“You misunderstand,” Frederica said. “Mr Milliard was not a young man. He was fifty if he was a day.”

Adelaide shrugged ruefully. “Men are not generally concerned with their own age—only ours.”

Scarlett affected a shiver, but Frederica remained unconvinced. Mr Milliard had never given the impression that his interest tended that way. “Whatever his motivations, he is gone, and I beg you would not mention it to anyone,” she said. “He is no longer at Taverstock, so there is no benefit in anybody knowing about what happened. And I should not like Oakley or Lord Tipton to have any reason to oppose my return.” She knew it was slightly absurd to still be clinging to the idea of going back—and if she had not known it, the turn of her sisters’ countenances would have made it clear—yet she could not quite bring herself to burn all her bridges before she had even made it safely to the other bank.

Scarlett gave Frederica a pitying look. “You really have had the most hideous week. Let us talk of happier things. What say we tell you some more about Chiltern Court, so it does not feel quite so strange when you arrive?”

Frederica was grateful for the change of subject, though it did not escape her notice that neither of her sisters had made the promise she asked of them. She did not quibble. If one of them had been hurt, she would likely not keep it from Oakley, either. Hoping that, at the very least, the matter could be set aside for the remainder of the day, she listened to the twins’ descriptions with relish. They told her of the great marble hall that had made Adelaide feel so out of place on her first visit, but in which Kem had first fallen in love with her. They told her about the stillroom where their father had brewed his first ales as a young man. They told her that her namesake’s portrait hung on the wall in the main staircase.

“It is one of the first things you will see when you arrive,” Scarlett said. “You will not believe our resemblance to her. It is quite remarkable.”

They were not wrong, Frederica thought later as she looked up at the slightly older,

slightly plumper, bewigged replica of the twins. They had made good time on the last part of the journey, arriving earlier than expected. As the party handed their coats and hats over to the waiting footmen behind her, Frederica had wandered to the foot of the stairs, curious to see how accurate the description of the late Lady Frederica Tipton had been—and the likeness was indeed uncanny.

“Oakley!” came a booming voice. “Your mother and I did not expect you so soon! And this must be our youngest niece.”

With a rush of apprehension, Frederica turned around, her eyes leaving one facsimile only to settle directly upon another, this one in the flesh. She recoiled with a gasp before she could help it, then clamped her mouth closed and winced in embarrassment. On second glance, this man—Lord Tipton, she presumed—was not so very similar to the one he had briefly reminded her of. He was a little older, considerably stockier, and was leaning heavily on a cane. Whereas the other man, the last time she had seen him, had been shoving her virulently against the store cupboard door.

Scarlett gripped her arm in two places as though fearing she might swoon. “Frederica? Whatever is the matter?”

“Forgive me,” she said, her cheeks aflame. “I meant no offence. It is only that he looks just like Mr Milliard. It startled me...given recent events.”

She had hoped this explanation might mitigate her incivility, but it only succeeded in making his lordship exceedingly angry. His gaze sharpened, and every hint of softness left his expression. “What did you say?”

“Forgive me, my lord, I did not mean?—”

“No, I insist. What name did you just give? Who did you say looks like me?”



“My dear, please. It is a coincidence, I am sure.” An older lady, handsome despite her years and gently spoken, came forwards. “Frederica, I am Lady Tipton—your aunt Louisa. You are very welcome to Chiltern Court.”

Frederica smiled and curtsied—both shakily. “Thank you. I am truly very sorry if I have offended either of you.”

“Frederica was the target of a violent outburst from this man, Mr Milliard, a few days ago,” Scarlett whispered quietly to her ladyship. “That is why she was scared.”

As with Frederica’s attempt to explain, Scarlett’s also seemed only to worsen matters. Lady Tipton looked horrified. “Violent? Has he injured you?”

“Injured? Has someone hurt Frederica?” Oakley said, catching her words. “Who?”

“One of the schoolmasters at the orphanage,” Adelaide said with a placating gesture towards him and an apologetic glance at Frederica. When he instantly began to puff up with indignation, she added hastily, “But all is well. We do not need to discuss that now .”

“On the contrary,” Lord Tipton said darkly. “It sounds as though we need to discuss it as a matter of the utmost urgency.” He came towards Frederica, his cane tapping loudly on the marble floor, and made a small bow. “Frederica, my dear. We have been anxious to meet you. You are every bit as welcome as your aunt says, and I hope you will be very comfortable with us. But for reasons that will become clear, I am afraid I must insist that you tell me about this schoolmaster who you say looks like me. You are injured, you say?”

“Barely, my lord. Only a bruise on my shoulder.”

He nodded sadly. “I am profoundly sorry to hear that, but I am heartened to discover

that you share your sisters' resilience. Perhaps, if you are well enough, we might have some refreshments in the saloon while we talk?" He smiled a concerned but genuine smile; his face around his eyes wrinkled kindly, and Frederica recognised not one but two people in his familiar visage: Mr Milliard and Oakley. Her heart began to race as a most disagreeable prospect occurred to her.

"Is your lordship acquainted with Mr Milliard?"

Her uncle exhaled heavily. "That remains to be seen. But I am familiar with the name. It is the alias my brother Damian always used when he wished to remain anonymous."

"Damian?" Kem and Oakley exclaimed together, both equally aghast.

"Damian?" Scarlett and Adelaide both echoed—more quietly but no less alarmed.

Frederica closed her eyes. 'I shall get what I am owed!' Those had been the words Mr Milliard spat at her—the words she had not understood at the time. She wanted to weep as the awful truth settled over her like a lead weight. As if it were not enough that she had let Taverstock's children down and broken Penrith's heart, there was every chance she had now wrought catastrophe upon her new family as well, by allowing herself to be the dupe of the true Tipton heir.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Tempers were running high in the saloon. Scarlett, Adelaide, and Lady Tipton were doing their best to reassure Frederica that she was not the object of anyone's ire, while growing ever more frustrated with the men for their irascibility. The men were demonstrably trying to remain calm, though without much success. Their questions—Lord Tipton's in particular—were pointed and growing increasingly impatient.

It could not be denied, however, that the chief of everyone's fury was directed at Damian Richmond, who, it now seemed certain, had been masquerading as Mr Milliard. His age and physical description tallied, as did his disposition. Even the history he had given amounted to more truth than falsehood. He had, apparently, spent time in the army; he had known a family called the Aldermastons who now lived in India, though he had never worked for them; he had been fast with the son at university. He had, naturally, received a gentleman's education. With every detail that came to light, Frederica felt more stupid.

"Had you any idea he was in Oxfordshire?" Oakley asked his father.

"I have not heard from Damian in six years—I have not seen him in above ten," his lordship replied through gritted teeth. He was standing next to Frederica, not quite looming over her, but with his weight on his cane, it certainly felt that way. "I half expected him to show up when Adelaide was found. I thought he must be out of the country when Scarlett's discovery did not flush him out of the woodwork. Apparently the third niece was the charm."

“I am sorry,” Frederica said for the tenth or eleventh time. “I did not know who he was.”

“And neither could you have,” soothed Adelaide, who was seated next to Frederica on the sofa, holding her hand.

“Which he would have known,” Oakley said testily. He had been pacing back and forth in front of the ladies since they came into the saloon and showed no sign of stopping.

Kem, on the other hand, stood motionless by the fireplace, his arms crossed, and his brow furrowed like some sort of fearsome sentinel. “You do not think he has guessed the truth, do you?” he asked Lord Tipton gravely.

“I wish I could say not,” the earl replied, “but he must suspect. What possible reason could he have had to conceal his true identity other than to coax information from Frederica that she would not otherwise give? ”

“Pride?” Worthe suggested from his chair. “Given what you have said of his dissolute ways, it could be that he needed the money but was too proud to let it be known how far he had sunk. It is possible that his connection to Frederica was a coincidence.”

“No, he knew I worked there before he took the position.” Frederica had said this the instant the memory entered her head, but when everyone turned to stare at her incredulously, she wished she had kept it to herself. “Forgive me, I have only just remembered that. I only found out directly after he attacked me, and I was really quite shaken—it must have slipped my mind in the confusion.”

“Do not concern yourself, dear,” Lady Tipton said kindly. “Will you tell us what you have remembered now?”

Frederica nodded but sipped some of the lemonade she had been served first, for nerves had left her mouth bone dry. “I knew when Mr Milliard—that is, Mr Richmond—applied for the position of schoolmaster that he had heard about it from Mr Dalton, Taverstock’s gardener. But after the attack, Mr Dalton said he thought Mr Richmond might only have taken the position because he knew I had wealthy connections and hoped to extort money from me somehow—and that is when he confessed the manner of their first meeting. Mr Richmond apparently introduced himself after overhearing Mr Dalton in a tavern, complaining about me being the Earl of Tipton’s niece.”

After inhaling deeply and letting out a prolonged sigh, Lord Tipton retreated wordlessly to the nearest chair. It was not clear whether it was his rheumatic joints or Frederica’s story that made him look so pained as he sat down.

“He knew Frederica was Robert’s daughter, then,” Kem said grimly into the silence.

“Yes, but how much more did he know?” Oakley finished. “Frederica, what did he say? How did he act towards you?”

“He was very charming at first. More supportive of my situation than anyone else at Taverstock.” She dipped her head. “I know I was foolish to trust him, but at the time, it was pleasant to have someone be accepting of my new family. It made me feel less of a pariah.”

Adelaide gave Frederica’s hand a gentle squeeze. “You were not foolish—he thoroughly worked on you!”

“Absolutely!” Scarlett agreed, adding, for the benefit of the others, “He even told Frederica that he knew our mother to try and win her favour. He told her she looked like her.”

“Then she probably does,” Lord Tipton replied. “He is not above using the truth to his advantage, and he would know. He went out of his way to make Susan’s acquaintance while Robert was courting her, simply to vex him. He even threatened to seduce her. That is the sort of thing Damian does for sport.”

Frederica remembered Mr Richmond’s surprise when she opened the door to him on his first arrival at Taverstock. He had seemed stunned—and then delighted—to see her. She shuddered to think that he had recognised her in that moment; that while she had been welcoming him into her world, he had been calculating how he might profit from a resemblance that was of such profound importance to her. “I am a fool,” she said quietly. “I thought his interest in my family was kindly meant, but the whole time his questions were self-serving.”

“What sort of questions did he ask?” Oakley enquired.

“He always wanted to know whether my visits with you had gone well. He asked me once how close in age we all are. He was interested in whether there was a strong family resemblance.” She gave a small groan of despair. “It sounds obvious now what he was doing, but it did not seem so at the time. And I swear, I told him no more than was common knowledge. That my father had been estranged from his family, that my uncle is an earl, that I have two twin sisters and a cousin who is a viscount. I made sure to always say that you were my cousin.”

“You are certain of that?” Lord Tipton asked severely.

“Charles,” Lady Tipton said firmly. “Frederica has said she made sure, and we will not doubt her.”

