







# The Widow's Christmas Rogue(Wicked Widows' League #30)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Jessica Lady Colyton has no intention of being a wicked widow and no time for rogues. Her father, her brothers and her husband were rogues enough for a lifetime. However, she has joined the Wicked Widows League, seeking help after her husbands will proves to be just one more blow from a controlling and manipulative man.

It has been a difficult year. When her new friends organise a holiday in a country cottage for her, she blesses them—right up until she finds a naked rogue in her bed.

Martin Lord Tavistock is no rogue, unlike his father before him. The mans early death in sordid circumstances brought him a title and a barrow-load of responsibilities. His uncles strict upbringing has given him little taste for pleasure and no skill in making friends.

He wants only to go home to Yorkshire, shunning the Christmas house party to which his matchmaking sister has invited him, and the beauties she has undoubtedly lined up to tempt him. When he wakes up in a strange ladys bed, naked, tied down, and clueless as to how he arrived at her cottage, he wants no part in whatever plot is underway.

Trapped by a snowstorm, he and his furious hostess must form a reluctant alliance to survive, and that will be the end of their acquaintance. Wont it?

Except that Martin doesnt want to fight his attraction to Jessica, and she hopes that his promises of pleasure will prove that her experiences with Colton were not her fault. They can walk away after three days and nights of lovemaking. But will they want to?

**Total Pages (Source):** 15

## CHAPTER ONE

R espite House, three hours north of London. December 22nd, 1822

No one came to her carriage driver's knock. No doubt the servants had gone home early because of the weather. Fortunately, Jessica had been given a key.

Hodge carried her trunks inside after she opened the door. He was now standing in the front hall, shifting from foot to foot. She could see the concern in his eyes in the light of the lamp on the hall table. There must be another upstairs, since Jessica had seen two lit windows when she descended from the carriage, and those lights were the only sign of occupation in the cottage.

"Are you certain you will be able to get back to the inn in the village, Mr Hodge?" Jessica asked him. The snow, at first just a few soft flakes that melted as soon as they landed, was now coming down thick and fast. Settling, too. Already, the driveway was covered in a sheet of white.

The man's eyes crinkled. She couldn't see his smile for the muffler that protected him from the cold, but she could hear it in his voice. "I shall, Lady Colyton. It is no more than two miles. I'll be in front of a warm fire with my feet up and a drink in my hand before you can say Jack Robinson. Never you mind."

"If you are sure, then."

"I am, my lady. But will you be safe and comfortable?" Hodge's eyes were concerned. "There'll be someone there, my lady, to look after you?" he half asked

and half stated. “I don’t like to think of you being on your own.”

“I shall be very comfortable, Mr Hodge, I assure you. The ladies who own the house have a cook and a maid. Also, a groundsman, who can do heavy jobs indoor if asked.” And who lived on the estate next door, a fifteen-minute walk away. He would only come when asked, Jessica had been told. As for the cook and a maid of all work, neither lived in, which suited Jessica. She would be all alone, and that was precisely what she wanted and needed.

“I’ll be off then, my lady. You will send for me if you need me?”

Jessica assured him she would do so, though she could not imagine whom she could send, nor how they would get through to the village in this weather.

She watched him to his coach, then shut and locked the door, and leaned against it with a great sigh. Alone at last! No one to hover over her, trying to include her in things, asking her how she felt. No one to complain, carp, and criticise—not that her family did any of those things, but her years with Colyton had left wounds that might never completely heal over.

An entire house to herself! No one would notice or care if she stayed up reading half the night or went to bed with the sun. No one would insist she slept in or that she rose apace. No one would watch every mouthful she ate and order her to eat less or beg her to eat more.

For ten glorious days, she had only herself to please.

Right now, it pleased her to carry her travel bag upstairs to find her bedroom. The trunk would have to wait until tomorrow, when the servants came.

Emily Mannering, the widow who had arranged this holiday for her, had described

the upstairs layout, and sure enough, when she turned left from the head of the stairs, she found a short passage with two doors on either side and a window at the end.

The maid had been instructed to prepare the first room on the right with clean sheets and a fire laid in the hearth that just required a spill to set it alight.

Jessica set down her bag and opened the door. Yes, there was the other lamp, on a small desk under the window. The room was warm, even though the drapes had been left slightly open, presumably so the lamp's light could be seen from outside. The servants must have stayed late to prepare the house for her, for the fire was not merely set, but burned merrily behind a fire guard.

Jessica put the lamp down on a chest of drawers to the side of the door, and turned back for her bag. There was a muffled sound from behind her, and she spun around to face the bed. The sound came again, an angry muffled growl that froze her in place.

But no. Colyton was dead and—if God was just—in hell. If he had been going to haunt her, he would have done so before now, and his angry spirit could not possibly have followed her to this house, which belonged to people he didn't know—People she only met after his death.

But someone was in the bed, destroying the peace of her holiday. Jessica was not going to stand for it. She armed herself with the fire poker, picked up her lamp, and cautiously approached, ignoring the shrinking within. She did not know what to expect, but the sight that met her eyes wouldn't have occurred to her as an option. Not in a million years.

A handsome man in his prime was lying naked on the bed, spreadeagled on his back, his wrists and ankles tied to the head and foot posts. He was gagged. Also, by his expression, furious. Another angry growl aroused her from her shock. She was gaping. She shut her mouth and blinked. Which didn't make him vanish. He was

really there!

Her fear was being diluted by a healthy dose of irritation. She snatched up a blanket from the foot of the bed and threw it over him. She did not need to see what was on such flagrant display. She had never seen a man in such a complete state of undress—Colyton included.

Mind you, Colyton could not possibly have looked as magnificent as the specimen in front of her. Enough of that. She shook her head in a futile attempt to remove the delightful—no, the indecent memory.

“What on earth are you doing here? It doesn’t matter. You will have to leave. Immediately. I cannot imagine how you got here, and in that state.” Another thought occurred to her. “Oh my. Is the person who tied you up still here?” She turned to face the door, the poker held as threateningly as she could.

His noise this time sounded like an attempt at words. He was still annoyed, but she would be, too, in his circumstances.

“I am going to remove your gag,” she decided. He was tied up, after all. He could not hurt her. She put the lamp on the bedside table and leaned the poker against the bed, where she could reach it easily.

The gag was a kerchief tied so tightly that it cut across his mouth, holding it open. It was fastened by a knot behind one ear. At her request, he turned his head so she could get her fingers into the knot, pulling and tugging until it gave way. As soon as it was loose, he moved his head so suddenly that her fingers collided with the side of his face before she could snatch them back. He spat out the kerchief, and after it, a wad of fabric that must have been pushed into his mouth.

“Whoever you are, madam, and whatever your game, it will not work,” he declared,

sternly, his voice harsh. "Release me instantly, or it shall go badly for you."

Release him? Jessica felt much safer with him tied up. Unless his assailants were still here. "I have no idea who you are or what you are doing here," she told him. "I have no game, and I want no part of whatever this is." She waved to encompass the bed, the ties, and his unclothed state.

He narrowed her eyes as if doing so would allow him to see into her soul. He was a good-looking man. The worst sort, in Jessica's estimation. Her half-brothers were both handsome men, and had been terrible rakes until they met their wives. Her father had also been handsome when he was young, before his lifestyle destroyed his health. Colyton had been very ordinary looking, which only went to show one couldn't tell anything about a man from his appearance, for her brothers were both good men, and her father and Colyton had both been fiends, in their separate ways.

"If you have had nothing to do with me being abducted and tied here like this," the man challenged her, "then undo me."

She bit her upper lip while she thought. She could not leave him tied up, obviously, but on the other hand, she could not bring herself to untie him. Unless someone else was in the house, and if so, they were in the dark and being very quiet, she was alone with this man. How did she know he would not take advantage of that?

But she could not leave him tied up. If only she had asked Hodge to come inside with her! It was too late now. Her brother's coachman would be at the inn, seeing to the horses and looking forward to his hot toddy.

How could her holiday have turned so quickly into a disaster?



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### CHAPTER TWO

It was the lady's fear that dispelled the last of Martin's suspicion. And she was a lady. The carriage and diction could not be counterfeited. A pretty lady, with lovely hazel eyes. Not in her first youth, he thought. Martin put her age at a few years short of his own. Perhaps she was in her late twenties or early thirties.

Not a wanton, either. She had blushed scarlet when she saw him and had covered him quickly. Nor had she said or done anything that could be interpreted as flirting. She was still wearing a bonnet, cape and gloves, as if she had just arrived. That was not proof of her innocence in whatever plot had brought him here, but he found himself believing her.

"I mean you no harm, ma'am," he said. "Or is it 'Miss'?"

She ignored the question. "You might say that even if you did mean me harm," she pointed out.

"Perhaps if we introduce ourselves? My name is Martin Findlater. And you are?"

He succeeded better than he expected. She sighed as the tension left her body, and then smiled. "Viscount Findlater? Chloe's brother?"

At his nod, she moved directly to the nearest bedpost and began untying the rope. "I am Jessica, Lady Colyton," she told him. "Dom is my half-brother. Sort of. I mean, he is my half-brother, but it is an irregular relationship." Her face flamed again.

She was the Countess of Colyton? The infamous Countess of Colyton? Martin knew of her. Who didn't? Even Martin, who hated gossip, had heard at least the main points of her story. She was a base-born daughter of the previous Duke of Haverford. The same duke who sired Dom Finchley, his sister's husband, though Dom's mother had been married and Dom had been claimed as his own by her husband.

Lady Colyton and two other merry-begotten females had been raised as wards of the Duchess of Haverford. The stain on their birth didn't prevent all three women from making excellent marriages.

As far as he knew, the other two were still with their husbands. Lady Colyton had left hers. It had been the talk of the ton at the time, though Martin tried never to pay any attention to rumours, and these had died out quite quickly. Squashed, he supposed, by the current Duke of Haverford, who was very protective of his half-sisters.

"Then we are connections through my sister and your brother, Lady Colyton," Martin said. Whatever her antecedents, and whatever had happened in her marriage, she had been raised as a lady. He would treat her as such. She had moved to the bottom of the bed and was dealing with the knot there.

"Indeed," she said. "Ahah!"

His ankle was suddenly loose. "That was quick."

She was at the second bedpost now, and released the knot even more quickly. "These were in a half bow," she explained. "One more to go." She picked up the lamp from by the window and moved it to give her light while she untied his last arm.

Meanwhile, Martin had stretched his free hand down to his groin. A label had been attached with a ribbon to his personal equipage. Perhaps it would give a clue to what this was all about.

“Do you think the people who brought you here will still be in the house?” Lady Colyton asked, her voice quavering at the thought.

“I don’t know, my lady, but I will check when I am free,” Martin offered.

“There!” She stepped back with a pleased smile even as the rope released.

Martin sat up, returning the smile. “Thank you, my lady.” He was already unbuckling the cuffs to which the ropes had been tied, releasing first one wrist and then the other. “Have you seen my clothes?” he asked.

Lady Colyton shook her head. “I have just arrived,” she explained. “I came straight upstairs from the entrance hall.”

“No matter.” He was making equally short work of the cuffs on his ankles, taking care first to tuck the blanket around his middle. And if Lady Colyton was offended by his bare shoulders and chest, there was little he could do about it. “My lady, I wonder if you would be kind enough to ask a servant to fetch me a drink? I do not know how long since I had one, or what they gave me to knock me out, but I have a powerful thirst.”

She bit her lip again. He wanted to soothe it with kisses, which was as inappropriate a thought as any he had had. “Is there a problem, my lady?”

“What if someone is in the kitchen?” she asked, frowning, her lovely eyes clouded with anxiety.

“The cook?” he suggested. Is the woman simple?

Lady Colyton was shaking her head. “The cook only comes in the morning,” she said. “The maid, too.”

She was here on her own, he realised. She said ‘the maid,’ implying there was only one. Had she been part of the plot against him, and was all this anxiety an act? His head hurt, and it was hard to think, but he wanted to believe she was being honest. He shied away from considering why he was so keen to give her the benefit of the doubt.

“Very well, Lady Colyton,” he said. “If you will turn your back while I arrange this blanket, we shall explore the house together.”

He wound the blanket around him toga style, and took a moment to examine the label while Lady Colyton was not watching. The message was addressed to “Jessica.” Lady Colyton then. His suspicion surged.

“Jessica, it is time for you to do something for yourself. We’ve given you a rogue for the holiday. Have fun.” It was signed E. M.

Martin would hand it to the widow and see how she reacted. “Lady Colyton, you can look again. I think this is intended for you.”

He handed her the label and she read it. Her eyes widened. If she was feigning her astonishment and her indignation, she was a better actor than any he had ever seen.

“This is appalling,” she told him. “And wrong, too. By what I have been told, you are a gentleman, through and through, and certainly no rogue. How did that stupid woman come to select you?” She frowned in thought. “In fact, Lord Findlater, how did you come to be here at all? They knocked you out, you said?”

“A drug in my food or drink, I imagine. Can you tell me where I am, my lady? The last thing I remember is eating my breakfast at the inn in Upper Beckthump.”

“We are near there. Two miles or a little more, I believe. And it is late afternoon, Lord Findlater.”

“Only a mile?” That was a relief. As long as he could find something to wear, he could be reunited with his luggage and Lady Colyton could be left to enjoy her holiday in solitude, if that was in truth what she wanted. “It sounds as if I have been here for hours, which makes it less likely that someone is still lurking in the house. However, let me check that the house is safe for you, my lady, and then I shall be on my way.”