His lordship held up his hands in apology, though it did not lessen Frederica’s distress. She was racking her mind to try and recall anything she might have said that could arm Mr Richmond with the truth but could think of nothing. “I am certain,” she

said. "I was overly conscious of what I ought not to say every time he mentioned Oakley."

"Did he mention me often?" her brother asked in alarm.

"No more than he mentioned Scarlett or Adelaide. Well...perhaps a little more. And then—" Frederica had not thought she could feel any worse, but as more memories tumbled into her head, she began to feel positively bilious with dismay. "During our last encounter, he asked about the ball at Cedarvale. He asked whether you had been a...a good little lord—whether you had played the part well."

"Hell's teeth, he knows!" Oakley cried. He had ceased pacing and paled alarmingly.

Lord Tipton shook his head. Unlike Oakley's ashen complexion, his had reddened. He looked worried and very, very angry. "If he knew beyond a doubt, then believe me, we would know about it. My guess is, he is looking for proof. It cannot have been a complete coincidence that he was in that tavern when this Mr Dalton fellow was there. I suspect he was already in the area, looking for Frederica."

"Perhaps, if his investigations were indiscreet, that is how everybody at Penrith's ball had heard about her," Worthe remarked.

Lord Tipton abruptly banged his cane on the floor. It made a loud thud against the carpet and observably vibrated with the force of the blow. "Damn him! He probably has suspected the truth since Adelaide was found, but he could not work on her—or Scarlett—because they were both with us—and then you." He gestured at his nephews-in-law. "He has targeted Frederica precisely because she was unprotected. Of all the scheming, cowardly ploys. Robert must be turning in his grave!"

"But how could he possibly have known where she was?" Lady Tipton asked, pulling on her necklace hard enough that it looked liable to snap.

“It was no secret that we were looking for a woman who was born in that vicinity,” Kem pointed out. “Penrith knew enough of the story to recognise when he had found her, and he was not in our immediate circle.”

Frederica wished Scarlett and Adelaide had not looked at her with concern at Kem’s mention of the duke. If they had not, she might have done better at sailing past it unaffected. As it was, their compassion made it impossible to ignore, and a fresh stab of anguish twisted her already knotted insides.

“But I do not see why the discovery that Robert had daughters should be grounds for him to suddenly suspect that Oakley is not ours,” Lady Tipton said with a definite note of panic in her voice. “He has never questioned it before.”

“He never knew Robert had any children before,” Oakley said. “Until he knew about the girls, the possibility of me not being yours may never have occurred to him.”

“Well, it has as sure as the devil occurred to him now,” Lord Tipton said, rubbing his forehead. “What worries me most is that he has disappeared.”

“Dare we hope it means he has given up?” Worthe asked.

“I would be a fool to assume so,” his lordship replied. “Frederica, was there anything else, anything at all that you might have said to him that he could use? We will not blame you—we only need to know. ”

She shook her head, despairing of ever convincing him. “There was nothing. I was constantly anxious about saying something I should not, so I made sure to redirect the conversation every time a knotty subject arose. If he mentioned my sisters and I being orphaned, I spoke about our pleasure at being reunited. He tried once to talk about brothers, and I made sure to speak about Kem and Worthe. Another time, he said he thought Oakley must be keen to beget an heir, so I said he was not likely to soon be



married after Mrs Beamish broke his heart.”

“What?” Oakley interrupted—so suddenly and so forcefully that Frederica jumped. The colour had returned to his face in force; he had reddened from the top of his collar to the tips of his ears.

“I am sorry,” Frederica said. “I did not mean to presume. It was just something I said in the heat of the moment to avoid the truth.”

“But why would you say her name?” he asked with an awkward laugh as though attempting to make light of his outburst.

Frederica hesitated. Surely it was no secret that Oakley had a partiality for Mrs Beamish? “I do not know. I suppose because you had mentioned her a few times. And Mr Milliard—sorry, Mr Richmond—seemed to find it interesting, so it made for an effective distraction.”

Oakley’s self-conscious smile altered to a frown. “What do you mean, he found it interesting?”

“Well, I...I remember that he seemed amused by the mention of her. He asked a few questions—who were her family, that sort of thing. ”

“Dear God, I must go to her!”

There was a brief pause, in which wary glances passed between everybody, then Lady Tipton said, cautiously, “I hardly think that is necessary, James.”

James , Frederica thought distractedly. She had not known that was Oakley’s given name. It felt almost disrespectful for her to find it out now, when he was standing in front of her, growing more agitated by the moment at the latest piece of bad news she

had delivered.

“Do you not see?” he said, running a hand through his hair. “Damian has not found what he needs from Frederica, so he must find it by other means. Has Father not already said he will not give up so easily? And now he has disappeared after discovering—or thinking he has discovered—the name of a woman I admire. Where do you think he can have gone?”

“You think he means to importune Bess?” Scarlett cried, lurching forwards to the edge of her seat in distress.

Worthe reached across the arm of his chair to cover her hand with his. “It is highly unlikely, darling. Does she even know the truth?”

Scarlett shook her head. “I do not think so. I have never told her—not explicitly.”

“It does not matter,” Oakley said. “I do not wish to distress you, Scarlett, but even if Bess does not know the truth, Damian might still attempt to make us reveal it by threatening her.”

Scarlett gave a wordless cry. “Surely he would not hurt her?”

“We cannot rule it out,” Kem said darkly .

Scarlett looked at Lord Tipton in alarm. “Uncle?”

His lordship sighed heavily. “I am afraid Kemerton is right. If Damian has even the slightest suspicion that he might be the true heir, he will stop at nothing to prove it.”

Scarlett began to panic; Oakley said an oath; Lady Tipton closed her eyes and moved her lips as though she was saying a prayer. Frederica watched it all in abject

dejection. Was nobody safe from the damage her na?vety had done? Would even Scarlett's childhood friend be imperilled now?

It was suddenly too much. Her guilt, her heartache, this absolute disaster of a first meeting with her aunt and uncle—Frederica did not think she could bear any more. It felt as though the sky itself was pressing down on her, forcing the air from her lungs. Her breath began to come in quick, staccato gasps. Adelaide frowned and asked in a whisper whether she was well, but Frederica's negative was lost amid the continuing commotion.

"We ought to at least write and ask whether the young lady is well, perhaps caution her husband," Lord Tipton said.

"Stuff that for a game of soldiers!" Oakley cried. "I would see with my own eyes that Bess is well. I shall go myself."

Then everybody began speaking at once: Scarlett to beg that somebody—anybody—would ensure the safety of her oldest friend; Lady Tipton to caution Oakley against an inappropriate display of concern for a married woman; Worthe to declare that he would go to the Beamishes' home in Hertfordshire to vouchsafe their well-being; and Oakley to insist upon accompanying him.

A whirlwind of activity followed as everybody hastened away to make the necessary arrangements. Oakley and Worthe went to change. Scarlett removed to her room to pen a quick letter for her husband to deliver to her friend. Adelaide went with her to calm her down, for Scarlett was by then distraught with worry. With a promise to return momentarily, Lady Tipton left to speak to the housekeeper about a basket of food for the men to take with them. Frederica knew not where Kem and Lord Tipton went—just that they had gone and only she remained in Chiltern Court's saloon.

She might have laughed if she were not so close to tears. The foundling daughter of

the estranged son, home at last but still entirely alone. Shame and self-reproach were like a crushing weight upon her shoulders. She wished none of it had ever happened—that, when Mr Mulligan had asked her to show the new patron around Taverstock, she had refused. Then she would never have met Penrith, never have been reunited with her family—and never caused such pain to every one of them. Unable to look for another second at the family home she felt utterly undeserving of, she squeezed her eyes shut, put her head in her hands, and wept.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“O h, my dear, what is this, now? Come, come!”

Frederica tried in earnest to collect herself upon hearing Lady Tipton re-enter the saloon, for she wished her aunt’s first impression of her would not be a snivelling little girl. Nevertheless, her distress was proportionate to her guilt, and since one was unassuageable, the other seemed impossible to quell. She continued to weep as her ladyship settled herself on the sofa next to her and put an arm around her shoulders.

“You poor dear—this has been a wretched welcome. An inquisition followed by our complete desertion. I should not have left you alone.”

“’Tis not that,” Frederica said between sniffs. “I feel awful for the trouble I have caused.”

“Now, we shall have less of that,” Lady Tipton said. She fidgeted about a little and produced a handkerchief from somewhere. Frederica accepted it even as she shook her head in protest .

“I have agonised over what it would do to the family if I were to stay at Taverstock, but I wish now that I had stayed, for this is infinitely worse! Because of me, Oakley could lose the viscountcy, Mr Richmond will run the estate into the ground, and my sisters’ reputations will be tarnished forever. I shall be the means of my family’s absolute ruin.” Her last word devolved into another sob, and she covered her face with the handkerchief.

There was a short pause, then Lady Tipton withdrew her arm and gently but firmly pulled Frederica's hands away from her face to hold in her own. "Now listen to me," she said softly. "There are many apologies to be made in this situation, but not a single one of them is owed by you. Everything that has happened is a result of decisions that were made by people you never knew, long before you were even born. Your father chose to elope with your mother; your grandfather chose to disown him; your uncle Charles and I chose to bring your brother up as our own."

Her ladyship tucked a finger under Frederica's chin and lifted her face until their eyes met. "Despite all the disadvantages we put in your path, you made a good life for yourself, and now along we have come to cut up your hard-earned peace. It is we who ought to be apologising to you."

She stiffened slightly and patted Frederica's hand a few times as she added, "You will certainly have no share of the blame for your uncle Damian's reprehensible duplicity. He is a wicked man, and he has used you infamously. But your uncle Charles and I made the decision to try and prevent him from inheriting, and the responsibility for that lies with us—not you."

Such a confession could not entirely banish Frederica's remorse, but it was nevertheless a great comfort. She regarded her ladyship for a long moment before replying, distracted by her familiar expression. She thought it must be a family resemblance at first, until she comprehended that there could not be one, for her ladyship was unrelated to any of them except by marriage. Her heart gave a little leap upon placing it. It was the sort of smile she was more used to seeing on Gold Days, when families came to collect their newly adopted children from Taverstock to take home with them. It was the best sort of smile; it spoke of hope and love. She took a deep breath and wiped her tears away with the handkerchief.

"Did you know my father?" she asked tentatively.

Lady Tipton's smile broadened. "I did. I wish he had lived long enough to know the woman you have become. He would have been exceedingly proud."

"Will you tell me about him?"

"I should be delighted, but I ought to leave that to his lordship, for he knew him best. Although it must be said that my sister, Lady Carbrooke, has a few choice tales to tell about him. He was supposed to marry her, you know—before he ran away with your mother."

This shocking and unexpectedly diverting turn of the conversation occupied them until it came time for Worthe and Oakley to depart. It was unlikely they would cover much distance before dark, but Oakley was adamant they must travel through the night, and Scarlett was not much less keen. Once they were gone, Lady Tipton enlisted the twins to assist her in showing Frederica around Chiltern Court—something Frederica suspected was as much to distract them from their woes as to acquaint her with the house. She appreciated the attempt, but it was not wholly successful. It was evident that everybody was concerned and only pretending to be otherwise, giving a false jollity to the tour that was difficult to maintain.

For her part, the inevitability of this soon becoming her home pressed more heavily upon her shoulders with each door she opened. She felt an onus to like it but instead found herself comparing every room to Taverstock—and occasionally, to her dismay, Cedarvale. That was especially the case when Lady Tipton took them to the nursery. Having been unoccupied for nigh on two decades, it was outmoded, cold, and damp. While Adelaide and Scarlett fondly attempted to imagine Oakley playing there as a boy, all Frederica could picture was Cedarvale's much more fashionably fitted up nursery, and Penrith's darling children, sitting on her lap as she read them a story. The memory made her heart ache.

The bedchamber Lady Tipton said would be Frederica's was larger than the largest

dormitory at Taverstock. It could have slept twenty children at least if the beds were arranged closely enough. This bed had four posts and curtains to keep out the draught—something she had never needed at Taverstock thanks to the heat from the kitchen. Her clothes had been unpacked by somebody she did not know and hung in a closet in a separate dressing room. She did not have a closet at Taverstock; her clothes had always been kept folded in her trunk.

Frederica privately scolded herself for being so churlish; these differences had been equally in evidence at Avonwyke, and she had not been half so affected by them. Yet, Avonwyke was Adelaide's home, and she had been but a guest there. Chiltern Court, on the other hand, was set to usurp Taverstock as the place Frederica supposedly belonged, and no matter how much she tried to approve of it, it simply did not feel like home.

The mood continued to be subdued at dinner. There was some conversation as everyone tried their best to make her feel welcome, but nobody mentioned the succession of the Tipton Earldom, or Mrs Beamish, or the threat to either of them from Damian Richmond. It cast a pall over proceedings that made Frederica thankful when her aunt signalled an early end to the evening.

She went to bed with her spirits in utter disarray. She thought back, as she had taken to doing of late, to all the precious times she had spent with Penrith. In particular, she recalled the vast comfort he had been on the day she received her initial communication from Lord Tipton. That had been the very first time the spectre of leaving Taverstock had raised its head, and she had been caught wholly unawares by the prospect. His Grace had been so wonderfully gentle on that occasion—all compassion and understanding. How she wished he were here now, to comfort her in the same way again.

She wondered what he would advise. He was intelligent, worldly, and dependably self-composed. Perhaps he would not say anything her uncle had not already said, but



he would say it while steadily holding her gaze, his poised, handsome countenance a much-needed tether amid the maelstrom. Perhaps he might even say it with his arms around her. Perhaps afterwards, he might kiss her, as he had done at the ball, before?—

Before it all went so horribly wrong!

Frederica rolled over with a groan, pulled the pillow over her head, and willed herself to think of nothing until sleep arrived to numb her broken heart.

An express arrived from Worthe and Oakley just after noon the next day. The whole family was seated together in the saloon when the butler brought the letter to Lord Tipton, and therefore they were able to hear in unison that Damian had not been to visit Mrs Beamish. She was safe and well and could not recall a single encounter with a man of Damian's description. Scarlett's relief was palpable, but so was Lord Tipton's concern.

"Is this not excellent news, Uncle?" Adelaide asked.

He regarded her unhappily. "I am excessively pleased that he has not embroiled any more innocent people in his schemes, but if Damian is not in Hertfordshire, pestering the Beamishes, then I should like very much to know where he has gone, and what he intends to do."

"Perhaps he will do nothing? It may be that Worthe was right, and he has given up," Lady Tipton said, but her husband was already shaking his head .

"I am not convinced. He held the position of schoolmaster for how long, Frederica?"

"A little over a month," she answered.

“A month ,” Lord Tipton repeated, nodding. “I ask you, Louisa, have you ever known Damian to willingly do a day’s work in his life?” When his wife admitted that she had not, he said, “Nor I. If he condescended to endure a month of it in the hopes of finding something out from our niece, then I cannot believe he will have given up his search now. If anything, he will be more determined, for Lord knows he despises losing.”

“What if he still plans to go to Bess?” Scarlett asked in alarm. “It may be that he has not yet found out where she lives and will go when he discovers it.”

“The Beamishes are forewarned now,” Kem observed. “Mrs Beamish’s husband will be able to protect her.”

“Not so, I am afraid,” Lord Tipton said, flicking the letter open to read it again. “Oakley writes that Mr Beamish is not with his wife. According to her, he is gone to Bath.”

Scarlett frowned. “Without her?”

Lord Tipton shrugged. “Evidently so. Oakley says he intends to remain in Hertfordshire to ensure Mrs Beamish’s safety in the man’s absence.”

Lady Tipton bristled at that. “I beg you would write to him and tell him to come home at once. He has no place acting as protector to a married woman. Mrs Beamish may write to her husband and ask him to return to Hertfordshire. Or her brother if her husband will not do it. ”

“But in the meantime, it would be better that Bess is not left alone,” Scarlett said worriedly. “Worthe will not mind staying for a few days. He promised me he would do whatever he could to ensure no harm came to Bess.”

“And I am sure no harm will come to her,” Adelaide said comfortingly.

“I shall write to him though,” Lord Tipton assured his wife. “If only to warn him to take care.”

“What do you mean ‘take care’?” her ladyship asked. The clickety-clack of her bracelets as she twisted them around her wrist spoke volumes as to her anxiety.

His lordship regarded his wife pityingly. “My dear, Damian has already attacked Frederica. You must know there is a risk that he will attempt to accost Oakley.”

Frederica had not known Lady Tipton long enough to know whether the bout of nerves she then suffered was usual—though, judging by Adelaide and Scarlett’s surprise, she guessed not. So extreme was her ladyship’s distress that once she had extracted a promise from her husband that he would write the letter directly, she retired to her bedchamber to lie down.

“Oakley is extremely dear to her,” Kem explained when only the three sisters and he remained in the saloon. “She is as attached to him as any mother could be.”

After their conversation the day before, Frederica suspected there was as much guilt as affection at play in her aunt’s present distress. If her ladyship had not decided to pretend Oakley was her own child, nobody would presently be in any danger. She could not help but wonder what Robert Richmond would have made of the imbroglio his brother and sister-in-law had created for his son.

She was startled out of her reverie when something touched her face. Adelaide had leant over the arms of both their chairs to nudge the curls aside from her temple and peer at her curiously. She giggled and gave Frederica’s arm a light squeeze. “I am sorry—I did not mean to startle you. I was just looking at your face.”

“Why?” Frederica touched her cheek self-consciously. “Have I something on it?”

“Not at all. It is just, with the mention of mothers...well, Uncle Charles said yesterday that Damian was probably telling the truth when he said that you looked like ours. I have always wanted to know what she looked like. I was trying to see her in you.”

Frederica smiled to think of it. “Do you truly not remember her at all?”

“Not a stitch of her,” Adelaide replied. “Scarlett and I were only two when we were orphaned.”

“And Oakley was not quite four,” Scarlett added. “Do you remember anything from that age?”

“I take your point,” Frederica said. “My earliest memory is of sitting by a large window and being too hot in the sunlight coming through the glass. But I could not tell you my age or where the window was.”

“My earliest memory is of being scolded because I had fallen asleep in church,” Scarlett said, adding, “I can hardly be blamed, for the reverend’s sermons were always deathly dull.”

Adelaide stubbornly declared she could not recall anything prior to the age of twelve—which Scarlett quietly explained was because she did not like to talk about her childhood—and they all petitioned Kem to relay his earliest memory instead. He was in the midst of attempting to describe his first terrifying encounter with an earwig when the door to the saloon abruptly swung open so violently that it banged loudly against the wall.

Lord Tipton stalked into the room, his cane abandoned and his limp more noticeable

for it. He looked shockingly ill. “Where is her ladyship?”

The sisters exchanged a worried look, and Adelaide answered, “Upstairs, resting still.”

“Good.” He shut the door and came farther into the room, but he did not join them in sitting. “I have just received another letter.”

“Oh no! Has something happened to Bess?” Scarlett cried.

“What?” Lord Tipton looked momentarily confused, then waved away the query with an impatient gesture. “Mrs Beamish is perfectly well. Damian never went to Hertfordshire, and neither does he intend to. He is in Wykham. He has been to Farnborough’s and Co. and seen Robert’s last will and testament.” He grasped the back of the nearest chair as though he might topple over. “He has found his proof.”

### CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The room stilled as Frederica, Scarlett, Adelaide, and Kem all stared at Lord Tipton, aghast. He stared back, his eyes wide like a frightened animal.

“Dear God,” Kem murmured.

His lordship made an odd noise and closed his eyes; Scarlett hastened to his side. “Pray, sit down, Uncle. You have had a terrible shock.”

It seemed somehow ominous that he submitted to being ushered into a chair. Kem went to the sideboard and poured a glass of something amber-coloured. “How the devil did he know about the solicitor?” he asked as he handed it over.

Lord Tipton knocked the drink back in one gulp and sucked in a breath through his teeth. His gaze flicked to Frederica and away again quickly. “It seems he got what he needed while he was at Taverstock after all. He found out where Robert used to live.”

Frederica’s blood ran cold. ‘I am a Richmond. My parents were Robert and Susan Richmond. I was born and orphaned in Wykham.’ A whimper of despair escaped her as she realised what she had done. “I told him! I am so sorry, I forgot. He...he was hurting me, and I?—”

“It is not your fault,” Adelaide said firmly.

“Indeed, it is not,” Lord Tipton echoed. “Frederica, you are not to blame for any of this. There was always a risk the deception would be discovered. I want you to

know—all of you—that your aunt and I did not take the risk lightly. But Damian ought not to be master of a hazard den, let alone an estate.” He stopped speaking and rubbed his forehead.

Frederica pitied him but did not feel at all familiar enough to condole with him—he was still much more an earl than an uncle to her, not to mention being thirty years her senior. Even her sisters seemed unsure how to act.

“What can be done?” Kem asked grimly.

“He wishes me to meet him,” Lord Tipton said.

“To what end?”

“Money,” his lordship said bitterly. “Apologies, ladies, but I think we are beyond delicacies at this point. My brother means to blackmail me. If I do not accede to his demands, he will send a copy of Robert’s will to The Times and ruin us all.”

“But if he has my father’s will, he could simply declare himself the rightful heir,” Adelaide said. “He does not need to blackmail you.”

Lord Tipton scoffed quietly—defeatedly. “Waiting for me to die is not an appealing option to him. He wants money now. And I daresay, he wants revenge for the lie I have told.”

“Pray do not give the man a farthing,” Kem spat. “He would take everything you gave him and still reveal the truth when it suited him.”

Lord Tipton met his nephew’s eyes. “What choice do I have?”