Her brow wrinkled as she shook her head. “It is snowing, quite heavily. I suspect you may be stuck here for the night, my lord.”

Martin pulled a drape aside, and Lady Colyton was correct. From the little he could see—for it seemed as if night had fallen—it was snowing a blizzard. He could do nothing about the weather, and he needed something to drink. Water, beer, milk even. Anything to quench his thirst. “Can we check downstairs first, my lady? Starting with the kitchen?”

He led the way down the stairs with one of the lamps, lifting his improvised toga out of the way so he could walk without tripping. “Is it this way to the kitchen?” he asked, as he headed to the back of the hall behind the stairs.

Lady Colyton was following behind him with the other lamp. “I imagine so. I haven’t been here before.”

The door at the back of the hall led to a short passage with two doors on one side and one on the other. Martin opened the first two. The stairs to the cellars. Dark. No noise or sign of occupation. A small office or perhaps a bedchamber—the housekeeper’s or the butler’s, perhaps. No occupants. Not even any furniture.

The third door opened into a kitchen. The lamps left dark shadows in the corners, but Martin could see well enough to tell that the room was spacious, clean, and well organised. Something fragrant cooked in a pot on a large closed stove, and a cloth-

covered tray at one end of the kitchen table hinted at what he assumed must be Lady Colyton's dinner.

She had not waited for him to proclaim the kitchen empty before following him. She put her lamp down on the table, swept off the cloth, and lifted a jug to her nostrils. "Cider," she declared. "Will that work for you, Lord Findlater?" She was already fetching a china mug from a row of them.

"Yes," he said. "Thank you."

After handing him the mug, she investigated the pot on the stove, using a cloth to lift the lid. "Stew," she said. "There is plenty for both of us, my lord."

The tray also had a loaf of fresh bread and a plate with two tarts—berry, from the juice that was seeping through the pastry lattice work on top. Another jug held what looked like milk. A butter dish and a bowl of whipped cream completed the offerings.

"Cover it up again," Martin suggested, "while we check the rest of the house. Or stay here, if you wish, and I'll do the search."

"I'll come," Lady Colyton said, replacing the pot lid. She put the cloth back over the tray and picked up her lamp.

Martin opened the other doors in the kitchen—a pantry, a scullery, and a short passage that led to the back door. It was locked and barred. "No intruders. I am not expecting to find anyone," he repeated. "I have been here for hours, at least. I was already tied as you found me when I woke, perhaps two hours ago, and I saw no one and heard no one until you arrived. I wonder what is through here."

A short passage led from the kitchen to the dining room past a china closet. The dining table was set for one person. "This is where they expected you to eat," Martin

observed.

“I will find another setting when we come back down,” said Lady Colyton.

The other door in the dining room returned them to the entrance hall. A door on the opposite side of the hall let onto a large parlour that made up the rest of the floor. It could be divided in two by doors that folded out from each side of the room, and the back portion had glass doors to the outside. They were also locked.

“Upstairs,” Martin suggested, and once again led the way so Lady Colyton would feel safe. He opened the door to the room opposite the one in which he had been tied up, paused in the doorway at what he saw in the candlelight, then took several swift strides to check that his first glance was correct.

The clothes he had been wearing at breakfast were laid out on the bed, and his travel bag was on a low table. There was a note with the clothes. He snatched it up and read it.

“Findlater, I trust you like the surprise. I’m sorry about dosing you, but I didn’t think you’d agree. You’re a nice man, but you really need to loosen up. Anyway, please present my apologies to the lovely widow. When I accepted Edith’s proposal that I be the lady’s Christmas Rogue, I didn’t know grandfather was going to insist on me attending his Christmas house party. I was on my way to apologise to Lady C. when I ran into you at the inn, and the rest you know. No need to thank me. Just have a nice time, and make sure the lady does, too. From what Edith says, she needs it as much as you do. A. P.”

Archie Porrit. The scurvy cur. Martin had met him in London last year, and they had become unlikely friends, for Porrit was a typically restless second son with a large allowance and no worthwhile occupation.

Porrit had tried to introduce Martin to the occupations of a gentleman of leisure, but the experiment had not been a success. Martin didn't enjoy drinking to excess, he was bored by games of chance, and while he enjoyed watching horse races, boxing matches and the like, a little went a long way.

As for his one visit to a brothel, Martin couldn't help but imagine his sister and stepsisters, if they were as poverty-stricken and desperate as the denizens of that loud, gaudy, and odorous house. He paid the young woman Porrit had selected for him a double fee for her trouble and went home without partaking of the offered entertainment.

"Does it explain what happened?" Lady Colyton asked.

Martin looked at her, shaken from his own thoughts and wondering what she meant.

"The note." She nodded toward his hand, which had crumpled the note into a ball, quite without him realising it.

The note! Of course. He handed it to her, and she smoothed it out to read it.

"A. P.?"

Martin peered at her, wondering if her question was an act. Her surprise and shock at finding him tied to her bed might simply have been because he was the wrong lover for a planned assignation. Porrit's offered apology certainly made it sound that way.

"Arthur Porrit," he told her.

She narrowed her eyes as she thought, then nodded, as if to herself. "Ah. Edith Mannering's cousin. Why on earth would she imagine I would welcome a liaison with a man I have met once? Twice if you count a chance encounter in Hatchards."



She frowned again. “If it was chance. I was with Edith, the conniving witch. Do you think they were plotting this even then, two weeks ago? Oh, wait till I get my hands on her... I trusted her, and she did this!”

She ended with a growl, as if words had failed her. Certainly, the lady sounded like an innocent victim. Uncle Swithin would counsel that Martin reserved judgement. Martin was trying to be a better man than Uncle Swithin.

“We have both been the victims of our supposed friends,” he ventured. “There is a bright side to this, Lady Colyton. There are no villains lurking in the house. I daresay Porrit is halfway to his grandfather’s estate in Hereford, along with whoever helped him. His valet, I imagine. The two are as thick as thieves.”

“When I saw Edith yesterday to fetch the keys to the house, she was getting ready to leave for her grandfather’s Christmas house party. Oooh, I could just...” She apparently could not imagine a fate bad enough for her friend, for she clenched her fists and stamped her feet, then visibly pulled herself into a more ladylike posture.

Her voice was calm when she said, “I shall leave you to get dressed, my lord. Casual dress, if you prefer. I shall not be changing for dinner. I shall be downstairs setting a place for you at the table and bringing through the dinner tray.” She bobbed him a slight curtsy, as if they had met at a ball and were now saying farewell.

Martin watched her leave the room, still in two minds about whether this had been an assignation gone wrong. He knew there were many rumours about Lady Colyton, but his sister Chloe had told him bluntly that they were lies, spread by the Dowager Lady Colyton after the younger lady left the older lady’s son. Or, according to Chloe, after Lady Colyton escaped an abusive marriage.

There’d been something else. Something he’d heard recently. Something that cast an unfortunate light on the lady. No. He couldn’t call it to mind.

He should be dressing, not standing here in a blanket trying to understand a lady who, whether innocent or not, was certainly no one he should be interested in for any moral purpose.

And there he went again, thinking of immoral purposes. “It is most unfair,” Chloe had told him. “Poor Jessica. Just because her father was not married to her mother, everyone believes the worst about her, and yet they accept my darling Dom without hesitation, and their father was not married to his mother, either.”

Martin had better watch his step. Innocent until proven guilty, that was the ticket. Quite apart from not wishing to offend Lady Colyton, he would hate to give Chloe a disgust of him. Nor would the lady’s brothers be inclined to be forgiving—one of whom was Chloe’s husband, and another the powerful Duke of Haverford.

Time to get dressed, and then go down to have a quiet meal with the most attractive and mysteriously compelling Lady Colyton. Keeping his hands to himself. And his lips. And any of the other treacherous parts of his body that had ideas of their own.

He was a gentleman, and would control himself if it killed him.

### CHAPTER THREE

Jessica was still steaming as she laid a place for Lord Findlater and brought through the food. She had met Edith after the Dowager Countess of Wyndam had befriended her and invited her to join a group of widows who offered one another mutual support. Edith was one of those widows, and a pattern card for the concept of merry widow. Edith was certain that all of Jessica's problems would be solved if Jessica would only take a lover. According to Edith, discrete affairs were one of the privileges and compensations of widowhood.

A lover was almost the last thing Jessica wanted. A husband was the very last. Her marriage had been a disaster. Nor had the marriage bed offered any compensation. From what she'd heard when listening to other widows, Colyton had been as selfish and controlling in bed as out of it, so perhaps another man would not be so disappointing. He would still be a man, however. Jessica had had quite enough of men.

Fortunately, Lord Findlater seemed as disinclined to dalliance as she was. Just as well. Being alone with an amorous male and trapped by the weather was the stuff of her nightmares.

Bother Edith! Jessica had been so looking forward to the time alone, and now she was forced to play hostess. To a man, furthermore, and one who made her uncomfortable. Because he was so attractive—she could admit it, if only in the privacy of her thoughts.

Fortunately, he was not of the same mind. She should be pleased about that, and not

disappointed. Her brother Haverford had the instincts of a pater familias , and liked to draw all his relatives together—both regular and irregular. How would she ever look Chloe in the eye again if she had had an affair with Chloe’s brother?

She was still blushing at the direction her thoughts had taken her when Lord Findlater joined her, thankfully fully dressed. He had taken her suggestion and wore half dress rather than evening attire—buff trousers rather than breeches, a coat that was cut for comfort rather than so tight it needed a valet to help fit it, and a simply knotted cravat.

He was still a magnificent figure of a man. The heat in her cheeks was not helped by her memory of what he looked like in no clothes at all

“Is that your trunk in the front hall, my lady?” he asked. “I will carry it up after dinner.”

“Thank you,” she said, the courtesy that had been drummed into her all her life coming to her rescue. “I would appreciate that. Please, my lord, take a seat. I have put everything on the table within reach, so we can serve ourselves.”

It was simple fare, but delicious. The stew was fragrant, hot, and succulent, and went beautifully with the fresh crusty bread. The meat melted in the mouth. Jessica had not realised how hungry she was until she began eating.

Lord Findlater must have been equally famished, for they ate in silence for a few minutes. After a while, Lord Findlater broke the silence. “May I pour you a glass of cider, my lady?”

“Thank you. That would be pleasant.” She should make an effort at dinner table conversation. “Your estate is in Yorkshire, my lord, I believe.”

“Yes, it is. Do you know Yorkshire at all, Lady Colyton?”

“I’ve not been that far north, my lord, but I believe it is very beautiful.”

“My estate is in the Vale of Mowbray, on the southern edge of the Yorkshire Moors. It is pretty country, yes. Good farming country.”

“What is your main crop?” Jessica asked. It was pitifully easy to amuse a man. Just let him talk about what interested him, and she had the advantage of knowing, from Chloe, that Lord Findlater was a keen landowner, and a student of modern farming practice.

He talked for the rest of the meal. She had to give him credit for stopping twice to ask her if she was really interested. She was, much to her surprise. The viscount was a good speaker, full of interesting facts and amusing anecdotes, and willing to explain the reasons behind the changes he was slowly introducing on his land.

When they had eaten finished their meal, he further impressed her by helping clear the evidence of their meal onto the tray and then insisting on carrying the tray to the kitchen.

Jessica had left a kettle on the side of the stove, and now she moved it closer to the heat to boil. “I shall wash these few dishes,” she said, “for we cannot be certain that the servants will be able to attend to them in the morning.”

“I shall dry them,” Lord Findlater proposed. “I am a dab hand at drying dishes.”

A viscount who dried dishes! Which was, Jessica supposed, not much more peculiar than a duke’s daughter with the same skill, but her great aunt had been the housekeeper at Haverford Castle. As a child, Jessica had spent at least part of her time in the kitchen.

“After that, I am making a pot of tea, my lord. Would you like one? Or would you prefer a port?”

“A mulled cider sounds appealing, if the pantry can provide the appropriate spices. I’m happy to make one for you, too, if you prefer it to tea,” he offered.

He carried the heavy kettle to the scullery to half fill the sink. He then refilled it from the indoor pump they found there, and returned it to the kitchen stove to be ready for the morning. They soon had the few dishes washed, dried, and put away in the china closet.

The pantry proved to be equal to the task of providing the needed spices, and it didn’t take long for Lord Findlater to prepare them both a tankard of hot spiced cider. “We can light the fire in the parlour,” Jessica said, “or have it here by the kitchen stove.”

“I do not plan a late night,” said Lord Findlater. “It is not worth lighting the fire for my sake, but if you intend to sit up, Lady Colyton, let us by all means move through to the parlour.”

“I shall also be early to bed,” she assured him. “I am very happy with sitting at the kitchen table. Where were you travelling to, Lord Findlater, if it is not impertinent of me to ask?”

“I have no objection, my lady,” he assured her. “I was heading back home to Yorkshire after visiting London for business.”

“This snow will delay your arrival, I’m afraid. I hope your family does not worry.”

“No one expects me,” he said. “I was going to spend Christmas in London, but...” He took another sip of his cider, his eyes staring into some private scene of his own, before he confessed. “Those of my friends who are currently in London would have

welcomed me, but either they intend to spend Christmas drunk and dissolute, which did not appeal to me, or they are happily married, and eager to see me in the same state. Even those who are not determined to matchmake are uncomfortable to be with. I feel as if I am a nuisance.” He made an impatient and frustrated gesture. “That is not quite it,” he said. “They don’t treat me as a nuisance, but...” he trailed off, frowning.