Kem began to speak several times and seemed to grow angrier with every utterance

he bit off before it passed his lips. At length, he said darkly, “How much damage will you allow him to cause? Enough is enough. He must be stopped.”

“Something must be done, on that we agree,” Lord Tipton said. “You will come with me?”

“Go with you?” Adelaide said, looking between her husband and her uncle. “Go with you where? You cannot mean to actually meet him? You said not an hour ago that Oakley might be in danger from him— physical danger. Uncle, tell me you do not mean to go!”

But it seemed that he did—and, no matter how Adelaide begged him not to, Kem was resolved on accompanying him. What was more, his lordship categorically forbade any of them from rousing Lady Tipton from her repose until after they had left, knowing she would resist his going. Frederica watched with a sense of complete helplessness as the same scene from the previous day repeated itself, only this time it was Adelaide who wrung her hands in worry, and for her husband’s safety, rather than her friend’s.

“What would you have me do, my love?” Kem said tightly upon her eighth or ninth plea for him to remain. “I cannot allow him to go alone—he can barely walk—and he is determined to go with or without me. I frankly do not blame him. This situation needs resolving, for Oakley’s sake as much as anyone’s. Nothing bad will happen, I give you my word. At least, not to either of us.”

Frederica saw him place a hand on the gentle swell of Adelaide’s stomach and say something else that she could not hear; and she saw a tear roll down Adelaide’s cheek. She prayed his word would be enough, for it felt far from sufficient in that moment.

“Damian is lodging at the Red Lion in Wykham,” Lord Tipton informed them as he



prepared to board the carriage less than an hour later. "I have sent an express to Oakley and Worthe telling them to go straight there, but if it misses them for some reason and they come here instead, I trust you to direct them there. Kemerton and I shall travel to Avonwyke today and Wykham tomorrow, hopefully to meet them there."

"What are we to say to Aunt Louisa when she wakes up?" Scarlett fretted.

"The truth," her uncle replied. "That I demanded your compliance. She will not blame you, my dear. She will be furious with me, and I suggest you allow her to be. It will spare you any of her displeasure. Regardless, being vexed with me is far superior to being carried away by her fears for the future."

He gave them all a rather stiff bow and turned to heave himself into the carriage. Frederica winced to watch him: holding on to the door frame with both hands, it still took him three bounces on his heel to gain enough height on the step to swing his other leg off the ground, and then he fairly stumbled into his seat. It looked undignified and painful, and she understood better why he had previously been unable to travel to Avonwyke. If this was him recovering, she could only imagine how he must have been suffering before.

After a final, private word with Adelaide, Kem climbed up behind Lord Tipton, and a footman closed the door. They were travelling light; only Kem's manservant would accompany them, and once he had climbed up to sit with the coachman, they were away.

Adelaide took a shaky breath and then, to Frederica's surprise, quietly swore.

"Try not to worry," Scarlett said to her. "They are both too sensible to do anything foolish."

Adelaide rubbed a hand over her belly and shook her head. “I would usually agree with you, but not in this instance. I have a very bad feeling about this.”

As it turned out, so did their aunt. Her ladyship summoned them to her private sitting room an hour later, vastly perturbed to have woken to a report from her maid that the gentlemen had departed. They entered to find her standing in the middle of the little parlour with her hands clasped in front of her, awaiting an explanation.

“Well, girls?”

Her ladyship turned white upon learning what had happened and where her husband and nephew had gone. Frederica had expected her to be angry—largely because that is what Lord Tipton had told her to expect—but there was no anger in her aunt’s pallid complexion or shaking hands. It crossed her mind to apologise again for revealing her birthplace, but the word was becoming meaningless in its overuse—and Lady Tipton seemed to have much more immediate concerns than how the secret was discovered.

“What was he thinking?” She staggered backwards until her calves touched the chaise-longue and then dropped heavily onto it. “He has been bedridden for most of this year. He has only been on his feet for a matter of weeks. He will cause himself an injury.”

Having seen him attempting to climb into the carriage earlier, Frederica could not but share her aunt’s concern. She and her sisters all seated themselves around the little parlour—Adelaide on a chair next to Lady Tipton, to whom she said, “I tried to stop them. I tried every which way.”

“I am sure you did, my dear,” her ladyship replied. “And I wish you had succeeded. You know I love your husband, but he is not best placed to keep your uncle calm in this situation.”

“On the contrary,” Scarlett said soothingly. “Kem is one of the most even-tempered people I know.”

“Not in this case,” Adelaide said. “He absolutely detests Damian. I do not know that he will be reasonable.”

“Detests him?” Scarlett said. “What has Damian done so bad that Kem would hate him for it?”

Adelaide winced and pressed a hand to her side in obvious discomfort, thus Lady Tipton put a reassuring hand on her arm and took up the explanation.

“Your uncle and I were great friends with Kemerton’s late mother and father. Indeed, they were two of very few people whom we ever told about your brother’s true parentage. When the boys were younger, about thirteen I believe, our family summered at Avonwyke. Damian joined us, for he was on leave from the army at the time.”

“Kem has met him? I did not realise,” Scarlett said.

“Yes, he has met him several times—though that was the last,” her ladyship said uneasily. “We discovered later that during our stay, Damian had got a child on one of the servants. When her disgrace was discovered, she attempted to bring about the end of the pregnancy herself so that she would not lose her position. I know not by what means, except that it caused her to bleed to death.”

Scarlett gasped, and Frederica grimaced, both shocked—but there was worse to come.

“It was Kem who found her,” Adelaide said quietly. “He tried to help her, but she died in his arms.”

“How awful!” Scarlett cried.

Frederica closed her eyes, remembering with revulsion the smugness with which Damian Richmond had avowed to having heard whispers that the Kemertons were an ‘excessively proud’ family. They had disliked him because of this, she comprehended now—and he had considered their ill opinion unjustified. And poor Kem! She had seen some shocking events herself at Taverstock—some of them very recently—but to witness such a grisly tragedy at such a young age must have been horrific.

“No wonder he thinks so ill of Mr Richmond,” she said. “Who that knows this could feel any other way?”

“Quite,” Lady Tipton said heatedly. “And imagine, if you will, that if Lord Kemerton has endured one such appalling incident at Damian’s expense, how many my husband has endured in a lifetime of being brother to him. And now with a threat to ruin your brother—to ruin all of us...I greatly fear he will not be reasonable either.”

Adelaide shifted about uneasily in her chair, one arm now wrapped tightly around her midsection. “What do you think will happen?”

Lady Tipton shrugged slightly. “I suppose it depends how unreasonable Damian’s demands are.”

“Will my uncle refuse if they are unreasonable?” Scarlett asked.

“Is Damian liable to hurt them if they refuse?” Adelaide asked. Distress was making her breathless. “He is clearly not above hurting people.”

“Let us hope your uncle took his pistols, just in case.”

Frederica could see that her aunt had spoken without thinking—she was perched on the very edge of her seat, wringing her hands together with worry—but it was evidently too frightening a prospect for Adelaide.

“Oh God!” she cried. “You think they will duel?” She was panting with alarm.

Realising her niece’s distress, her ladyship said emphatically, “No, dear! No! I meant only for protection. But I am sure he did not take them. ”

“But you do think they will need them?”

Lady Tipton floundered over her answer, her expression far more a ‘yes’ than the ‘no’ that was forming on her lips.

“It does not matter if he did not take them,” Adelaide cried, “for Kem has pistols at Avonwyke. He is going to get himself killed, is he not? I cannot—Oh!” She let out a sharp cry and abruptly bent forwards, clutching at her stomach with both hands.

Lady Tipton grabbed for her, as did Scarlett. Frederica was for a moment frozen in horror. Adelaide’s baby was not due for months; pain at this stage presaged nothing good, and as she looked at her sister gasping in agony, she could think only of the nameless woman who had died in Kem’s arms, miscarrying a child. That, and Damian Richmond, leaning over her, snarling that she did not know who her family was.

He had been wrong then, and he was no less wrong now. I am a Richmond! she thought defiantly. And I shall do whatever I must to help my family.

In the first instance, that meant running to pull the cord for her ladyship’s maid to come. A short while later, once Adelaide had been settled in her bed and the physician sent for, it meant sitting down to pen the most difficult letter she had ever

written in her life.

Dear Duke of Penrith,

I hardly know where to begin, but I believe it must be with an apology. Indeed, I have so many apologies to make that I may not have ink enough to write them all, but most importantly, I must apologise for what I am about to ask of you.

You once told me that assisting me in any capacity would be an honour. If my actions this past week have not completely destroyed every feeling of warmth you ever had towards me, I beg you would consider providing that assistance now. My family is in grievous difficulty, and to my shame, it is the result of my foolishness—my credulity. I should never forgive myself if I did not therefore do everything in my power to find a solution. No other justification could induce me to risk making you think worse of me than you already must by petitioning you in this manner.

It has been discovered that the new schoolmaster at Taverstock was not ‘Mr Milliard’, as he claimed, but Mr Damian Richmond, Lord Tipton’s brother. It shames me deeply to admit that I was thoroughly taken in by him. Unknowingly, I provided him with information, the disclosure of which has the potential to ruin my whole family. He has avowed his intention to extort money from my uncle in exchange for his silence—but that is not the worst of it.

Their lordships Tipton and Kemerton have, this very hour, left Chiltern Court to go to the Red Lion in Wykham where Mr Richmond awaits them. Their purpose is not clear, except that they mean to prevent him from injuring the family. I cannot overstate my aunt and sister’s concern for their safety. The prospect of ruination notwithstanding, both gentlemen have valid cause to revile Mr Richmond, who is by all accounts— mine included, as of my last encounter with him—an unprincipled brute. It is my sister’s very real concern that her husband will demand satisfaction from him, with no guarantee of being the victor. It is my aunt’s equal dread that Lord

Tipton's health will not withstand any violent encounter. Lord Oakley and Lord Worthe have been summoned from Hertfordshire to attend the meeting, which I cannot believe will result in anything but an exacerbation of tempers and peril. My sister, Lady Kemerton, has been taken ill with worry, and there are grave concerns for her unborn child. The situation is dire, and I beg you would help me prevent a tragedy.

I recall you saying that you had some influence amongst the judiciary. It occurs to me that, if my uncle and brothers were not able to meet Mr Richmond—if, for example, he were to be in gaol when they arrived to meet him—then nobody would be able to seek satisfaction, and everybody would remain safe and well. I know not what charges might be levelled against him, but I cannot believe it will be difficult to uncover some evil or other, for he is wholly unscrupulous.

That I should even entertain the notion of soliciting your help is an egregious presumption, I know. It would be, even in ordinary circumstances, but after my behaviour towards you last week, it must seem brazen. I am sorrier than you can know for giving you such pain. I have managed to hurt almost everybody I care about of late, but the injury to you has been the hardest to bear, for of all of them, you are dearest to me .

Frederica did not realise she had paused until a droplet of ink fell from her pen to spatter on the page. She stared at the last line she had written for a moment longer, then with an unsteady hand and a racing heart, replenished the ink and continued.

I did not set out to write of my feelings in this letter. It seems wildly inappropriate to ask for your help in the same breath as expressing my esteem, but I find I cannot help it. I am under no illusion that it will alter anything, but if this is to be my last opportunity of telling you what is in my heart, then I must take it.

I miss you. I thought I knew what I was about when I forbade you from saying what

you came to Taverstock to say, but I could not have been more wrong. I had suffered a horrible shock and was plagued with guilt. I thought it would be wicked to choose happiness in the face of so much misery. But the truth is that I was ready to leave. It would have made me happy—blissfully so. I regretted turning you away almost the moment you had gone.

When Oakley came the next day, I was in a more reasonable frame of mind—I had remembered my resolution to go. He brought me to Chiltern Court, but my resolve has not lasted. I do not feel the same contentment with my decision to leave that I felt before. I recognise that it has been but a short time, but Chiltern Court does not feel like home in the way I expected it to, no matter how dear my family are to me. And I comprehend now that I had not merely reconciled myself to leaving Taverstock—I was only reconciled to leaving it to be with you.

I have led a narrow existence. Not sheltered from hardship, perhaps, but not varied, not worldly. Life outside of Taverstock is terrifying to me—and I am lost in it without you. You have been an anchor while I have been adrift without direction. I upbraid myself daily, hourly, for turning you away. But most of all, I berate myself for using you so ill when you have surely suffered more than your share of pain already in this life. I am heartsore with regret.

I pray that you will find somebody who can love you and your beautiful children the way you deserve. If she loves you half as much as I do, you cannot remain unhappy for long.

Yours with the greatest affection,

Miss F Richmond

Frederica asked Scarlett to help her send the letter. Lady Tipton would not approve of her writing to the duke, and Adelaide was too unwell to be troubled. Scarlett appealed



to the butler to arrange for an express rider and used her own pin money to pay him.

“Are you sure this is wise?” she asked at the last moment. “We have scandals enough to contend with. We cannot inflict another on our poor aunt and uncle.”

Frederica hesitated. She could rewrite the letter with all her confessions omitted. She did not need to humble herself to the duke in this way. But I do need him to know that I love him, she thought helplessly. Besides, that was not Scarlett’s concern. Her sister did not know she had written anything but a plea for help. She nodded firmly. “There are few people in the world I trust as much as Penrith. If he cannot help us, then he will at least not worsen our plight by revealing it.”

Scarlett took her at her word and gestured for the rider to depart. Frederica inhaled sharply at the sudden burst of movement from the horse and held her breath as it galloped away along the drive, carrying all her hopes and dreams with it.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The rest of the day crawled past agonisingly slowly. The physician visited Adelaide but gave no reassurance with regards to her pregnancy other than to opine that she ought to avoid hysterics. Frederica had never wanted so badly to kick a person's shins. He did at least provide a sleeping draught to help Adelaide rest—and since Lady Tipton was almost inconsolable with worry, and upsetting Adelaide all the more for it, Frederica and Scarlett persuaded her to take some too.

“It is likely because she suffered so many miscarriages and stillbirths herself,” Scarlett said when they were both settled. She and Frederica had taken a tray in her room rather than trouble the servants with a full dinner, and even then, neither of them had much of an appetite. “But Adelaide is not bleeding—that is the most hopeful sign.”

Frederica put her plate down on the table between them and curled her feet up beneath her on her chair. “Do you truly believe they might duel?”

Her sister sighed. “I should like to say no, but I cannot rule it out. Oakley is impetuous, Kem is enraged, Uncle Charles is desperate.”

“And Worthe?”

“Worthe would do anything for me. If my family were in danger, he would do whatever it took to help them, for my sake.”

Frederica lay her head against the back of her chair and sighed. “It must be wonderful

to be loved that well.”

After a short pause and a shrewd look, Scarlett asked, “Do you think His Grace will agree to help us?”

“I do not know,” Frederica admitted despondently. Then, more hopefully, she added, “Do you think he will?”

Her sister chuckled. “If you do not know, I am sure I do not. But...if he were to involve himself, it would surely show an affection for you that was every bit as strong as Worthe’s is for me.”

Frederica looked away, unsure what to say. Life had better equipped her to deal with difficult truths than false hopes, but she did not wish to appear ungrateful for Scarlett’s support by arguing the point. Her sister took pity on her and changed the subject, and they passed another hour in each other’s company before retreating to their own beds for the night. Sleep did not come easily for Frederica, however; she tortured herself long into the night attempting to guess what Penrith had thought when he read her letter, and whether there was any possibility that he might still love her .

Adelaide passed the night without further discomfort, giving all the Richmond ladies hope in that regard, if no other. It was nevertheless a long day of waiting for news that it seemed would never come—and in the end, did not. Not until late afternoon the following day did Scarlett leap from her chair by the saloon window, shouting, “Someone is coming! Two carriages. It is them! They are here!”

Frederica hastened to the window to watch with her as the carriages rolled slowly towards the house. Unanimous were the cries of relief when they reported that all four men had alighted, each very much alive and none of them appearing to be wounded. Alas, that was where the good news ended.

“Damian was not there,” Lord Tipton announced with evident disgust as he hobbled into the room and collapsed into a chair.

Hope flared in Frederica’s breast, but she held her tongue.

Worthe and Kem were occupied exchanging private greetings with their wives—Kem’s look of dismay suggesting that Adelaide had informed him of her bad turn two days ago—but Oakley joined his lordship in the telling.

“According to the innkeeper at the Red Lion, he left his lodgings to meet someone the night before we arrived and never came back. His belongings were still in his room.”

“The innkeeper said we were not the only people who had come looking for him either,” Worthe said, joining the conversation.

The more they said, the more convinced Frederica became that Penrith had answered her plea and somehow contrived to have Damian arrested. She could not rejoice, however, for, unlike Scarlett’s prediction, he had not hastened to Chiltern Court fresh from having saved the day to claim that he had done it out of affection for her. Rather, he had done it quietly and anonymously, and it did not matter whether he had done it for her or not; he evidently had no desire to see her again. She was not overly surprised and did not blame him, but her disappointment was so sharp it felt as though it was shredding her insides. It did, at least, answer the question that had kept her awake most of the night. She blushed to think of the contempt with which Penrith must have read her foolish declaration of regret.

“Do you think your brother is in some sort of trouble, Uncle?” Scarlett asked.

“Damian is always in trouble,” he snapped in reply.

“And so, what will happen now?” Lady Tipton asked. “He still has a copy of Robert’s

will. Is it not likely that he will yet try to blackmail us?"

"If he does wish to, he can come to me to do it," her husband replied. "I'll not fork out another penny on travel simply so that he can blackmail me for more."

"But you are right, Mother," Oakley said. "It does mean that nothing is resolved. We have not been able to stop Damian. We do not know where he is, or what he intends to do, or when. We could be ruined at any moment, and we are to live with the threat of it hanging over our heads indefinitely."

But you are all alive! Frederica wanted to say, yet the look on her brother's face stole every feeling of triumph for having ensured as much. She sighed quietly—or tried to, but her aunt noticed.

"Frederica, are you unwell?"

"No, but I slept very ill. Might I be excused to lie down for a while?"

Her ladyship consented, and without meeting anyone's eye, Frederica escaped upstairs to her bedchamber. She was still lying on the bed with her eyes closed, failing miserably to fall asleep, when the door flew open, and Scarlett raced in.

"Frederica, he is here! He is come!"

She sat up in alarm. "Damian has come here?"

Scarlett broke into a broad grin. "No, not Damian. His Grace!"

Frederica's insides lurched violently. She scrambled off the bed, clutching her roiling stomach. "Penrith?"

“Unless you know any other dukes?”

Feeling stupid with surprise and doubt, Frederica asked, “Why is he here?”

Scarlett gave her a withering look. “For heaven’s sake, will you still be doubting him even as he says his vows?”

“He says he has come for me?”

“He has not said anything yet—his carriage has only just pulled up to the house—but we both know you are the reason. Come, make haste! ”

Scarlett grabbed Frederica by the hand and tugged her out of the door. They raced together along the landing, both hitching up their skirts to hurry down the stairs with quick steps. Frederica stopped with a gasp upon arriving far enough down to see Penrith in the hall. He was handing the butler his hat and coat, saying something in his usual quiet but commanding voice that Frederica loved so well. She knew she had missed him, but she could not have guessed what pangs of delight seeing him would bring. Her heart fluttered madly when he turned to look at her.

It faltered slightly when he did not smile and only stared at her intently, his expression inscrutable. She longed to believe that her letter had brought him here, but could not guess what he was thinking, and for the first time in their acquaintance, she cursed his imperturbable poise. Then, abruptly, every awful second of their last encounter crashed into her mind, and she felt her cheeks redden with shame.

“Um...Your Grace,” Scarlett said hesitantly, coming around Frederica and down the rest of the stairs to curtsy to him. “We were just making our way to the saloon to receive you with the rest of our family.”

He blinked once or twice, as though he had not been listening, then bowed to her.

“Lady Worthe.” And then to Frederica. “Miss Richmond.”

Once back on her, his eyes did not stray again. Much though Frederica would have liked the reassurance of a smile, she could not deny how well solemnity suited him. His flawless skin and strong, noble features were magnificently statuesque in their stillness. She felt pinned to the spot by his penetrating gaze but forced herself to follow her sister’s example and come down the last few steps to curtsy. “Your Grace.”

Neither had the opportunity to say more, for the butler at that moment stepped forwards. “Your Grace, if you would accompany me?”

The duke inclined his head and silently fell in beside the butler as he made his way to the saloon. The sisters followed behind, Frederica returning Scarlett’s encouraging grin with a helpless shrug, for she felt anything but encouraged by the restrained greeting.

Lord Tipton was standing ready to receive the duke when they entered the saloon—although he did not remain standing long after giving a stiff bow and welcoming Penrith to Chiltern Court, for his travels had greatly exacerbated his frailty. Frederica and Scarlett found themselves seats while salutations were exchanged amongst the rest of the party and Penrith was offered a drink and a seat, both of which he declined. Frederica watched him anxiously, but although he did not avoid her gaze, neither did he linger on it as he had done in the hall.

“Did you happen to be in the area, Duke?” Kem asked, coming to stand with him by the mantel.

“No, indeed, I have come from Cedarvale.”

“You do not say!” Worthe replied with surprise. “Why, we have come ourselves from

Oxfordshire today. You must have been one coaching stop behind us the entire way. ”

“I was,” Penrith replied. “It was remarked on by at least one person at every stop.”

“Your Grace has travelled a long way,” Lord Tipton said warily. “We are honoured, but I hope you will not object to my asking why?”

Frederica held her breath and did not look at Scarlett, whose words— we both know you are the reason —echoed in her head as Penrith opened his mouth to speak.