She knew exactly what he meant. “Everyone else is in pairs, billing and cooing like turtle doves, and they suddenly realise that you are there, too, and politely stop mumbling sweet nothings and comparing notes with other couples to ask if you would like to walk in the garden, or take a trip to the shops, or show them your embroidery. And all is said with great affection and sincerity, but you just know that a single person on her own is like a pebble in their marital shoes—rather uncomfortable but impossible to ignore.”

His smile was relieved. “Exactly! It is the same for you?”

“Oh, yes. My brother Haverford has an instinct for gathering family around him, especially at this time of year. I have quite a few irregular brothers and sisters, but to Haverford, the circumstances of our birth are irrelevant. Blood matters. And all love matches, would you believe. They have all gathered at Hollystone Hall, in Buckinghamshire, along with Aunt Eleanor’s—the former Duchess of Haverford’s—new family, the Duke of Winshire’s children and other relatives.”

Jessica shuddered at the thought of all those happy couples, much though she loved them. “I had to have a few days on my own before I joined them,” she explained. “If I am not there by New Year’s Day, I daresay Haverford will send out a search party, but that gives me more than a week to gather my fortitude.”

“I’m sorry,” Lord Tavistock said, frowning. “I am destroying your solitude.”

“It was not you, but our stupid friends,” Jessica assured him. Perhaps the cider was

stronger than she realised, for she found herself impulsively reaching out a hand. She stopped it before she touched him. Even so, a tingle seemed to jump from his skin to hers, and she snatched the hand back.

To hide her confusion at the sensation, she made a joke. “My quarrel, my lord, is with lovers. Unless you have a sweetheart hidden somewhere, we shall brush along together quite cheerfully until the storm is over.”

“I am sweetheart-free, my lady, here and everywhere else. We shall form a temporary coalition, shall we?” Lord Tavistock raised his tankard in a salute. “To the Cheerfully Uncommitted.”

“The CU Coalition,” Jessica said, pronouncing the acronym as “coo”. She raised her own tankard and copied him when he tipped his tankard back and draining it. She heard herself giggle.

Yes. She had definitely had too much cider. “It has been a long day, my lord. I shall wish you a good night.”

“I shall carry the candle upstairs for you, my lady,” he offered. “An early night sounds just the thing.”

Jessica could not help comparing the man to Colyton. She could not imagine Colyton drying dishes in the scullery or drinking cider at the kitchen table. For that matter, she was certain that Colyton would not have accepted the situation with such grace. No. Her former husband would have spent the entire evening complaining about his kidnapping and finding a way to blame it on Jessica.

Lord Tavistock, on the other hand... As she slipped in between the fresh sheets on the bed, she realised she had not checked to see if the other bed was made up! She should check... But no. She could not walk around the house in her nightgown and robe. She



would give Lord Tavistock quite the wrong idea. They had found the linen closet when exploring the house, and Lord Tavistock was surely capable of spreading a sheet over a mattress.

She blew out the candle, settled back against the pillow and composed herself for sleep, unable to avoid thinking of this very mattress, with Lord Tavistock spread eagled over it in all his glory. She had gaped at him for a long moment before she averted her eyes and covered him, but apparently, she had seen more than enough, for now the image replayed itself in her mind.

Such shoulders! And that chest! His thighs! Her cheeks heated as her mind enumerated the man's physical attributes, including the one that had stirred at her appearance. No. Lord Tavistock was nothing like Colyton.

### CHAPTER FOUR

Martin had a restless night. That was not the fault of the bed, which was comfortable enough, and which he had made with fresh sheets before retiring for the night. Apparently, the co-conspirators had believed he and Lady Colyton would be happy to share a bed.

He was a little disgusted with himself to admit that they were quite right, at least as far as he was concerned. However, the lady had shown no signs of being receptive to the idea. Except when she had first seen him, and had for that one moment stared at what she saw, and particularly at the part that was stirring at the memory. And when she reached out a hand towards him in the kitchen.

Though he was no rake, neither was he an innocent. His uncle had been a puritan in most ways, and rigidly faithful to Aunt Swithin, but he had also believed that a gentleman should never be at a loss, and so had included the etiquette of dalliance in Martin's education, commissioning the assistance of a local widow for the practical lessons. Martin had briefly kept a mistress, but preferred a lover of his own class whose choice to be with him was not motivated by the money he paid.

He didn't have a lover at the moment—had, in fact, been celibate since his last friendship of that nature had ended. Perhaps that was why he was fantasising about bedding Lady Colyton. However, it would be the act of a cad to pressure the lady when circumstances had trapped them together. His body, though, was by no means convinced, and he woke several times in the night from feverish dreams in which Lady Colyton played a starring role.

By the time he gave up on sleep altogether, dressed, and went downstairs, he had convinced himself that the real Lady Colyton could not possibly be as delectable as the houri that had haunted his night hours. No such luck. The lady who glanced at him as he entered the kitchen was even more attractive than his memory and imagination had painted her, but not nearly as available. More's the pity.

“Good morning, Lord Tavistock,” she said. “Would toast and eggs be acceptable? And would you mind if we have it in the kitchen? It will save using up the firewood on heating the dining room.”

“Good morning to you, Lady Colyton. There should be a wood shed close by. Shall I see how well stocked it is? And yes, toast and eggs sound delightful. I'm a dab hand with a toasting fork if you know how to cook eggs.”

She raised her eyebrows in surprise, but she handed over the toasting fork and pointed to the loaf she had been cutting at the kitchen table. “There is the bread, my lord. I do know how to cook eggs, as it happens, and just as well, for it is still snowing heavily. Boiled, scrambled, poached, or fried?”

They decided on poached. Lady Colyton already had a pot of water simmering on the stove. Martin fixed two slices of bread into the toasting fork and opened the fire box door so he could hold it in front of the flames.

She had set two places at the table. Plates, cups, and cutlery waited, and a teapot with a cosy. “I've just made the tea,” she said, “so it will be perfect by the time the rest is ready. I'm afraid I did not see any chocolate or coffee, Lord Tavistock. But there is ale, if you prefer it.”

Martin quite liked tea, especially in the morning. “I will enjoy a cup of tea, my lady,” he said.

He enjoyed his tea and the rest of his breakfast. The eggs were poached to perfection—the whites firm and the yolks runny. The toast was, if he said it himself, browned just enough. Above all, it was delightful to have company, and the company of a pretty woman, at that.

Over the meal, they compared acquaintances, discovering that they knew a few of the same people, quite apart from Chloe and Dom. No surprise in that. The families of peers comprised only a few thousand people, after all, and had been marrying one another for hundreds of years. Through her father the duke, Lady Colyton had relatives throughout the aristocracy, both regular and irregular.

“I am closest to my sisters,” Lady Colyton said. “Half-sisters, really. We all had different mothers. Frances is younger than Matilda and I, but all three of us were raised in Aunt Eleanor’s nursery. Haverford and Jon—Lord Jonathan—too, but years before us. Haverford was fourteen and Jon seven when Aunt Eleanor first opened her doors to me and Matilda.”

Martin’s uncle had been most upset by what he called the Duchess of Haverford’s misstep. She should never have acknowledged the existence of her husband’s bastards, according to Uncle Swithin, let alone raised three of them.

“I have other half-brothers and half-sisters, too, of course,” Jessica said, as matter-of-fact as if nothing she said was scandalous in the eyes of many. “The old duke was a terrible man, and I am sure even Haverford has no idea how many children our father engendered. Perhaps the duke himself did not know. Some, like Dom, are willing to acknowledge the relationship, and some are not.”

“My own immediate family is small,” Martin admitted. “On my father’s side, there is a third or fourth cousin who is my heir until I marry and get one of my own. On my mother’s, I have a full sister and two half-sisters. My mother’s brother, who raised me, has been gone these ten years, and his wife for the last four. There may be other

distant cousins somewhere. I don't know them, though. But my mother married a second time when I was three. As well as the two half-sisters I have from that marriage, I have nine step-sisters! I do not know whether the earl her second husband had mistresses, but he did have five wives."

Lady Colyton had clearly heard of the Earl of Seahaven and his wives. Well, no doubt Chloe had told her. "One after another," she pointed out. "Not five at once."

They smiled at one another, and then Lady Colyton stood and began to gather the used dishes.

Martin stood when she did. "I'll just check the firewood," he said. He put on his own muffler plus a heavy coat and a woollen hat that were hanging on hooks by the back door, and went out to see what he could find.

The snow was coming down thick and fast. Martin decided not to go looking for a shed. He did not want to go beyond touching distance of the house lest he got turned around in the snow and lost his way.

But perhaps a store of wood had been stacked against the house, where it would be close at hand when the weather made a journey across the kitchen courtyard unpleasant. Martin soon found a covered woodpile that had been invisible from the back door, even though it was no more than a dozen paces away along the outside wall.

He made several trips to carry armloads to stack by the back door. Even close to the house, semi-sheltered by the eaves, he was covered with snow and chilled to the bone by the time he thought they had enough. There was no way he wanted to go out again today or—worse—tonight.

One armload at a time, he built up the supplies in the kitchen, where the smell of

something delicious was wafting from the oven. "I've more," he told Lady Colyton, who was tidying up the evidence of baking from the table. "If it acceptable to you, I will put more wood in both bedrooms, and also in the front parlour, but I won't bother with the dining room."

"Of course," she agreed. "We can take our meals in here or from trays in the parlour."

He replenished the wood basket by the fire in the front half of the parlour and closed the dividing doors to the back half. They didn't need all the space, and the smaller room would be easier to heat.

Then he trudged up and down the stairs, filling the baskets in the bedrooms. He moved the remaining wood, stacking it along the passage inside the back door, removed his outdoor garments for the last time, washed his hands, and went upstairs to change into clean dry clothes. Lady Colyton was no longer in the kitchen, so he went through to the parlour.

He stopped in the doorway for a moment. The fire burned brightly. On a low table in front of it were tea makings, a tray of tarts, and waiting cups and plates. A chair flanked either side of the fireplace, one of them already occupied by Lady Colyton, who had her head bent of a piece of embroidery on a frame.

Had he once seen his mother in such a posture? He could not bring such a memory to mind, but what else could explain the sweet pain of the domestic scene before him? His heart yearned to have a lovely woman by his own fire, making him tea and treats before he had time to realise he wanted them. His heart said "this lovely woman," but that was surely his lust talking.

Of course, no wife of his would need to make tarts. But then Lady Colyton had been the wife of an earl, and he was very grateful she knew her way around a kitchen.

He must have made a noise, for she looked up and smiled when she saw him. “I found some dried fruit, my lord, and made tarts,” she said.

“I cannot thank you enough,” he told her. “A hot cup of tea is just what I need, and the tarts look delicious.”

“It is the least I can do,” she said, “when you have ensured that we shall not freeze.”

She really was very lovely. Martin accepted the cup of tea she poured for him, and the plate with a couple of delicious tarts. All very welcome, but what he really wanted, at least while the blizzard lasted, was Lady Colyton.

### CHAPTER FIVE

By the afternoon, they were on first name terms. Jessica had been reluctant, at first. She did not want Lord Findlater—Martin—to think she was a loose woman, despite the rumours about her. But she hated being called “Lady Colyton”—hated the reminders of her marriage and of the way she had tried, and failed, to squeeze herself into the shape that Colyton and his mother thought appropriate.

Martin was correct, too, when he pointed out that no one would know, and therefore no one would care. He was not meant to be here. As far as the world knew, he wasn’t, and she was on her own. Edith knew, of course, and Martin’s friend, but they would not speak of it. The Wicked Widows were very protective of one another, and Martin said his friend was an idiot, but an honourable one.

So, Martin and Jessica it was, then, and somehow casting aside the formality of titles allowed her to relax. Indeed, being with him was almost as good as being alone. She didn’t feel any weight of concern or expectation when he looked at her. He wasn’t worried about her or critical of her. He was a chance-met nearly stranger, and neither of them had any feeling for the other.

In fact, it was better than being alone, for if she tired of her book or her embroidery, there was someone to talk to. To talk with. He was a fascinating conversationalist, and took an interest in many of the same things as her. He had a wry sense of humour that took her completely by surprise, for his sister’s description of him had led her to expect a dour, proper man. Someone a bit like Colyton, in fact.

While Martin had been bringing in firewood, Jessica had put a pot of soup on the



back of the stove, using root vegetables and onions from the pantry and some ham bones she'd found in the meat safe, all seasoned with herbs and spices. If she kept adding vegetables and more water, it should last them for days.

They had a bowl shortly after noon, eating in the parlour with a tray each on their knees, rounding the simple meal out with more toast, this time cooked at the parlour fire.

“Do you happen to play chess, Jessica?” Martin asked, after they'd dealt with the dishes.

“I do.” Her brother Haverford had taught her—had taught all three sisters, back when he was the Marquis of Aldridge and their father's heir. Jessica was the only one who could beat him, though admittedly not more than one game in four—one in three, more recently, since he had taken her back under his roof.

He was always so proud of her successes, teasing her that the win was his as much as hers, since he had taught her to play so well.

Colyton had also enjoyed the game, but he was nowhere near as good at it as Haverford. After his reaction to her winning the first time she played him, and then the second, she had soon learned to deliberately lose. It took all the pleasure out of the game.