“I have important news for you that I judged it best to impart in person, for it is of a delicate nature,” he said. “It pertains to your brother, Mr Damian Richmond.”

A silent shifting of awareness ran around the room as every person stiffened in alarm.

Frederica discreetly looked down at her lap and let out her held breath as quietly as she could. It came out absurdly shakily. Of course he brought news about Damian—that was, after all, the matter she had begged him to resolve. She winced to think what a fool she had looked, racing to the saloon and sitting with bated breath for a duke , whose affections she had already spurned, to declare himself to her. She ignored Scarlett’s subtle attempt to reach for her hand, for she dared not accept any comfort lest she make an even greater fool of herself by starting to cry.

“Pray, go on,” Lord Tipton said unhappily.

“Before the ladies?” the duke queried, drawing a weary sigh from the earl, though it was Lady Tipton who answered him.

“We are all well past being shocked by Mr Richmond’s antics, Your Grace. I beg you would spare no details on our account.”



“As you wish, madam,” he replied. “Your brother is in gaol. He was arrested two nights ago for larceny.”

Frederica could not help but look up at that. Penrith had done exactly as she asked and found a misdemeanour with which to charge her uncle—and evidently within hours of receiving her express. Disappointment and mortification aside, she would have him know how grateful she was, for it could not have been a simple undertaking.

She was not able to, for he did not return her look and did not see her smile.

“That explains why he did not keep our meeting,” Oakley grumbled.

Lord Tipton rubbed his forehead. “Your Grace has my sincerest apologies. I shall, of course, reimburse you in full for whatever it is my brother has stolen.”

“That will not be necessary, Tipton. It was not me from whom he stole but the Taverstock kitchens.”

“The kitchens?” Worthe repeated, somewhat dubiously. “What could he have taken from there that was so valuable?”

“The cook reported the theft of meat joints worth in excess of three pounds.”

There was an uncomfortable pause as Lord Tipton and all Frederica’s brothers regarded the duke with undisguised incredulity. Her uncle shook his head; Kem pressed the back of one fist to his mouth as though withholding a cuss; even good-natured Oakley let his shoulders sag and sighed exasperatedly. Their incivility was mortifying to behold. Frederica looked at her aunt in supplication, but she was not much more guarded in her vexation and sat rigidly with her lips pursed and her colour high. Frederica wanted to scream at them all for their discourtesy—did they not

comprehend what the duke had done for them?

“Three pounds?” Lord Tipton said stiffly. “Was it absolutely imperative that he was arrested for so small a sum?”

Penrith was unmoved. “Theft is theft, my lord, although I should be unsurprised were other offences to come to light. I have heard of at least one recent case of violence that I shall personally insist he be punished for.”

He did not look at Frederica as he said this, making her doubt that he could have been referring to Damian’s attack on her, but whomever he had meant, his point made itself felt; her uncle grimaced contritely—to her as well as him.

“Pardon me. There is no argument that my brother ought to be held accountable for his crimes, which I regret are many. If it seemed as though any of us thought otherwise, it is only because his arrest at this particular time has prevented us from dealing with a family matter of the utmost importance. To know that we were thwarted for the sake of a few pounds is...” He did not finish his sentence and instead said, “At least we know where he is. I shall have to speak to him in gaol.”

“That is your prerogative, but there is something you should know first,” Penrith replied, his expression stony. “The matter of which I believe you speak, I am afraid, may no longer be merely a family concern.”

“What is your meaning?” Lord Tipton said severely.

The duke’s poise held—he scarcely batted an eye at the earl’s tone. “Mr Richmond was wanted and ultimately arrested for larceny, but he was found when the authorities were called to a gambling den in Bicester where he had been involved in a brawl. In an attempt to evade arrest, he avowed repeatedly that he was the true heir to the Tipton Earldom, that he had proof of it, and that his viscountcy ought to be sufficient

reason to stay his debts. He was less than discreet.”

Lady Tipton cried out and clamped a hand over her mouth as though she might vomit. Oakley looked wide-eyed between his parents like a frightened boy, unsure what to do. Lord Tipton, his expression one of absolute devastation, said, “Then it is over. We are discovered.”

Frederica’s heart plummeted—she stifled a cry of her own. What have I done?

The duke cleared his throat. “Nobody will hear it from me, and I made what arrangements I could to secure the silence of those present, but I could not vouch for the word of every person in the establishment, such as it was. So, I am afraid that yes, you must prepare yourselves for the possibility that you are discovered.”

“Devil take it!” Kem muttered furiously. “If we had only got to him a day earlier and dealt with this as we intended?—”

“Then you would very likely be dead or in gaol yourself,” Penrith said flatly .

Brought up short by this interjection, Kem tilted his head at the duke in a clear and angry invitation for him to explain his remark.

“Can you deny that it was your intention to challenge the man?” Penrith asked, looking first at Kem, but glancing meaningfully at each of the other men. None of them answered, which Frederica thought spoke volumes as to their guilt.

Penrith nodded, evidently in agreement. “If, by having Mr Richmond locked up, I have prevented you from killing him in a hot-headed duel, then I cannot be sorry. Take it from me, Kemerton, losing someone you love dearly and being left to bring up their children without them is not a fate you would wish on your lady wife.”

“Well said, Duke,” Adelaide muttered, touching a hand to her stomach and raising her eyebrows expressively at her husband. Kem looked both thoroughly chastened and exceptionally displeased, but before he could respond, Lord Tipton interposed.

“Do I understand Your Grace correctly? That it was your design to prevent a duel?”

For the first time, Penrith hesitated, which only fanned the earl’s ire. Frederica watched in agonies as his countenance darkened and he worked himself into an ever-greater fury, every ounce of it directed towards the duke.

“Pray tell me—why now? Why have my brother arrested on that day above all others, if not to prevent our meeting? ”

“I assure you?—”

“Nay, the only assurance you can offer me is that through no fault of his own, my son will be ruined in the eyes of all the world, and my worthless brother will inherit all this, only to run it into the dirt. If you had not sent your men in search of him, I daresay Damian would never have revealed anything of this. Why would you do it?” His voice grew louder still, and he began jabbing his finger into the arm of his chair with every other syllable. “Why would you involve yourself in a matter that has nothing to do with you—that is none of your business?”

“Because I asked him to!” Frederica cried, propelling herself to her feet, unable to bear it any longer. “I am sorry! I never meant for this to happen—but we thought you or Kem would get yourselves killed, and Adelaide would lose her baby, and Aunt Louisa would take ill, and I could not bear to see the whole family torn apart because of the secrets I gave away. So I asked His Grace for help. Despise me if you must, but I beg you would not blame him. He does not deserve your anger. I do.”

Frederica could see people’s lips moving but, deaf to everything but the pulse raging

in her ears, she turned on her heel and ran.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

F rederica ran through the house, past more than one startled servant, and out into the garden. Dusk was falling, but she did not care—she wanted only to be away from her mistakes and the look of despair on her uncle’s face. She ran across the lawn and past the folly into the woods beyond, where she was at last obliged to stop and catch her breath. It did her little good, for her breath would not come, and she found herself gasping for air. It took her a moment to realise she was sobbing. She slumped against the darkened silhouette of the nearest tree and let her tears come, never in her life feeling so utterly wretched.

“Miss Richmond!”

She spun around at the familiar voice to see Penrith jogging towards her through the gloaming. What it meant that he had followed her, she was too miserable to guess, but as always, her first sensation upon seeing him was one of profound relief—always his presence was such a balm to her spirits. She took a shaky breath and wiped frantically at her face to dry her tears, all too aware that she must look an absolute fright and hoping the deepening gloom might disguise her red-rimmed eyes.

The duke slowed to a stride, then a walk, then finally came to a halt in front of her. He seemed uncommonly agitated. “You did not need to do that,” he said almost angrily. “I was perfectly content to let them think it was my idea.”

“You should not have to take the blame.”

“Neither should you, for you are blameless!”

“We both know that is not true! By asking you to act as you have, I have secured their complete ruin.”

Penrith took a step closer. “What you did by asking me for help was clever, and brave, and right . Your brothers clearly intended to duel. And this secret was too large to ever remain undiscovered. It would have come out with or without your help—or mine. Your family will simply have to accept that Damian Richmond is the rightful heir. It may be painful for them, but you have prevented a far greater tragedy.”

“I do not think my uncle would agree.”

“He would—indeed, he does. He has already expressed his regret for losing his temper, but in any case, I would counsel you not to hold it against him. He is afraid, and fear invariably presents itself as anger.” He gave an exasperated little laugh. “Which is precisely why I was trying so hard not to look at you—to avoid anyone guessing your connection to events, thereby saving you the brunt of any such untamed sentiments. ”

The significance of Penrith having come to her, of him staunchly defending her actions, of him speaking to her at all, finally began to dawn on Frederica. She wiped her face again in a vain attempt to make herself appear less wild. “It is?”

“Yes! Though you made it damnably hard, staring at me the way you were, and looking so very, very beautiful.”

Frederica stared at him, too astonished to believe what she had heard. “Your Grace, I?—”

“I thought we agreed you would dispense with that formality.”

She let out a small, doubtful huff of air. “That was before I was so awful to you.”

“Before you were awful to me ?” He shook his head. “How like you to assume the fault is yours.”

The darkness was increasing by the moment, and Frederica did not see him reach for her hand—she only felt the warmth of his touch as he wrapped his fingers around hers.

“Frederica, it was unconscionable of me to come to you as I did that day. It was without doubt the most selfish act of my life. I thought only of my own happiness and spared no thought whatsoever to what you had endured. It was I who was awful to you, and I beg you would forgive me.”

“I thought I had made you hate me.”

“That is not possible.”

“But you looked so unhappy when you left. It has haunted me. ”

“Do not let it. I shall not deny that I have endured many hours of misery since that day for having failed to win your hand—but I did not relinquish my hopes of making you love me when I left Taverstock. I was perfectly ready to wait until such time as you might receive my addresses more favourably. No, my unhappiness in that moment was something else entirely.” He reached for her other hand, holding both between them.

“You said in your letter that I had been an anchor to you, but it is quite the reverse. You have pulled me out of a blackness I did not believe would ever recede. And in return, boor that I am, I forced you to choose between love and duty. And when you had made the only choice your perfect, pure heart would allow you to make, I had no option but to leave you, crying and alone, without any of the comfort you deserved, all the while knowing I was the cause of your distress. Yes, I can safely say that I was



outside of unhappy when I left you that day—but it was all my own doing, not yours.”

“Oh, Penrith, I never blamed you for coming. I wish I had let you comfort me.”

He ran his thumbs over her knuckles, sending tingles the length of her arms and releasing a host of butterflies in her stomach. “Frederica, I would be that comfort to you always . I would hold your hand through every travail and be at your side for every triumph—if you would allow me.” He lifted her hand to kiss her fingers. “Will you be my duchess?”

His question was as sobering as if someone had thrown a pitcher of cold water in Frederica’s face. She sucked in her breath and stepped backwards, withdrawing her hands from his and pressing her palms together in agitation. “Your duchess ?”

“Yes.” Penrith’s confusion was clear—as was his sudden apprehension. “Good God, what did you think I was asking you to be?”

“Well, your...your wife.”

His brow furrowed even as he laughed and shook his head. “That is what I am asking.”

“I know, I...I just had not considered before that being your wife would also mean being a duchess.”

“You are surely the only woman of my acquaintance who has not considered it. Did you not see them, throwing themselves at me at my ball? All with the hope of piquing my interest, all with their eye on my rank and fortune.”

“Then are you sure you want me ? I trust you have not forgotten that I grew up in an

orphanage and cannot speak French or Italian or do complicated arithmetic. I cannot read music. I can barely dance.”

The gloom notwithstanding, there was no disguising Penrith’s smile, so broad it almost made a stranger of him. “You have never cared that I am a duke, have you?”

Frederica gave him a slight, one-shouldered shrug. “Not really, I am afraid. Only in as much as I was aware that you would be conscious of the chasm between our conditions in life. I have never been much interested in anybody’s rank or birthright. My history has made a mockery of the whole business.”

“And thus, I offered for the only woman in the whole of the ton who would refuse me.” He reached for her hands again and tugged her gently back towards him. “I beg you would not refuse me again. Please say you will marry me. Never mind my duchess, Frederica, I would have you be my dearest friend, a mother to my children, and my wife—in every way.”

It had been a while since Frederica felt anything but worry or guilt—it had been even longer since she felt contentment—and she could not recall ever feeling happiness such as she felt at that moment. Every part of her thrummed with it, her heart so full she thought it must surely burst. She had barely completed one full nod of her head before Penrith swept her into his arms. He held her as though he was worried she might slip away again, his usual composure evaporated as he crushed her against his chest, murmuring soft words of love and devotion that moved her deeply. Tentatively, self-consciously, she wrapped her arms around his broad back. She thought that she had erred when he stilled, yet when he drew back to look at her, his expression banished her concern.

“I love you,” she whispered. “I should be honoured to be your duchess.”

Clearly moved, he lovingly cupped her face with both hands and kissed her. It was a

less restrained embrace than they had shared at Cedarvale, savouring more of relief and urgency than tenderness. His caress was ardent and possessive, and when his lips moved to her neck, Frederica gasped with pleasure. His hands moved from her face to her shoulders to her back to her hips, pulling her against him in ways that inflamed her, body and soul. So affecting was his touch that she shivered at its withdrawal, not yet quite returned to her senses.

“Are you cold?” he asked.

“Not particularly,” she answered, too distracted by the taste of him, lingering on her lips, to think about much else. “I suppose we ought to go in, though. It would be unwise to give my uncle any more reasons to be displeased with me, and he will not like that we have been alone together.”

“You need not worry. I secured his consent for a private audience with you before I followed you out here—and your brother’s. They know perfectly well what my intentions are—and your sisters were adamant that they agree to it.”

She smiled at that—dear Adelaide and Scarlett! Penrith held out his hand for hers, and when she gave it to him, he raised it to his lips and kissed the back of her fingers. Then he placed her hand on his arm and set them off towards the house, whose windows were now aglow with candlelight—a beacon in the darkness.

“Besides,” Penrith continued, “I daresay your uncle will not object to having our favour in the coming months. Your family face an uphill struggle, but as a duchess, you will be able to protect them from the worst bite of the scandal merely by standing by them in town.”

Frederica looked up at him, beyond delighted by his observation. Finally, she might be of some use to her family, instead of a constant nuisance. “I had not considered that!”

“I know,” he replied, and though it was by now too dark to see his smile, she could hear it in his voice. After a brief pause, he said, “There is another benefit to being a duchess that I know you have not considered.”

“Oh?”

“You could become patroness of Taverstock. It would be a different manner of involvement, but with your knowledge and my fortune, you could make a vast difference.”

Frederica had thought her present happiness unsurpassable, but everything Penrith said gave her yet more joy. “You are right, I did not think of that. Why did you not suggest it before?”

“I did not wish to influence your decision.”

With this declaration, Frederica knew she had found the very best of men to love her. Feeling almost overwhelmed with her affection for him, she tugged gently on his arm, slowing his steps enough that she could kiss his cheek. This was encouragement enough for him to stop walking altogether and kiss her again as passionately as he had before, to which she had no objection.

Afterwards, the duke did not hasten to pull away, instead placing the tenderest of kisses to her forehead and staring at her, close enough that the nighttime made no difference; it still felt as though he was looking into her soul. “Will you reward me in that manner every time I say something that pleases you?”

She nodded shyly, too embarrassed to openly admit how well she liked his attentions, even in the dark.

“In that case,” he said, “you might like to know that I received a letter this week,

from the housekeeper at Stubbington Hall in Southampton. She has a young lady in her employ by the name of Miss Patty Robins.”

Frederica let out a little squawk and clutched at his arm. “You have found Adelaide’s friend?”

“I have—though I shall not take the credit for the idea of searching for her. In any case, it seems she has been learning her letters and is, I understand, very good with her mistress’s children. I thought perhaps you might like to invite her to take your position as matron at Taverstock, when you leave.”

Frederica grinned broadly, already envisioning her sister’s raptures when she heard this news. “You have thought of everything! You are too clever, Your Grace.”

“Only as clever as you, Your Grace , for your idea to have Richmond arrested,” he replied. “But then I have noticed that you are often the voice of reason when everyone else is losing their heads. It is one of the first things about you that I fell in love with.”

He could not have done any more to demonstrate his affections, but Frederica was nevertheless enchanted to hear him say it. She felt she ought to repay the compliment. “I first admired you for your way with children.”

“In that we are perfectly aligned, for I think it was only about our third encounter before I knew that you would make the very finest mother to mine.”

“I hope I shall! I mean to try. They are such wonderful little souls.”

“They are—although, I have been thinking...You are used to so many more children that three is probably not enough for you, is it? A few more would be a fine thing, do you not think?”

Frederica was momentarily silenced by the flood of sentiment that overcame her. The desire to be a mother in her own right was something she had never allowed herself to dwell upon, for it had seemed such an unattainable wish. Yet anybody who cherished children as dearly as she did could not deny the yearning to hold her own child in her arms. She did not think she would ever be able to express to Penrith how profoundly the prospect pleased her.

“Yes,” she whispered. “That would be a very fine thing indeed.”

She fancied Penrith heard the waver in her voice—or perhaps he simply knew her well enough to comprehend her sentiments—for his next kiss, when he gave it, was tenderness itself.

Frederica was still in high emotion as they returned to the house; she was thankful to have her beloved at her side, for she did not feel equal to facing her family’s anger alone. The duke had been correct, however—now that the initial shock had passed, there was no ill will, only stoic resignation that the truth was always likely to be discovered. And all their imminent tribulations notwithstanding, to a piece, the Richmonds welcomed her and Penrith with open arms and heartfelt congratulations at their happy news. For the first time in her life, Frederica truly knew what it was to be a part of a family, and she had never felt more blessed.

### EPILOGUE

Cedarvale, Oxfordshire

May 1819

Frederica felt a delicious quiver of excitement as Penrith wrapped himself around her from behind and put his hand over hers on the knife. Together, they cut into their wedding cake, and a convivial round of applause went up amongst those gathered to celebrate the occasion. It was a relatively small congregation, the guest list carefully curated to minimise any unsympathetic attention towards Frederica's family, yet with enough dignitaries present—Lady Tipton's sister, the Marchioness of Carbrooke, and her family amongst them—to give a clear signal that the Duchy of Penrith stood firmly by the Tipton Earldom.

Her new husband placed a kiss on her cheek. "You always did know the perfect time for cake, Duchess."

She smiled elatedly—as she had been doing all morning until her cheeks ached from it. "It makes a welcome change not to be dishing it out as a means of commiseration."

"On the contrary, you must commiserate with me," he said quietly. "I am profoundly distressed that all these people are still here, and I cannot be alone with my bride. The wait is insufferable."

She felt a warmth that had become gradually more familiar as their engagement had progressed, and Penrith's attentions had grown bolder. It was but one month since he

proposed, and in some ways, the time had rushed past, for there had been much to arrange and a great deal of activity—and gossip—to manage. In other ways, it had felt like an age.

Prior to the duke's impassioned declaration in the gardens at Chiltern Court, uncertainty had made them both guarded. Penrith had since admitted to having been convinced that Frederica would resolve to stay at Taverstock; Frederica had admitted to having persuaded herself that he could never return her regard. Once both obstacles were removed, they had each been emboldened to display a far greater degree of admiration, discovering a mutual ardour that had rendered the month of waiting difficult and long.

Once or twice, their desire had run so hot as to seriously imperil Frederica's virtue—something that had delighted her as much as it had astonished her; she had never known such passions existed. Assuming none of the delicious sensations she was experiencing for the first time were new to Penrith, she had been captivated to learn, after one particularly heated tryst, that he, too, had never known yearning like it.

“What have you done to me?” he had said to her, reluctantly and breathlessly desisting his attentions. “I am a man crazed—or a green boy, more like. I have never been so woefully incapable of controlling myself.”

“Have you not? Not even with...?”

He had shaken his head emphatically. “It was never like this with Margot. I loved her dearly in the end, but I never wanted her like I want you. You drive me out of my senses!”

Telling him she was no less affected, and it was therefore a good thing that they had sense enough to spare between them, had tested his restraint and her patience to its limits.



Without sacrificing their closeness, they both relinquished the knife to a footman for him to cut up the cake. “His Grace and I will require equally generous slices,” Frederica said to him, earning herself a rapacious look from her husband.

The applause died away and Frederica’s brother raised his glass. “A toast! To the duke and his new wife, my dear sister, the Duchess of Penrith! I wish you both every happiness.”

There was a slight pause, a ripple of mumbling, and a host of sly glances before anybody took up the toast, and even then, it took Kem and Worthe to initiate it. Frederica wondered at James’s boldness. In his inimitable way, he had determined not to allow his altered situation to bring him low, declaring instead that it was his greatest joy to be able, at last, to drop the pretence of being a mere cousin and announce to the world that he was brother to the three finest young ladies of his acquaintance. Frederica and her sisters were deeply touched, but whilst James might be reconciled to no longer being the viscount, the ton was far from content to overlook the lie Lord Tipton had perpetuated. There was derision and censure aplenty amongst some in their circle without James adding fuel to the fire by advertising the matter in his every speech.

“Thank you, Richmond,” Penrith said collectedly. “It is much appreciated.”

Frederica saw Lord Tipton wince at the appellation. She felt for him. She had known her brother for only a few short months, and she could scarcely get used to calling him anything other than Oakley. After a lifetime of fathering him, not to mention the guilt of having landed him in his present fix, her uncle was struggling much more with the adjustment.

Penrith directed her with a delectable touch to her lower back away from the buffet table and towards the window, where her family were grouped. They had not quite reached them when the butler interrupted their progress.