Martin was setting up a chess set he must have found in the sideboard. So far, the man had proved to be good company, respectful, and even—in an understated sort of way—charming. What would happen when she won? Would he be like Colyton when he lost? Or Haverford?

As it turned out, they were more evenly matched than she expected. So well matched, indeed, that a mere two games occupied the entire afternoon. Martin eventually won

the first.

They took a short break to see about adding some vegetables in the oven with the piece of beef she had put in to roast after lunch, and to make some more mulled cider, and then returned to the parlour for the second game.

It took even longer than the first. Towards the end, Jessica thought she was going to have to settle for a draw, but she saw an opportunity and managed to battle him to checkmate.

She waited for the explosion, or the sour cutting remarks.

“Brilliant!” he said. “Jessica, you shall have to promise me another match tomorrow. I don’t know when I have ever had a better opponent.”

A little shaken by his unexpected reaction, she still managed to return a polite answer. “Yes, I would love to play again tomorrow.”

She lowered her eyes, disturbed by the strange heat in his—and by the embarrassing way she reacted to that heat. “Shall we eat dinner in the kitchen, or bring it through here?”

“Let’s bring it through here,” Martin proposed. He stood to lean over the table and put the pieces into their box. Jessica bent to help. When the pair of them reached for the same pawn, their hands brushed. Jessica snatched hers back and their eyes met again.

“You feel it too, do you not?” Martin said.

If by ‘it’ he meant the confusing sensations rioting through her body, the true answer would be ‘yes,’ Jessica had no intention of making any such admission. She

straightened. "You finish that, Martin," she suggested, her voice not quite steady, "and I shall check on the dinner."

She managed to walk from the room rather than fleeing as if hounds were at her heels. But it was a close-run thing.

That first touch might have been accidental, but as the evening wore on, Jessica became convinced that Martin was touching her on purpose. Fingers brushing hers when they both reached for the same object. A hand in the small of her back to usher her through a doorway. A swift touch of a finger on her hand to draw her attention.

By the time they had eaten dinner and cleaned up, she was a bundle of nerves and irritation. "Are you trying to seduce me, my lord?"

Martin's grin was that of a rogue. She had seen it often enough on her brothers when they were up to mischief, had been caught, and were not at all repentant. "Is it working?" he asked hopefully. "I am attracted to you. I think you are attracted to me. And we are stuck here in the middle of a snowstorm, with nowhere to go until it is over. A dalliance would pass the time nicely."

To Jessica's surprise, her body was softening at his arguments, right up until the last sentence. Pass the time nicely? As if I am an entertainment, convenient to hand and easily replaceable. Her indignation allowed her to add a layer of ice to her voice. "Whatever you have heard," she said, "I am not a woman of loose morals. You will have to think of another diversion to while away the hours."

Her chest seized up with sudden panic at having spoken so sharply. He was a stranger, despite the family connection and the pleasant day they had spent together. He was a man, and her marriage had taught her how nasty men could be about lack of respect from a woman.

“I beg your pardon.” Far from being angry, Martin appeared both contrite and alarmed. “I did not mean to imply... I meant no offense, my lady. You are a widow. I am a bachelor. I saw no harm... meant no insult. I was thinking only of your pleasure and mine.”

The last comment incensed her all over again. “My pleasure? Hah! That is where you are wrong, Lord Findlater. I have never found the marital act pleasurable, and I see no reason why dalliance would be any different.” She clamped her lips shut, her cheeks, her neck, and even her chest heating in a blush as she realised what she had said.

It was not, in fact, entirely true. She had always found the act a rude invasion, but sometimes, especially on those rare occasions that Colyton caressed her a little before pushing himself inside, she found it... not unpleasant.

But true or not, she could not believe she had just blurted out to Martin something she had never told anyone. Not even Matilda, her almost-twin, or Cherry, the sister-in-law she loved. Of course, both those ladies were in happy marriages, with husbands who adored them. And both, she knew, thoroughly enjoyed the marital bed.

“Then Colyton was a selfish ass,” said Martin.

“It was not that,” Jessica protested, though Martin was certainly right that Colyton was selfish. Opinionated, rigid, selfish, and unkind. But what that had to do with the marital act, she had no idea. “I am naturally cold,” she explained to Martin. “Most ladies simply do not like... that.” Colyton had approved. He said her ladylike attitude to the marital act must be the aristocratic blood from her father.

“Utterly selfish, and stupid, too,” Martin said. “Jessica, I promise you, if a lady does not enjoy intimacy, the fault lies with the man who has failed to tend to her needs before he meets his own.”

Jessica stared at him. That couldn't be true. Could it? She knew so many ladies who found the whole business distasteful, and who were only too glad when they had delivered the necessary heir and maybe a spare, and could leave their husband's entertainment to someone else.

She also knew ladies who took lovers, and who claimed to enjoy coupling. Colyton said it proved they were not really ladies, but rather light-skirts who were traitors to their breeding.

"We should not be discussing this," she told Martin. "It is unseemly. If you will excuse me, my lord, I shall go up to bed now."

He bowed. "Good night, Jessica. I am sorry I distressed you."

She fled before she found herself explaining her feelings, in so far as she understood them. She was not distressed. Not precisely. Confused was a better description.

Shutting her bedroom door, she sank onto the fireside chair, her mind racing. In the past year and a bit, since she had left Colyton, she had slowly let go of many of the beliefs he had hammered into her during their marriage—sometimes with words and sometimes with his hand or a whip.

Was this another?

Was Colyton to blame for her failure to enjoy the marital act?

The married ladies of her family all spoke of their bed sports as if they enjoyed them and looked forward to them. But they were all besotted with their husbands, and she had assumed that made all the difference, for she did not love Colyton. She had married him because he was the only one who asked, because she had fallen in love with his daughters and wanted to be their mother, and because he did not treat her as

if she must be a whore, just because her mother had had the misfortune to catch the temporary attention of a duke.

It had not been a good enough set of reasons, in the end. After they were married, she did not come to love him, as she had hoped. Instead, she had stopped even liking him, long before the last incident that had caused her brother to scoop her up and carry her away home.

Being separated from her husband was bad enough, but rumours of her infidelity soon began to circulate—started, she was certain, by Colyton or his mother. That ruined what reputation she had, and only Haverford's and Aunt Eleanor's steadfast support kept her from being shunned by so-called Polite Society and besieged by those men who believed the rumours gave them a right to her intimate attention.

She had never been the least tempted to take a lover, and was glad that Haverford kept the tomcats of the ton away from her.

A knock on the door made her jump. She opened it to find Martin there with a jug. "For your evening ablutions," he said.

He handed over the jug, which was three quarters full of water with steam rising off it. He must have filled it from the pot she'd set at the back of the hob for this very purpose. "Thank you, Martin," she said.

"Sleep well, Jessica," he told her, but he hesitated on the threshold, clearly deciding whether or not to say what was on his mind. "Jessica," he blurted, after a moment. "You are safe with me. You do know that, do you not? I will never act on my attraction to you. Not without an invitation. Nor will I mention it again. The last thing I want is to make you uncomfortable. Good night. I will see you in the morning."

"Good night," Jessica said. She shut the door and leaned against it. What had just

happened? Martin, if she understood him correctly, was promising to put her comfort ahead of his appetite. She shook her head in wonder. If he was sincere, he had completely confounded her. That was not how she expected a man to behave.

After a moment, she went to put the jug next to the wash basin.

She had never been tempted to take a lover. Until now.

### CHAPTER SIX

Martin had put his foot in it with his suggestion of a dalliance. Her hints about Colyton's careless treatment of her had temporarily damped down his desire for her, which was good, under the circumstances, but the effect had not lasted, and he spent another night of uncomfortable dreams.

None of which were likely to be fulfilled, more was the pity, though a glance out of his window in the morning confirmed it was still snowing heavily. They would be stuck here for at least another day.

He went down to the kitchen determined to treat Jessica like another sister. Polite, friendly, casual. He was, after all, a gentleman. He could manage his unfortunate physical reaction, or at the very least, keep it from her notice.

With that in mind, he put on his banyan after he'd tied his cravat and donned his waistcoat. It might be slightly disreputable to wear a garment reserved for domestic use when he was sharing the house with a lady who was not a relative, but better that than his cutaway frock coat, which would be his usual morning wear.

The cutaway allowed the front of his trousers no privacy whatever, and there was less room in the fabric every time he thought of Jessica.

Again, she was up before him, in a neat but not flashy gown, humming as she cooked something on the hob. Merciful heavens, she was delectable. His desire rushed back full force, and he was grateful for the banyan. He forced his face to assume a pleasant, non-threatening smile. "Good morning, Jessica," he said, cheerfully.



She returned his greeting, but he could tell how discomposd she was. She was blushing like a maiden who had just received her first compliment—or her first kiss. Damn his impertinence in suggesting a dalliance to her last night!

All he could do now was treat her with matter-of-fact courtesy and hope that reassured her. “I trust you slept well,” he said, and regretted it, for he did not need to be thinking of Jessica in bed.

Her blush deepened. “Not particularly,” she answered. Then her words came out in a rush, as if they had been jammed behind her teeth, waiting for them to complete the courtesies. “I could not stop thinking about what you said last night. Is it true? Is it a man’s fault if a woman does not find pleasure?”

Her question does not mean she is considering changing her answer , Martin warned his rioting appetites. “Yes, my lady. That is what my uncle taught me, and that is what I have heard from women who...” He trailed off and his own face heated. He should not be talking to a lady like Jessica about former lovers.

Jessica’s hands clenched around handfuls of her apron. Clenched and relaxed. Clenched and relaxed. Her face flaming, she said, “If your offer is still open, I would like...” Her eyes were turned down, fixed firmly on the flagstone at her feet.

His trousers had felt tight a couple of times already this morning, but they filled even more in reaction to that hesitant embarrassed statement. Still, he had to be certain. “Jessica, are you inviting me to make love to you, and to bed you if you like the results?”

He could no longer see her face. Only the crown of her head. He had never before been aroused by the neat centre part of a woman’s hair. He yearned to put it in disarray, to pull out the pins that fastened the snood at the base of her neck and release the rest of her hair from the confines of the net bag. How long was it? The

snood was large and full—he would wager her hair reached her waist, at least.

The nod she gave in reply to his question was miniscule, and the noise she made not much more than a high-pitched hum. “Hmmm.”

Her obvious nervousness helped him wrestle back control of his appetite. She needed him to be calm. “I am honoured,” he told her. “Shall we discuss the particulars as we break our fast?”

Her head came up at that and he found himself gazing into hazel eyes wide with—what? Fear? Anxiety? Uncertainty? “Breakfast? Now? I thought...”

“We have plenty of time,” he told her. “Let us eat, play another game of chess, perhaps kiss a little, and see how things develop. And Jessica? Just to be clear, you can stop me at any time. At any time at all.” A thought occurred to him—a set of words she could use to make her feel more comfortable. “You can say stop, or slow down, or wait, or no. And I will listen. I promise.”

Some of the small lines around her eyes relaxed and smoothed away. “Stop. Slow down. Wait. No.” She repeated the words in an undertone, as if memorising them. Then, in a sudden transformation, she said, “Breakfast. Martin, I made griddle cakes.” She was in motion again, all crisp housewife, as she picked up a jug containing a smooth cream batter. We can eat them with bacon and eggs, if you wish, or with butter and jam. Also, I have mashed some of the vegetables left from last night. I can fry the mash, if you choose the savoury option.

“Bacon, eggs, and fried mash,” he agreed. “Do you want ale or tea, Jessica?” And he cupped her cheek and bent to press a tender kiss to her lips. Closed-mouthed, short, and gentle, but his head reeled as he straightened again.

It was because she was so vulnerable. How could their first kiss not be important,

innocent though it had been? She gazed up at him, her eyes wide again, this time with wonder, unless he was much mistaken.

He could not resist a second kiss, this time slightly less innocent, since he swiped his tongue along her lips. “Mmm,” he said. “Sweet.”

She blushed again. “I had a spoonful of the jam, just to be sure it was tasty. Raspberry.”

“Raspberry and Jessica,” he commented, and risked a wink. “Yum.”

Her blush deepened, but he saw her lips curve in a smile as she turned back to the stove, saying, “Rogue.”

“Did you like it, though?” he asked, and waited anxiously for her answer.

Her smile reassured when she glanced at him over her shoulder. “You must know you kiss very well,” she said, her voice sharp but her eyes soft and warm.

“That was barely anything,” he told her. “There is more. Much more.”

### CHAPTER SEVEN

Jessica was not quite sure what she had expected after making her request, but it hadn't been a morning of exquisite torture. Perhaps, she had thought, he would want to take her back up to bed immediately. According to Colyton, the marital act was meant to be performed after dark, in the privacy of the lady's chamber, and afterwards, the husband returned to his own.

Dalliance, she assumed, had different rules, but perhaps not. What did she know, after all?

Martin took her consent to do that with him as permission to treat her in a most familiar manner. After those first two kisses, he never lost an opportunity to touch her—a stroke of her hand when she passed him his plate, a hand on her shoulder as he passed her on the way to fetch the ale, a slide of his leg against hers as they sat side by side at the table.

And that was just at breakfast!

He proposed a game of chess after they had done the dishes.

“We are almost out of bread,” she told him, a little disappointed that they could not move directly to that. She was feeling unaccountably restless, and her breasts and nether regions were tingling. “I can make some more. It won't take long, and we can play chess once the bread is rising.” Though privately, she had been hoping for more kissing. Colyton had rarely kissed her, and the two kisses from Martin, especially the second, had made her curious about what “more” might mean.

“I will help,” Martin said. “I have never made bread, but I can follow directions.”

He was helpful, too, though his physical presence and his touches scattered her thoughts. The hardest part was always the kneading, and Jessica usually had to knead the dough in batches, even though she was only making enough for two loaf tins, since only the two of them were here.

Being so much stronger than her, Martin was able to knead the entire batch at once. At first, he stood behind her, putting his hands on hers, saying that he was keen to follow her movements so he knew what he was doing.

She did her best to ignore his buttocks against her lower back, and especially the hard cylinder that pressed into her as he leaned a little of his weight against her and allowed her hands to lead his across the dough. It was impossible, though. She knew he was aroused. What would he do about it? He was certainly not planning to do that here, was he?

But apparently not. Once she had demonstrated the kneading action, he asked her to move to one side and gave the dough a thorough working, until it was as elastic and springy as it needed to be.

Meanwhile, Jessica had greased the bowl and sprinkled a cloth with flour. “Now roll the dough into a ball, and put it in the bowl,” she instructed, and stood by to put the cloth over it when he was done. “We will leave this to rise, Martin.” She set it close to the stove, where it would keep warm but not overheat.

“Did I do a good job with the kneading?” Martin asked.

“You did,” she assured him.

“Then I have earned a kiss, have I not?”

She stiffened her jaw in time to stop it dropping. She had not expected that. Warily, she nodded. “I will just fetch some water to wash the dough off our hands,” she said.

“Wash after,” he suggested. “Lean forward, Jessica. We won’t use our hands. This time.”

She leaned forward, though she was a little disappointed. On numerous occasions over the in the past year, she had walked into a room or around a corner in the garden to see Haverford and Cherry kissing. Hands were always involved, though she had never stayed to figure out exactly how.

But “this time” sounded promising.

His lips touched hers. The tingle was pleasant, but she had hoped for more. He licked across her mouth again, and then he did something new. With his teeth, he nipped her lower lip. Her mouth dropped open in shock, and that was when the kiss changed.

Some part of her mind was making notes. Kisses can involve tongues . Good. An opportunity like this was unlikely to come her way again. She wanted to remember everything that happened. His mouth covered hers, slightly abrasive in a way hers was not. She had noticed yesterday that his facial hair grew quickly, and perhaps he had not shaved today.

His tongue slid along inside her lips, and then withdrew. “Open up, sweetheart,” he murmured, and she obediently opened her teeth, inserting his tongue to rub across hers, filling her mouth and then withdrawing, filling her mouth and then withdrawing.

It is an imitation of the marital act , she realised. The tingle was back, and focused between her legs, where she had occasionally felt a pleasant excitement before. If Martin could produce this effect with a kiss in which no other parts of them touched except their mouths, what would that feel like.

And next time, or the time after, he would put his hands on her, draw her close to his body as she had seen Haverford do to Cherry. She moaned in enjoyment and anticipation.

Suddenly, Martin drew back. “Chess?” he asked.

Chess! Is the man serious? Here Jessica was, all hot and bothered, and Martin looked as if nothing of significance had happened. For her pride’s sake, she forbore to argue. “Yes, of course,” she said.

To Martin, or so it transpired, chess provided opportunity after opportunity to continue his programme of touches. It was excruciating. It was wonderful. His foot stroked up her ankle under the table. He caught her hand when she had moved a piece and place a kiss or a lick in her palm, or sucked a finger into his mouth. He proposed a penalty of a kiss for each piece captured—and each kiss was more venturesome than the last.

She had been correct. Kisses when they were so close that their bodies pressed together. Kisses when his hands roamed her body, and, greatly daring, she explored him back. And he didn’t object! He didn’t tell her that ladies kept their hands to themselves, that ladies lay still and did nothing while husbands took their pleasure.

Of course, he was not a husband, but a lover, and from what she had heard when other ladies talked, lovers made certain that ladies had pleasure, too. How lucky were those ladies whose husbands were also their lovers?

“Checkmate,” said Martin, as he moved his bishop into an unassailable position. “What do I win, Jessica?”

Jessica wanted to say, “Me,” but would he think her wanton? Besides, she wasn’t certain it was true. Yes, the pleasure and craving he had aroused in her was sharp and

insistent. Much more so than the vague and distant sensations she had sometimes experienced when Colyton took a while to reach his end. She was still afraid she would freeze up when they began the actual act.

“What do you want?” she temporised.

“You, of course,” he said, “but you are still not certain, are you? Don’t be nervous, Jessica. I won’t do anything you do not want, and you can stop me at any time.”



### CHAPTER EIGHT

There was nothing more futile than telling someone not to be nervous. Jessica desired Martin—he might not be the rogue that idiot Port was, but he was experienced enough to know the signs of physical arousal in a woman. But the signs of fear were there, too. She was as skittish as the horse he had once rescued from the mishandling of a brute who blamed the horse for his own poor horsemanship, and sought to school the poor filly with a whip.

Her nervousness told Martin more than he wanted to know about Colyton. He should have guessed, of course. According to rumour, the Duke of Haverford had scooped her up from Colyton's house and defied Colyton when the man wanted to retrieve her.

Haverford seemed to believe the rules of man were for his benefit but did not apply to him, and he respected few people apart from his mother and the wife he adored. Martin hadn't thought about it when the story was just distant gossip. But now it occurred to him that the law was altogether on Colyton's side, and even Haverford would not have interfered between man and wife on a whim.

Jessica needed distraction. "Shall we check on the dough?" he suggested.

She shot up as if on a spring. "Oh! The bread! How long has it been?" She was hurrying through to the kitchen even as she spoke. Martin smiled as he followed her.

The dough had risen to the top of the bowl, and she sprinkled some flour onto the table and tipped it out.

“I can knead the dough,” he offered.

“You do that while I prepare the tins,” said Jessica.

He put his back into the kneading, relieving some of his tension. Would it be better to back off and leave the poor lady alone, to continue his slow and steady assault on her senses, or to take the plunge and get past her fears by showing her what intimacy could be. Should be.

Actually, it was not his decision to make. “Jessica,” he said. “I have been making love to you all morning. Kissing you, too, and you have, I think, enjoyed it. True?”

She blushed. In some ways, she was a complete innocent, odd though that was for a widow. “Yes, I have.” She pressed her lips together into a tight line, then said, “I suppose you have had enough. Colyton always said—”

He stopped her with a finger to her lips and a shake of his head. “No, I have not had enough. Furthermore, though I have no right to govern what you say, I would rather not hear what Colyton thinks when I am trying to arrange to bed the wife he neglected and failed to please. Colyton is dead and gone, and—though I daresay it is uncivilised of me to say so—a good thing, too. For he has made you doubt yourself and never, as far as I can see, bothered to teach you how wonderful pleasure can be between a man and a woman. If he wasn’t dead, I might have to kill him for that alone.”

“Oh,” she said.

Oh, indeed . Martin had not realised how indignant he was until he started talking. Time to take a deep breath and start again. “Stopping is one option for the afternoon,” he said. “But it will have to be your choice. It is not something I want, but I will do it if you ask me.”

He saw her frown and added, “And I won’t blame you for it, either. You owe me nothing, Jessica. I am grateful for the gifts you have already given me.”

And would make a private trip upstairs to his bedroom alone, if necessary, to deal with the consequence of any denial. He had nothing but scorn for men who blamed women for their own lust, as if women existed only to give them pleasure.

“What are the other options?” Jessica asked, warily.

“We can continue as we have been, slowly becoming more adventurous,” he suggested. “That would be option two. I am concerned this is giving you too much time to think and to become nervous. If you can tell me what makes you anxious, perhaps I can ease your worries?”

Her brow crinkled when she frowned, her eyebrows drawing together so two little vertical lines formed. “Is there another option?” she asked.

“Option three: We can go upstairs as soon as you put the bread to rise again,” he said. “We can take off our clothes, get into bed, and consummate our desire. Then you will know the worst that can happen, and after that, we can decide if, when and how often to do it again without any anxiety. That is, assuming it is the thought of congress that makes you anxious.”

“Congress? Is that what it is called? When a man and woman join?”

“One of its names,” he told her. “One of the more polite ones. Swiving is a less formal term, but not precisely rude.” A few of the even less polite ones wafted through his mind while he watched her face, trying to interpret the thoughts behind her changing expressions. He remained silent and let her think.

“My decision,” she said, in a tone that made the words not quite a question.

He answered it, anyway. “Your decision, my lady.”

“I will put the bread a little further from the fire so it rises more slowly this second time,” she said, and suited action to words. “There. Take me to bed, my lord. Show me I do not need to be afraid.”

\* \* \*

From the moment she made her demand, Martin would not let her tense up. Every time she began to second guess her own reactions, he either slowed down to explain what he was doing—and what he was about to do—or speeded up to overwhelm her anxiety in pure sensation.

The process he had outlined in a sentence had three parts, and she had only feared the third. Had consoled herself that the consummation of desire would be over within a few minutes.

But Martin had a different view of things, right from the first step, taking off their clothes.

He made that part of the act, converting it into a sensual game, asking her to undress him while he undressed her, not missing a single opportunity to touch and fondle as he unbuttoned, untied, and unlaced her fastenings.

And he took down her hair, running it through his fingers and using a skein of it to brush across her breasts. Colyton had always demanded a tight plait... No. Martin had said he did not want Colyton between them and he was quite right.

She had never been fully naked in front of a man before, nor had she seen a man naked, but he was so comfortable in his own skin and so worshipful of hers that she ignored her embarrassment and then forgot all about it, as she waited for the order to

get onto the bed, the second step in his process.

Again, he confounded her expectations. He had dropped to his knees to remove her stockings, which had put his head level with a part of her for which she did not have a name. Instead of rising and demanding—or, to be fair, since Martin was always polite, requesting—her to position herself on the bed, he remained where he was, looking up to meet her eyes.

“May I kiss you?” he asked.

Having agreed, Jessica was astounded to discover where he intended to kiss her. Was this really permitted? We are lovers, she reminded herself. I am already breaking the rules. Soon, she felt too good to worry about such things. Before long, she was on the bed, and not alone, with Marton still kissing her in that unexpected place, and also using clever fingers in concert with his mouth. Inside her! She had never imagined such a thing. The craving, the urgency, returned. It grew greater and greater, centering where he touched her, forcing her to move in response.

She seized his hair in her hands, vaguely intending to pull him away but finding herself holding him in place. Her hips began to lift in concert with his fingers, and he didn’t pull away and slap her to remind her to lie still.

And when she couldn’t keep from moaning, instead of roaring insults at her, he murmured, “That’s it, sweetheart. Let me know I am pleasing you.” And he lowered his mouth and redoubled his efforts.

His approval set her free to fly, and she did, soaring into the heart of pleasure, screaming his name. And he didn’t stop his ministrations, but drove her to fly higher and higher. At last—it might have been minutes later—she began to glide down the other side, returning, or so it seemed, to a body sated with delight, all her muscles limp.

Martin crawled up over her body and kissed her, open mouthed. She could taste herself on his tongue, and was surprised once again, this time at the satisfaction it gave her to savour her essence and his combined.

Then she felt something blunt at the entrance to her body. This was the moment she had feared, but she was too replete with satisfaction to react, and when he fitted himself to her and thrust, she did not stiffen up.

He slid home, and it was good. And then it got better, and her second peak was higher than the first.

### CHAPTER NINE

Martin was so determined to see her climax again that he nearly didn't pull out in time. As he reached for the damp cloth he'd put ready, and cleaned them both up, he thanked whatever powers looked after careless lovers.

Perhaps he had a condom in his luggage, but he didn't think so. He was past the age of carrying them "just in case," since his encounters were all planned—until this one. Perhaps Porritt had supplied some.

If not, he was going to have to draw on his reserves of discipline. That is, if Jessica wanted to more. She had only asked for him to help her to find her pleasure, and he had. Perhaps she was finished with him.

He hoped not.

With the towel tossed to one side, he pulled the covers over them, then wrapped her in his arms, making sure not to trap her hair, which lay around her in a glorious carpet, even longer than he had deduced. He kissed the top of her head. "Thank you," he said. "That was amazing." Which was an understatement. He had an unsettling feeling that intimacy with Jessica Lady Colyton was life changing. That, however, was a worry for another day.

For now, he had her in his arms, and once they had had a short rest, he hoped to be able to persuade her into another round.

\* \* \*

Martin and Jessica spent the rest of the day making love, sharing the necessary chores, playing chess and talking. Laughing, too, which in Martin's opinion was one of the great delights of a love affair. Lovers who did not laugh at the same things were doomed to misunderstanding and early separation, but he and Jessica shared the same kind of humour.

They also had similar attitudes to most social and political issues of the day, and when they disagreed, she was willing to listen to his opinion and argue her own. What an amazing countess she must have made. Colyton was mad not to have valued her.

The bread was delicious with the last of the stew. "We shall not starve, though, Martin," Jessica said, as they sopped up the last of the gravy. "Even if supplies don't arrive for several more days. We have bread, and can make more. We have a huge wheel of cheese. Also, plentiful supplies of root vegetables and onions."

"Something for all of my appetites," Martin joked, and Jessica blushed, but responded with a question that had him instantly hard. "Martin, can I do what you did? I mean, do women kiss men—you know, down there? Like you did to me?"