“Forgive the intrusion, Your Grace, you have a visitor—Lord Humboldt.”

“The magistrate?” Frederica asked, perturbed. She had not seen him since the night of Lucy Baxter’s accident, and the circumstances then could not have been more disagreeable .

“It is my wedding day—I am not receiving callers,” Penrith said with an unusual flash of vexation on his countenance.

The butler inclined his head. “Apologies, Your Grace, I did impress that fact upon him, but he insists it cannot wait—and he has requested to see Lord Tipton as well.”

Frederica balked. Recalling a recent mention in one of the gossip papers that her uncle might be required to forfeit his earldom altogether should the Crown take exception to his deceit, she became fearful of what new disaster this visit heralded. “Should you like me to join you?” she asked anxiously.

“No, my love, you stay here,” Penrith replied. “The less our guests are given to tattle about the better. I shall not be long, I promise.” With a kiss to her hand and a smile that seemed somewhat forced, he left her to speak to Lord Tipton. Moments later, both men left the room. Frederica guessed that Penrith had not told her uncle his real purpose, for his lordship had looked only curious and not at all worried. Taking her husband’s lead, she took a deep breath, pasted a smile on her face, and walked calmly to join the rest of her family.

“Frederica, where have Penrith and Uncle Charles gone? Is everything well?” Adelaide said immediately, not in the least bit fooled.

She felt her smile grow ever more fixed. “I do not know, but pray, let us continue as though it is nothing.”

They agreed without hesitation and did her proud with their efforts to act as though

nothing was amiss. Kem, Worthe, and Lord Carbrooke proved invaluable, moving about the room with James in tow, drawing upon all their consequence to deter any undue speculation about him or the absence of Penrith or Lord Tipton.

Left with her female relations, Frederica did her best to maintain an unruffled demeanour. With a determined smile befitting a happy bride, she said, “Patty is settling in well at Taverstock, Adelaide.”

Her sister beamed at her. “I know—because she wrote to me! Her handwriting is atrocious, but I cannot tell you how well I like being able to correspond with her now. You and Penrith have given me an absolute gift by returning her to me. I do not know how I shall ever repay you.”

“That is easy,” Frederica replied. “You are about to provide me with a new niece or nephew to dote upon. I shall be very well satisfied with that as payment.”

Adelaide placed a hand on her growing belly and smiled. “Not long now, and I confess, I am impatient for my time, for I am not well suited to the inconvenience of increasing. I am exceedingly grateful that you chose to marry from Cedarvale. I do not think I could have endured the carriage ride to Chiltern Court.”

“It was no trouble. It was less disruptive for the children this way.”

“Yes! Our anticipation for Adelaide’s babe notwithstanding, you have three children of your own now,” Scarlett said warmly. “And we have two nephews and a niece to spoil rotten.”

Frederica smiled happily. She had spent a good deal of time with Ryde, Delphine, and Felix over the last month, and they grew dearer to her by the day. “They will be brought down later, when the other guests have gone.”

Lady Tipton smiled fondly. “I look forward to it. They are cherubs—ah, Your Grace,

we were just discussing your darling children.”

Frederica turned to see that Penrith had returned and was crossing the room to her. His smile for her was as warm as ever, but that which he then turned upon Lady Tipton was distinctly less easy.

Her ladyship looked around him and at the door, then frowned at him in confusion. “Has my husband not returned with you?”

“No, madam,” he replied seriously. “In fact, he has requested that you join him in the library.”

Lady Tipton’s face fell, and she excused herself directly, insisting that her nieces and sister remain to enjoy the celebration.

“Enjoyment is impossible when we do not know what has happened,” Frederica said quietly. “Is it serious? Is my uncle in trouble?”

“Yes and no, in that order,” Penrith replied in a low voice. “Do not be too alarmed—he is well, only shaken. Let us get this over with and then I shall take you all to him.”

He refused to divulge any more, and after a tense moment, the twins and Lady Carbrooke and her daughters moved away to mingle with the guests—various of whom immediately turned in Frederica and Penrith’s direction, evidently intent on claiming their share of notice.

“Humboldt did bring one piece of indisputably good news,” the duke said beneath his breath before they were descended upon. “Tom Baxter has been returned to Taverstock.”

Frederica’s delight at this news buoyed her for the almost two hours that passed

before their guests could be prevailed upon to leave. When it began to look as though they never would, Lady Carbrooke offered to start the ball rolling by taking her family home first. She announced loudly that it was time for the bride and groom to be left in peace, and one by one, everyone else took the hint until only Frederica's brothers and sisters remained. As soon as the door closed behind the last departee, Penrith led them all to the library.

Lord Tipton was sitting next to his wife, looking pale and frightfully old. Frederica glanced at her husband in dismay; he squeezed her hand and gave her a reassuring smile, then drew her to one of the sofas nearest the earl, encouraging the others to follow suit.

Lord Tipton waited only as long as it took for them all to be seated before saying, without preamble, "My brother Damian has been killed."

Frederica did not wonder that Penrith had refused to divulge this news whilst the wedding celebration was ongoing; there was no doubt her family's absolute astonishment would have drawn unwanted notice. Nobody spoke; they only stared cagily at each other as the significance of Damian Richmond's death settled upon them all.

"The magistrate informs me there was some manner of disturbance at the gaol last night." Her uncle continued. "They are investigating, but all they presently know is that several men were involved, Damian among them. He was stabbed. And now he is dead."

Still, nobody said anything, and Frederica felt the cruelty of it. She had no love for Mr Richmond, but none of his crimes made him any less Lord Tipton's brother. "I am sorry, Uncle. You have my deepest condolences."

Her uncle looked at her with something like wonder. "You are quite remarkable, my dear. Damian used you abominably, yet still you have the compassion to mourn his

death. You truly are your father's daughter."

His words rendered Frederica as silent as the rest of her family. She was grateful to feel Penrith squeeze her hand again and returned his grip fiercely to steady herself.

Her uncle cleared his throat and gave a sad little shake of his head. "I had put off visiting him, for there seemed nothing to be said or done about the situation. Lord knows I regret that now. Just as I regret not seeing Robert before his death. It seems I have learnt nothing. I did not want Damian to inherit, but I certainly did not wish him dead."

More awkward glances passed between them all, everyone seeming reluctant to be the first to ask the most obvious question. Eventually, James—who looked really rather ill—looked plaintively at his father.

"What will happen now?"

An expression of pure affection overtook Lord Tipton's countenance. "You will be lawfully recognised as the true heir to the Tipton Earldom. "

James took a deep breath. "Then I shall be Viscount Oakley and openly recognised as brother to Robert Richmond's daughters?"

Both Lord and Lady Tipton looked deeply pained at his question, but neither opposed it. Lord Tipton answered simply, "Yes."

"That would surely have made our father happy?" Scarlett said hopefully.

"I hope so," Lord Tipton replied sombrely, giving one, unhappy nod.

James met Frederica's eye. She smiled encouragingly at him. He turned his gaze on Adelaide and then Scarlett; they each smiled back at him with equal fondness.

Seeming to take heart from them all, he then addressed Lord and Lady Tipton with more of his usual verve. “I am sure Robert and Susan would be delighted that my sisters and I are together again, as we always ought to have been. But I should like to know whether my mother and father are happy about it.”

Lady Tipton let out a small sob. “Oh James, you dear boy! Of course we are!”

Lord Tipton appeared too moved to speak, but after a few curt nods and vigorous blinks, he managed to convey his vast satisfaction and relief.

“Does this mean we can revert to calling you Oakley?” Worthe asked.

“Dear God, please say we can,” Kem added with feeling. “It galls me to call you by the name I have always associated with...” He paused and looked contritely at Lord Tipton. “Pardon me. ”

“Do not apologise on my account, Kemerton. Your antipathy is more than warranted—and it goes without saying that I share your feelings on the matter of my son’s rightful name.”

It was impossible to rejoice in the face of a man’s death, but there was much cause for relief. Robert and Susan’s children were properly reunited at last; the Tipton estate was safe from ruination at Damian’s hands; Lord Tipton’s gamble on Oakley’s upbringing had paid off, for a lifetime as the assumed heir had prepared him for the destiny that would come his way after all; and Oakley’s name might yet not be entirely ruined.

“For all the good it will do me,” he said good-naturedly. “It is not as though I held much appeal for anyone before all of this. I should think my hopes of convincing someone I am a good catch now are next to none.”

Scarlett straightened her spine as though she had taken personal affront. “That is

nonsense.”

“Do not be discouraged by that Huntington trollop,” Adelaide added.

“Sister!” Scarlett exclaimed.

“Well, she is.”

Huntington? Frederica had heard Oakley lament his missed opportunities with numerous women—Lady Veronica, Mrs Marshall, Scarlett’s friend Bess, to name but a few—but she could not recall ever hearing the name Huntington. She began to comprehend just how ill his luck with the fairer sex truly was and begrudged the injustice of it. He was such a kind-hearted person; he deserved more. She angled her body enough to pat him on the arm. “You will make one fortunate lady a wonderful husband. You are certainly the finest brother anyone could wish for!”

Adelaide and Scarlett joined their agreements to hers, but Oakley was saved from the embarrassment of their insistent praise when the nannies arrived with Penrith’s children.

“Should you like us to go to a different room and leave you in peace, Uncle?” Frederica asked Lord Tipton.

“Goodness, no,” he replied, sitting up straighter in his chair. “This is their home! Besides, there is nothing like the innocence of children to help ease one’s troubles.”

Frederica gestured for the nannies to release their charges, all three of whom ran directly to her and Penrith. She took Delphine onto her lap, Penrith took Felix onto his, and Ryde climbed proudly to sit between them.

“Nanny said there was cake,” he said hopefully.



“There is,” Penrith replied. “Should you like some?”

All the children nodded enthusiastically, and Frederica asked a footman to bring a tray of leftover wedding cake and some tea for them all, with chocolate for the children.

“Thank you, Mama,” Delphine said—so nonchalantly that it took a moment for Frederica to fully comprehend what she had said. Her heart contracted powerfully in her chest when the word sank in. Nevertheless, she looked at her husband uncertainly.

“I am sorry, I-I did not ask her to?—”

“It is well,” he said, reaching to place his hand on her upper arm and regarding her with a sublimely loving gaze. “You are their mother now. And they are fortunate indeed to have you. We all are.”

“Hear, hear!” Oakley seconded—a sentiment that was quickly echoed by everybody else.

Frederica regarded them all with a lump in her throat, unable to respond for the strength of feeling overtaking her. Happiness like she had never known filled her eyes with tears and her heart with joy. She hugged Delphine gently to her, kissed her head, and made a silent promise to the late duchess that she would love her children as dearly as though they were her own. Then she declared to her family that they should all eat cake and forget their worries for a time. Privately, she was hopeful that they might be able, at last, to forget their worries for good, but she would settle for the respite lasting for the duration of this day—without doubt the happiest of her life.