"Yes," he said, doing his best to sound calm. "Shall we leave the dishes until later, and try it in the parlour?"

"The parlour, not the bedroom?" She sounded more intrigued than scandalised, so Martin didn't bother with a full answer, but merely nodded.

She was a quick study, and afterwards he pleased her again, on the rug in front of the fire. Then they did the dishes and made mulled cider, which they brought through to the parlour.

"More chess?" Martin asked.



“Can we just talk?” Jessica asked.

“Of course.” Women always wanted to talk, but somehow, with Jessica, he didn’t mind. No. That wasn’t strong enough. He liked it. He liked talking to her, working alongside her, kissing her. Yes, and all the rest, too. When this interlude was over, he was going to miss her. He pushed the thought away. “What did you wish to talk about, Jessica?”

“I have questions,” she said, and then was silent, those two little vertical lines appearing again between her eyebrows.

“I will answer if I can,” he said, to nudge her into speaking again.

She blushed bright scarlet, and stammered when she tried to explain. “When you... and then, you know, I... The flying thing. Is that normal? With the wetness, and everything?”

“When you come?” he asked. He chose his words carefully. “It is normal. Humans are made to enjoy copulation, and to achieve a peak of pleasure. For men, the pleasure grows and grows, and when we reach the peak, we release our seed and come down the other side. For women, it is a little more complicated, for a thoughtless man can come while his partner has not begun to feel pleasure at all. A woman’s bower becomes wet when she is looking forward to congress.”

“Bower,” she murmured to herself, as if memorising the word, and then addressed him again. “That is why you do not...” she blushed again, and her words were mumbled towards the general direction of her knees. “...put your...” she waved vaguely towards his groin... “into my bower until I am wet?”

Apparently, her ladyship lacked the vocabulary for any part of the festivities. “My shaft?” Martin said, choosing one of the milder terms from the rich supply.

It was the right thing to do. Her blush faded slightly, and she repeated the term, her voice trying out the word. “Your shaft.”

“Yes, in answer to your question. Both because I do not want to come too quickly, and because I am told it can hurt a woman to put a shaft into her bower when it is not ready.”

Jessica nodded. “It does,” she said, thoughtfully.

Martin clenched his fist and his jaw. The one to punch Colyton, who was fortunately dead and could no longer torment his poor wife. The other to keep a few choice angry words behind his teeth.

“Thank you,” Jessica said. “I have no one else I cared to ask. Indeed, until today, I had no idea... I have heard other women talk, of course, but not about such details.”

There were those two adorable lines again. “I think, perhaps, that only a few men are thoughtful,” she said. “I have the impression that most women endure intimacy, rather than enjoying it.”

Was that true? Certainly, to hear other men talk, they were all stallions in the sack, never leaving their women unsatisfied. But, of course, Martin had not spoken to the women. “You will know in future not to put up with such obnoxious behaviour,” he said, and then was sorry he had spoken. The thought of her with another lover set his teeth on edge, though he didn’t know why. They had agreed to a brief liaison during the snowstorm, and he had no other claim on her.

She shrugged. “I doubt the circumstance will arise. Martin, I think I shall go up to bed early.” She chuckled. “Perhaps the unexpected exercise has tired me out. Will you excuse me?”

“Not at all. I am tired, too,” Martin said, truthfully. Then his reluctance for the day to end had him adding, “Shall we sleep in your bed or mine?” Why had he said that? He never spent the night with a lover.

“Sleep together?” Jessica sounded more intrigued than repulsed.

He stuffed his own doubts to the bottom of his mind and bent himself to persuade her. “Just sleep. We are both tired. But if we both wake in a different frame of mind... well...” It was his turn to shrug. It was all true, but he had to admit, if only to himself, that he feared to let her out of his reach, lest this whole day turned into a mirage and faded away.

“My bed is, I think, a trifle bigger,” she commented.

Martin’s heart bounded. She had agreed! “I shall change for bed in my room and knock on your door when I am ready,” he said. Now to see if his valet had packed a nightshirt!

### CHAPTER TEN

Jessica had occasionally shared a bed with her sister Matilda, when one of them had had a nightmare, or when they were at a house party with more guests than bedchambers. Not for many years and never with anyone else. Especially never with a man. Colyton had not remained in her bed longer than it took for him to swive her. Fifteen minutes, at the most.

How much time had they spent swiving? As she dressed for the day, she found herself making the calculation. Colyton visited her twice a week, regular as clockwork. Perhaps forty weeks in a year, since he left her alone during her courses, which made eighty visits a year, or twenty hours. So, in total over the four years between their wedding and her announcement that she was, finally with child... Eighty hours in all that time. Goodness. Less than a day in a year, if you added all the minutes together, and Colyton's version of swiving had been the final abuse that had broken her.

His disrespect for her in those most intimate moments, as well as his constant criticism out of bed, had crushed her so completely she'd almost forgotten the girl she used to be. The girl who was confident and defiant, ready to challenge the ton's expectations and prove she was every bit as much a lady as any other.

Martin's very different attitude had reminded her of who she really was. Pretty. Capable. Intelligent. Worthy of respect. A smile lingered around her lips as she remembered the night. As Martin had predicted, they had both woken wanting more than sleep—once in the middle of the night and again this morning. How lovely it had been to simply wake up and find his kisses and his embrace within arm's reach.

And they had another day! The snow had ceased in the night, but it lay thick all around the cottage. There'd be no leaving here today. Furthermore, today was Christmas Day, and the servants at the manor would be busy. With luck, no one would come to the cottage until tomorrow or even the next day.

Meanwhile, Jessica had her very own Christmas rogue to unwrap. As often as she possibly could.

Fully clothed and with her hair neatly dressed, she went smiling out into the hall, and stopped."

"Martin?"

He put a finger to his lips. "Sssh," he said. "People are coming from the manor, across the snow on a sleigh. If you keep them from coming upstairs, no one will know I have been here with you."

Jessica's heart sank. So much for her plans. "I'll go down to greet them," she said.

"One moment." Martin took her chin in one hand and pressed a firm kiss to her lips. "I will be waiting," he promised. "Merry Christmas." He gave her another kiss and then let her go and disappeared into his bedchamber, closing the door behind him.

She hurried downstairs and opened the kitchen door just as the sleigh drew up outside. The horse that pulled it was a cob with powerful hindquarters. "Well done, Tansy," called the man who had been driving the sleigh, giving the horse a slap on the withers. "Good job." He saw Jessica watching and touched his cap. "Good morning, my lady."

"Good morning." Jessica's gaze made the greeting include the two women servants who were now descending from the sleigh.

The older of the two women approached. She was carrying a large basket. “Are you Lady Colyton, my lady?”

“I am.”

“We are that sorry to have left you on your own, my lady,” said the man. “We couldn’t get through the storm.”

“I would not have wanted you to try,” Jessica assured them. “I was very comfortable here, and grateful for the food you left.”

“We’ve brought more, my lady,” said the second woman, whose basket was even bigger than the first. “If you prefer, though, her ladyship would be happy to welcome you at the manor.”

Jessica shook her head. “No. Please thank her ladyship for me, but I am very comfortable here.”

“Well, then, we’ll just clean and restock the pantry, while Frank, here, cuts you some more wood. I’m Molly, my lady. And this here is Kate. We’ll make you a nice cup of tea, shall we, my lady?”

Martin had already done it. Jessica had seen the cup set ready, next to the teapot on the kitchen table. Only one cup, which must have been the first thing Molly saw when she followed her into the kitchen. The woman gave a shriek of horror. “You were never going to drink your tea in the kitchen, my lady, and you a countess! I’ll bring it through to the parlour for you, and Kate will change the sheets on your bed. Do you want Frank to bring the bath up for you? I can set some water to heat.”

“No need,” said Jessica, thinking fast. “In fact, leave the sheets, thank you, Kate. I’ve only been here three nights, and they do not need to be changed yet. I’ll take my tea

up to my bedroom with me, to be out of your way. I shall sit up there where I have a better view of the landscape. The snow is so beautiful. Just manage the food and the wood, if you please.”

It was just as well that she and Martin had washed and put away their dishes last night, and left the kitchen and parlour tidy.

Upstairs, she knocked on Martin’s door, saying, “It’s me.”

The door opened just enough for her to slip inside. “Did you put one of the cups away when you saw them coming?” she said. “You will have to share mine. I’ve told them just to restock the pantry and the wood box. I am perfectly happy to be left alone. I said no to a bath, for I do not want them upstairs.”

Martin’s eyes flared with heat. “Ask them to set up the bath in the kitchen before they leave,” he suggested. “I would like a bath. With you.”

Her own desires flared. A bath with Martin would be... interesting.

They finished the tea between them, and Jessica went down for a second cup and to make the request for the bath. Molly stared, and last week’s Jessica would have blushed and perhaps backed off. Today’s Jessica returned the look with one eyebrow slightly raised. Who was the countess here and who the servant ?

“Yes, my lady,” Molly said. “Can I fix you some breakfast while Frank is fetching the water to heat? Perhaps an omelette?”

A short time later, Kate came up to Jessica’s bedroom with the omelette, some toast with butter and marmalade and another pot of tea. “Your bath will be thirty minutes, my lady,” she said. “We’ll be on our way once it is ready, if there’s nothing else, ma’am.”

“I’ll come down to see you off, then,” Jessica told the servant.

By that time, she and Martin had shared the omelette, the toast, and a few more kisses. Jessica carried the tray downstairs to find the three servants waiting for her.

“There’s ham and roast pork in the meat safe, my lady,” Molly told her, and took her to the pantry to show her the rest of the food sent over from the manor. It was a feast—far too much for one woman, or even for a couple.

“Wonderful, Molly,” Jessica told the woman. “There is enough there to keep me eating like a queen for several days. You need not come tomorrow. I hope you all have time off. Please enjoy it without being concerned about me.”

“Thank you, my lady,” Molly replied. “We’ll be off, then, if you are sure. You’ll lock the door behind us, ma’am, won’t you.”

“I will,” Jessica assured her.

Frank nodded to her and left the kitchen, but Molly and Kate lingered. “We can easily come back tomorrow, my lady,” Molly said. The woman shifted restlessly, then added, “It don’t feel right leaving you alone on Christmas Day, ma’am. If you’ll forgive me for saying so.”

“It is kind of you to be concerned for me,” Jessica said, and indeed, she was touched, which was why she felt impelled to explain further. “This is a holiday for me, away from my family who love me dearly, but they will fuss over the poor widow. I am joining them in a few days. I will be happy to have another day alone before I need to smile and do the pretty. Enjoy your day off, Molly.”

“Eh, well,” said Molly, “That’s all right then.” And Jessica heard her say to Kate, as they left the kitchen, “See, young Kate. Even rich ladies have their troubles.”



Jessica locked and bolted the outside door, then returned to the kitchen to find Martin waiting for her by the hot bath. He had already stripped naked. “Can I help you with your fastenings, Jessica?” he asked.

Another thing Jessica had never known about intimacy was that it could be playful. Martin taught her that during Christmas Day, starting in the bath. She had not played in a bath since she was a small child, and as far as she could remember, she had never shared a bath with another person.

Much of the bath water finished up on the floor, and Jessica was so weak with laughter that she swore he was trying to drown her, and demanded to be able to rest her head on his shoulder so she could keep her head above the water. Which led to other matters that took her laughter and transmuted it into a different kind of joy.

Martin had brought down a banyan each for them to put on, and they wore only those as they bucketed the bathwater out of the bath and poured it down the drain in the scullery. Then they mopped up the spilt water from the kitchen flagstones.

“Time to dress and have breakfast,” Martin said. “All this exercise has given me an appetite,” and he wiggled his eyebrows in case she had failed to take his meaning.

He was correct that half an omelette had not been enough to keep her filled until dinner time. They dressed, and Jessica fried slices of ham and eggs in a pan on the hob while Martin took charge of the toasting fork.

The day continued with interludes of intimacy—or swiving, as Jessica had learned to call it, chess, reading quietly by the fire, more swiving, working together to prepare or clean up after a meal, cards, and swiving again.

Also talking and lots of laughter. Martin told an hilarious story about Dom’s courtship of Martin’s sister Chloe, and the part played by Chloe’s monkey. Jessica

responded with the tale of her brother-in-law's courtship of her sister Matilda. The poor Earl of Hamner had been unwillingly fascinated by the lovely Matilda, but it took one of the coldest winters and the deepest freeze in London in a generation to bring them together.

The conversation took a more serious turn in the afternoon. The sky had cleared during the day, and a ray of sunlight had crept across the parlour floor to the rug on which she and Martin were lying after another bout of swiving.

Jessica rather liked having Martin admire her naked body. No one ever had. To be fair, no one except her lady's maid had ever seen it. Colyton used to visit her in the dark, and even so, both of them remained in their night attire while Colyton exercised his rights and Jessica did her duty.

Martin was using his fingers to find ticklish spots, but maintaining a complimentary commentary as he did so. But then he stroked a finger across the side of her belly and said, "Scars, Jessica? Were you in an accident?"

Oh, no. She had forgotten. For a moment, she wanted to slap his hand away and flee, but she fought the impulse. He knew how awful her marriage had been, and he did not judge her. Perhaps she could trust him with this, too.

And if not—well. They had to part tomorrow, in any case.

"Not an accident," she told him. "They are marks many women bear after carrying a child."

He looked surprised. "You have a child?"

The familiar grief crashed in on her, as strong as ever, sweeping away all her equanimity. It never grew less, no matter how many months had passed, no matter

how much she rebuilt her life. It deluged her less often, but as strongly, every time.

She found herself sobbing, and Martin lay down beside her and folded her in his arms, murmuring how sorry he was. Haverford, when he had arrived after it happened, had also held her. “I will fix it,” his murmur had been. “Tell me what is wrong, and I will fix it.” Poor Haverford. It had already been too late.

The whole story came out once she was a little calmer. How Colyton had been so determined that the child she was carrying would be a son, how she had instead given birth to a daughter.

“I do not need another daughter, woman,” he had screamed at her, and he had ordered the midwife to “take it away.”

Jessica had tried to stop him, to get between the midwife and the baby, but she had been weak from the birth, and that was the last time she had seen her little girl.

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

For Jessica's sake, Martin needed to stay calm. Her grief made it nearly impossible. Martin had to hold her gently in his arms and murmur soothingly when what he wanted to do was hit something. Hard. Colyton, preferably. The man was lucky he was dead.

Now he knew why the Duke of Haverford had taken his sister away from her horrible marriage, and why Colyton had not protested. Jessica said Haverford had arrived a few days after the birth, expecting to meet his new niece, and instead finding Jessica grieving and Colyton ranting. Reading between the lines, Martin guessed that the brute had beaten his wife for repeatedly asking for her daughter.

Haverford had taken Jessica from the house and gone looking for the midwife. "She left my baby at the church door," Jessica told him. "She didn't know the vicar was away from home." She turned her face into his shoulder and wept again. The baby must have died. Poor little mite. Poor Jessica .

"I'm sorry," she said, eventually. "Holding me while I cried all over you is outside of our agreement."

"We are friends, are we not?" Martin said. "Friends rejoice with one another and grieve with one another. I am so sorry for what you have gone through, Jessica. I wish I could make it better."

She cupped his jaw with one hand. "I have never known anyone like you, Marton. I'm glad you are my friend." She wriggled until she was on her knees beside him,

facing him, and rested her other hand on his shoulder before leaning in for a kiss. He tried to keep it gentle and friendly, but she had other ideas. “Swive me, Martin. Make me feel good,” she demanded.

Perhaps for her it was a remedy for grief and nothing more, but for Martin, this time was different, deeper. He had already been feeling more for her than made sense for a passing affair—protective, tender, jealous, proud she had chosen him for her first lover. Now he had to admit, if only to himself, that he was in serious danger of falling in love.

He lay with her in his arms after they’d finished, reluctant to release her. After a while, both for something to say and because he really wanted to know, he asked about her childhood. It sounded like an idyllic nursery in which to grow up, with doting servants, kindly older half-brothers, and the loving presence of the woman Society now knew as the Duchess of Winshire.

“She had a terrible marriage, too,” Jessica mused. “But of course, she was better born than I, and she gave His Grace of Haverford two sons. She is a strong woman, and I admire her nearly as much as I love her. Her second marriage is a love match.”

The whole of Society knew that, too—how they had wanted to marry as young people, but had been denied. Then after years of separation and a marriage each, the dowager Duchess of Haverford and the widowed Duke of Winshire had fallen back in love with one another.

The cloud to Jessica’s childhood had been Society’s view of her as Haverford’s base-born and unacknowledged daughter. “As I grew, I heard so many spiteful comments about following in my mother’s footsteps. Yes, and learned never to be in a situation where a so-called gentleman felt emboldened to offer—or even attempt—my ruin. Well. That is in my past, now.”

Not really. The situation with Colyton had been laid unfairly at her feet precisely because of her irregular birth. No other duke's sister, if supported by the duke himself, would have been the subject of malicious gossip over the failure of her marriage.

"But enough about me, Martin. Tell me more about you. Did your mother really leave you to be raised by your uncle?" She shook her head. "I cannot understand a mother leaving her child. If only I could have taken Colyton's daughters with me when I left. Had my baby lived, nothing my brother said would have convinced me to go with him."

She looked horrified, as if she had just heard her own words. "I am sorry. I do not mean to criticise your mother. I do not know her circumstances."

"No need for an apology." Martin told her how he felt about being left with his mother's brother, his guardian, while his mother took Chloe with her into her second marriage. "For a time, I thought the same as you, but I think I understand her better now. My uncle was a hard man. Fair, but hard—and much older than my mother. He had very strict ideas about how women should behave, though Chloe never let him douse her spark. I think Mother was quenched by him, and both marriages were an escape for her."

He sighed. It had been a hard-won understanding. "Once I was older, I realised that my uncle must have forced the choice on her, but as a child, I thought she had chosen Chloe over me, though she visited often, and wrote even more frequently. Sometimes every day! Poor Mother. She died when I was eight, after giving the Earl of Seahaven two more daughters. The fact that one was born six months after the wedding explains another reason for the choice that Mother made. Uncle Swithin would never have accepted a love-begotten child into his home. After she died, Uncle Swithin brought Chloe home." Despite his mother's death, that had been the happiest time of his childhood, after Chloe came home and before his uncle began to take him about to

learn the business of the estate.

He and Jessica whiled away the rest of the afternoon sharing stories from their past, then ate their dinner and went up to bed together. Tonight would be the last night, and Martin was determined to make it memorable.

### CHAPTER TWELVE

“The roads will be cleared today, I imagine,” Martin said to Jessica at breakfast. From his bedroom window, they had been able to see that the snow was slowly melting.

Jessica’s heart sank, but she managed to reply calmly. “I daresay you will need to be on your way, then, Martin.”

“I suppose,” he said, sounding as unenthusiastic as she. “You won’t want me here if the ladies at the manor take it into their heads to come visiting.”

She supposed he meant that he did not want to be caught alone with the scandalous Lady Colyton. She could not blame him. She nodded.

“I shall pack, then,” he said.

“I shall make you a package of food to eat on your journey,” said she.

They were being exquisitely polite to one another. Was this really the lover of the last few days? The man with whom she had laughed, cried, swived? The man she had told things she’d never shared with another human being?

She assured Martin that she could do the dishes on her own, and he went upstairs, leaving her to drop a few tears in the washing water. By the time he came down again, carrying his bag, she had pasted on a bright smile.



“So, this is goodbye,” she said, trying to sound cheerful.

“I suppose it is,” he agreed. He sounded morose, which perversely cheered her. Good. She hoped he missed her, for she was certainly going to miss him.

She pronounced the speech that she had been practicing as she washed and dried the breakfast dishes. “Thank you, Martin,” she said. “Thank you for showing me what swiving can be with the right man. Thank you for being so kind, and such a good listener.”

He made an impatient gesture. “You owe me no thanks,” he insisted. “What we’ve done...” He grimaced. “I am not good with words about this sort of thing. It was... We are friends, are we not? No need for thanks between friends.”

His broken off sentences left her wild with curiosity. It was what? For her, it had been amazing, incredible, life-changing, but she couldn’t say that, of course. At best, he would look at her with pity. He was a man. He had swived before. She didn’t want to believe that she was not different to all the lovers before her, but she’d be a fool to think he found it as special as she did.

At worst, he’d know her for the wanton she’d spent her entire life trying not to be. He offered his friendship. That would have to be enough for her.

“We are friends,” she confirmed.

Marton let out an oath, dropped his bag, seized her in his arms and gave her a kiss to make her toes curl. “I’ll never forget this Christmas,” he told her. Then he scooped up his bag and walked away down the path that was just showing in patches through the snow.

Jessica watched him out of sight, but he never looked back.

The cottage without Martin in it was lonely. Jessica, who had so longed to be alone, itched to be surrounded by people. The servants came, but their presence did nothing to ease her sense that something precious had been given to her and taken away, leaving emptiness in its wake. When they left, Frank promised to take a message to Mr Hodge at the inn, asking him to fetch her the following day, if it was safe to travel.

Perhaps, in the noise and bustle of a Haverford and Winshire family Christmastide house party, she wouldn't feel so lonely. At least at Hollystone Hall she would not keep turning to tell Martin something, to be confronted with the emptiness he had left. She would not serve two cups of tea or two glasses of wine before remembering he was not there to share it with her. She would not, later, turn to him in bed, only to find no one was there.

"You fool, Jessica Colyton," she scolded herself. "You have gone and fallen in love."

\* \* \*

Martin picked up his horse from the inn, being vague about where he had been staying. He set off on the road north, feeling as a part of him had gone missing. He had not been three hours on the road before he realised that he had left his heart with Jessica. He should never have left. Be damned to what people thought. He loved Jessica Lady Colyton, and he did not want to be without her. If she would agree to marry him, he would make her his viscountess.

And if not? Then he'd camp on her doorstep until she changed her mind, dammit. She felt the same way as he did, he was certain of it. But whether she would take the risk of marrying again, he couldn't tell. He didn't blame her for being wary, but he would do his best to convince her that they belonged together.

He would stop at the village he could see up ahead for a mulled wine or something

else warming, and then return and tell her how he felt.

The innkeeper found him a table in a corner, a hot cider punch, a plate full of hot stew, and fresh bread to sop up the gravy. “Just village fare” he said, apologetically, “but we didn’t expect the quality to be out in this weather, my lord.”

“It is delicious, and very welcome, innkeeper,” Martin assured him.

After that, he was left alone in his corner, trying to imagine Jessica’s face when he arrived back. Surprised? Pleased? Horrified? From there, his mind drifted to their future together, if she would only have him. Perhaps he would give her babies—none of this nonsense of separate beds, and visits in the dark a couple of times a week.

If the babies didn’t come, well, no matter. They would have a good life, and when the end came, he wouldn’t care who had the estate.

And if they were blessed with children, then she would be a wonderful mother. Despite something he half remembered hearing about her. What was it? It didn’t matter. He knew better. She still missed her step children. She had tried to be a mother to them for four years, though the Dowager Lady Colyton had refused to give up control of the nursery, or the house, and Colyton would not counter his mother’s orders.

Words from the next table impinged on his mind, sneaking into his consciousness because they echoed his own thoughts. “She won’t leave her children, and the man’s bastard enough to keep them from her if she did.”

A few more comments sufficed to tell Martin that one of his neighbours wanted to rescue an abused wife, but the woman had refused his help. “She’s a good mother,” another of the men acknowledged. “What sort of mother leaves her children?”

As if it was a key, a door opened in his mind and what he had been trying to remember moved into view. A conversation he had overheard at Whites, while he'd been sitting much like this over dinner, pretending to read a newspaper to discourage interruptions.

“What sort of mother leaves her children? I should make Lady Colyton take them back.” It had been the new Lord Colyton, a distant relative of Jessica's husband. He had been complaining about inheriting a parcel of females. A sour old bat who could turn milk with a look, and four children. Martin had not been that interested at the time, which was why it had slipped from his conscious mind.

He was certain Lord Colyton had said four children. He was nearly certain. Yes, he said three that would be debutantes in a couple of years, and one that was still a squalling brat. Perhaps Colyton's mistress had left a child—for the vicious cur surely had a mistress. But if there was any chance that Jessica's baby still lived... No. Haverford had checked.

But even Haverford was not infallible, though he acted as if he thought he was. Martin had to see for himself. He paid his shot and collected his horse. Instead of spending tonight in the cottage, and hopefully in Jessica's arms, he had a long cold ride ahead of him.

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Hollystone Hall, Buckinghamshire, December 31st, 1822

Her Grace had been surprised to see Jessica several days earlier than Jessica had planned. She was welcomed, of course, and not just by the duchess, but by the wider family.

Both of her sisters were there, with their husbands and children, as well as another two base-born sons of the old Duke of Haverford—David Wakefield, with his wife Prue and their tribe of children, and Dom Finchley, who was married to Martin's sister Chloe.

The Finchley's two children had been absorbed into the horde of youngsters of all ages that had been given the freedom the house. At any moment, one might find a tumble of babies in the parlour, a gaggle of little girls playing tag in the ballroom, half a dozen boys and perhaps a couple of their sisters sliding down a banister, a mixed group of slightly older boys and girls planning theatricals in the music room, and more.

They were not just Haverford connections, of course, but also Winshires. The Winshire family group was big enough on its own, with the duke's six England-based children and two nieces, plus his two sisters-in-law, and assorted husbands, wives and children. Also, some of the duke's foreign retainers from the mountains of Central Asia were also dear friends, as close as family, and they and their wives and children swelled the numbers still further.

Jessica had wanted bustle, and she certainly found it. And it was fun. It was chaotic, busy, and joyful. None of it, however, prevented her from missing Martin. She scolded herself, but it was no good. She was in love. “And why not?” she asked herself, part way through her second restless night. “He is single. I am single. Yes, he left, but I told him I was not interested in marriage, that I wanted a liaison for as long as it snowed. And perhaps that is all he wanted, too.”

But his kindness, his passion, his respect—didn’t they show that he cared? If there was a chance of more, shouldn’t she find out? Once the holiday was over, of course. Her family was so pleased to see her, and she would not disappoint them. But afterwards, what was to stop her from going to Yorkshire and asking Martin how he felt about her? Only her pride, but she didn’t intend to let that stand in her way.

Meanwhile, she had a house party to enjoy, noisy and chaotic as it was. There were oases of calm amid all the rumpus, of course. Her Grace had designated several places for people to go when they wished for quiet. One such parlour was used mainly by the women at the house party, for writing letters, reading, or quiet conversation, perhaps with sewing or knitting on their laps.

Elsewhere, there was a library, a painting studio, a billiards room, a room set aside for table games—such as cards, backgammon, and chess—and even a smoking room for those with what the duchess described as “that horrible habit.”

Jessica liked the peace of the ladies’ parlour, and spent part of each day there, catching up with her sisters and others. She retreated there in the early afternoon of New Year’s Eve, and found several others seeking refuge after a rather noisy parade through the house.

Some of the fathers had organised the children into a procession, celebrating the end of the old year and the start of the new. They had been supplied with instruments from the music room, though only some of them knew how to play. The others had

been given things to bang, and encouraged to make as much noise as possible. Yes, and to shout and shriek as well.

“The din frightens the bad spirits,” the men claimed. “Make a loud enough noise, and we shall all have a good year.”

“The children had a wonderful time,” said Sophia, Lady Sutton, Winshire’s daughter-in-law.

“It was fun to watch,” Chloe Finchley remarked. Jessica had expected to be embarrassed when she saw Chloe, and she was. But, of course, Chloe had no idea that Jessica had been swiving her brother. She hid her embarrassment and did her best to behave naturally.

“Fun to watch from far enough away to protect one’s hearing,” said Cherry, Haverford’s duchess.”

“Where did they get the idea?” Jessica wondered.

“That was Dom,” Chloe admitted. “He heard about it from a neighbour who has been in China.”

“It was wonderful to see some of the shy children coming out of their shells,” Cherry remarked.

Jessica had been wondering her stepdaughters would have reacted. Johanna would have loved it. Margaret would have been polite about it. Elizabeth would probably have stuck to Margaret’s side, too shy to make much noise herself, but fascinated by the whole affair. Margaret, Elizabeth and Johanna loved their last stay at Hollystone Hall, before Jessica’s wedding to their father. How much more would they enjoy it now they were six years older?

“I wish the Dowager Lady Colyton had let me have my stepdaughters for the holidays. I wrote and asked, but she made no reply.” She had not had much hope. Mother Colyton had never replied to one of her letters, and nor had she let the girls do so. She was as rigid and unforgiving as her son. Jessica worried so much about the three girls in that woman’s care.

“Jessica, you must not have heard,” Matilda said. “Lady Colyton died a few weeks ago. My friend Pansy wrote to tell me—she and her husband have an estate near the Colyton estate in Warwickshire. An apoplexy, apparently.”

Jessica found herself standing, every fibre urging her to leave immediately and rush to the children’s defence. “Does she say what has become of the girls?” she asked.

“She did not. I suppose the new Lord Colyton has charge of them,” Matilda said, frowning a little.

Jessica’s mind was working again. She resumed her seat. She could hardly fly out the door and ride to Warwickshire. She did not even know if the girls were at the estate, nor whether they were in any kind of danger. “My poor darlings. I wonder if Aunt Eleanor has an acquaintance who might know.”

The other ladies laughed. Her Grace always knew someone who could find out whatever information she requested. Cherry, though, was frowning, slightly. “Haverford may be able to use this to your advantage, Jessica,” she said. “You are now the girls’ closest living relative.”

“But, my reputation...” Jessica objected, though her heart felt as though it was too big for its chest at the mere thought of having her girls with her again.

“Is a pile of—well, I will not allow that horrid man to tempt me into vulgarity,” said Matilda. “Everyone who counts knows that the reputation a certain unmentionable



person gave you is lies, Jessica. It will not carry any weight with the courts.”

“I expect it depends who has been named as guardian,” said Cherry. “But we shall ask Haverford when he arrives.”

Jessica had been surprised that Haverford was not at the party. Apparently, she had missed him by half a day. “He was called away. Something urgent came up,” Cherry told her. That was all anyone else knew. Something urgent, but not what, nor who brought the message.

Poor Cherry, to have her husband disappear for three days in the middle of a family Christmas party. “I expected him back yesterday,” she added. “I am certain it will be today.”

“In the meantime,” said Jessica, “I shall write a letter to my lawyer, asking him to make enquiries. Oh, my poor girls.”

They were interrupted by a footman with a message. “His Grace has arrived, Your Grace,” he said to Cherry. “He has brought more guests with him. He asks if you will come down to greet them, and Lady Colyton, he would like you to come too, if you would.”

More guests? And Haverford wanted her to meet them? Intrigued, Jessica followed Cherry out into the hall and along the winding way through the sprawling house to the nearest staircase. “Do you know what this is about?” she asked Cherry.

Cherry shot her a secretive smile. “Know? No, I do not know. Not for certain. I will only say that I have hopes, Jessica.” She grinned, and would say no more.

Haverford and his guests, whoever they were, were waiting in one of the reception rooms off the grand entrance hall. The footman, who had hurried ahead of them,

opened the door and Cherry led the way inside.

Jessica followed. She stared. She blinked. She stared again, and that was all she had time for, because Elizabeth and Johanna were in her arms and she was hugging them with tears running down her cheeks, saying over and over, “My darlings. My darlings. I was afraid I would never be allowed to see you again.”

A touch on her arm proved to be Margaret, the eldest of the three. She had tears in her eyes, too. “I looked after them, as you told me, Mother,” she said.

“She did,” Johanna assured Jessica. “She would not let Grandmama Colyton beat me when I could not read my lesson, and she stayed up all night with Elizabeth when she had the fever.”

Jessica sobbed and enfolded Margaret in her embrace. “My good girl.” And then, gathering the other two again, “My good, good girls.”

“But do you not wish to see Catherine, Mother?” Johanna asked. Jessica freed a hand to find her handkerchief to wipe her eyes.

“Yes. Lord Findlater has her. See?” Elizabeth pointed.

Sure enough, Martin was watching her from a few paces away across the room. In the glance she took, Jessica noticed that Haverford was watching too, with one arm around Cherry’s waist. But she could spare no attention for Haverford. Not when Martin held an infant in his arms—a child of around a year and a half, a child with the Haverford hazel eyes.

The hope that sprung to life was nonsense. It couldn’t be.

Haverford spoke while Jessica stood frozen, unsure of what to believe. “The midwife

lied. Or the old Lady Colyton rescued your daughter before she came to any harm.”

Jessica took a pace closer to Martin. “My baby?”

“They named her Catherine,” Martin said. “Lady Margaret has had charge of her, along with her other sisters.”

Another pace, and another, her hand out to touch the little girl’s cheek, wonderingly. Catherine turned her head and buried it in Martin’s shoulder.

I am a stranger to my own baby . But Catherine was alive. She and Jessica would have time to discover one another. Jessica turned back to her stepdaughters, and wept joyfully on Margaret’s shoulder.

### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Martin had not called on the house party, for he did not want to be delayed and nor did he want to disclose his errand to everyone, lest word of it reach Jessica and raise hopes that might prove to be false.

He had sent a message from the local tavern and Haverford had come in response, listened to his story and his deductions, and returned to Hollystone Hall to fetch a good horse and enough clothes for a few days.

“One day took us to Warwickshire, to Colyton’s estate,” he explained. “There, we found that the Dowager Lady Colyton had died, and Colyton’s daughters had been moved from the dower house to the main house. Colyton’s four daughters.”

Haverford took up the story. “The new Lord Colyton was nearly beside himself. He’d had Christmas plans that were quite inappropriate for four damsels, one nearly of age to be a debutante. He was too decent a fellow to abandon them when their grandmother had just died, but he was very keen to tell his troubles to two interested gentlemen.”

“Haverford suggested that we might have the solution to his problem, but he insisted on speaking with the Colyton ladies first, so Colyton sent for the four of them. He kept repeating, ‘Are you certain you want the baby?’ Of course I wanted the baby! That was what I had come for.”

And Martin was glad of it, for the girls and Jessica clearly belonged together. They were sitting on a sofa, the three girls all dressed in sombre black gowns that were a

trifle small for them, Elizabeth on one side of Jessica, Johanna on the other, and Margaret, with Catherine on her lap, beside Johanna but holding Jessica's hand.

The girls had been told that Jessica had abandoned them, but easily believed that she had been driven away, and that her letters to them must have been intercepted. "Papa was a mean person, and so was Grandmama," Johanna had said.

Haverford took up the tale. "Once I'd discovered that the girls wanted Jessica just as much as Jessica wanted the girls, I suggested that Colyton might want to pass guardianship to Jessica."

"Haverford!" Jessica gasped. "The girls are mine?"

"You have legal custody of them," Haverford told her. "I am their guardian of record. At least for now." He gave Martin a smirk, knowing perfectly well that Martin intended to propose as soon as he could get a moment alone with Jessica. Which he figured might take a while.

Martin ignored the smirk, and Jessica's focus was on her daughters, so she didn't see it. "Haverford insisted on dragging a lawyer away from his Christmas to write up the papers," Martin told Jessica. "The old Colyton had made no provision for them, so Colyton was responsible for them as their nearest relative. He has signed them over to you and Haverford, Jess— Lady Colyton, so it is all right and tight."

Jessica's beam was somewhat watery, but there was no doubting her joy. The reunion had brought a lump to his own throat. "You realise, Findlater," Haverford had said to him, "that you will be taking on four new daughters if Jessica agrees to marry you." Martin couldn't wait. Catherine had wormed her way into Martin's heart, as had the other three girls.

"We are thrilled for you, Jessica," said Cherry. "Margaret, if you could only know

how Jessica has pined for you all. You remember me, do you not?"

"You are Auntie Cherry," Johanna piped up. "We stayed here with you once before, when I was only little. You had many other children staying here, too."

Cherry's smile broadened. "Quite right, and we have even more children here now, Johanna. Jessica, bring your girls with me, and we shall see about rooms. I think there is a suite where the five of you might stay together. And the nursemaid." She smiled at the girl who was perching on a chair in the corner.

Six of them in a suite. Martin suppressed a groan. There went any plans he might have had to make a private visit to Jessica's rooms. Haverford shot him a smirk.

"Come along, Lord Findlater," said Cherry. "We'll find a room for you, too."

They put him in the room that Jessica had vacated. That was hopeful. At least he wasn't sharing. And she knew where to find him.

But he had no opportunity to suggest that Jessica pay him a visit. For the rest of the day, she wouldn't leave her daughters. By evening, Catherine had accepted her as part of the family, though Margaret was still clearly the infant's stay and security, as Jessica was for her stepdaughters. All three older girls hovered near Jessica and Johanna clung.

It rained for most of the day, but the evening was clear, and Winshire had organised a display of fireworks to bring in the New Year. Jessica and her little flock went off to bed. "But Margaret and I will sit up until it is time for the fireworks, and then we shall wake you," she assured Elizabeth and Johanna, both of whom were afraid to miss the display.

And there they all were, just before midnight, bundled up warm and out on the main

bridge from the house to the manor's extensive water gardens. No. Not all. Margaret saw him looking and must have guessed at the question in his mind.

"Catherine is fast asleep, Lord Findlater. We left her with the nursemaid."

"Quite right," said Chloe, who walked up to his side, with Dom behind her. Dom had their son on his shoulders. "Dorrie is asleep, too. She is too young to enjoy fireworks, and too young to know that she missed out."

"They are about to start," Johanna said, jumping up and down in her excitement, and for the next fifteen minutes, the rockets and pinwheels absorbed all their attention. Then it was inside for a hot drink and some sweet treats before mothers or fathers or both led happy children off to bed. At a Haverford-Winshire house party, nursemaids and governesses must have time on their hands.

And still, Martin had not had any chance to talk privately to Jessica. Perhaps tomorrow would be better.

However, thirty minutes later, as he was settling to sleep, he heard a sound. He sat up in bed and listened. Sure enough, there it came again. A tap on his door. In some house parties, he would know what to think. But this was a family party, with no bed hopping. Unless...

The thought had him leaping out of bed and hurrying across the room before the person outside could go away. And yes. When he opened the door a crack, in case he was mistaken, there she was.

"Jessica."

She started talking even as she stepped toward him, and then past him and into the room as he moved out of the way. "I am sorry to disturb you. I needed to talk with

you, and there does not seem to have been an opportunity.” It must have been a prepared speech, for she did a double-take at the end of it, when she turned to watch him close the door and turn the key, and realised what he was—or rather wasn’t—wearing.

Martin wasn’t embarrassed. He always slept naked, and Jessica had seen him that way before. Still, she said she wanted to talk, so he picked up his banyan from the chair beside the bed and put it on. “Come and sit down, Jessica.”

He indicated the two chairs by the fire, and squatted down to put a log on the banked embers, and to poke them back to life. “I wanted to talk to you, too. I’m glad you are here.” She had had a good eyeful before he shrugged into his banyan. She knew he was glad to see her. But he would not make assumptions about why.

“Would you like a brandy?” he asked, once the fire was sending out a bit more heat. She had not spoken. Perhaps she was having second thoughts, or perhaps she needed some liquid courage.

“A small one.”

\* \* \*

Jessica waited until he had poured them a brandy each and taken the chair opposite her before she spoke. She wanted all his attention when she asked her question. “First, Martin, I cannot begin to thank you enough for Catherine. It is a miracle beyond my hoping. Haverford was telling me you remembered an overheard conversation—the new Colyton mentioning four daughters, and from that you were prepared to cross the country for me, in winter. Thank you. Thank you a million times.”

He leaned forward in his chair, his gaze intent on hers. “I did not remember until after



we had parted. I was on my way back to you, but I stopped to eat while changing horses, and I overheard another conversation, this time about someone else entirely. They used the same words, about a mother not leaving her child. It triggered something in my mind, but I wasn't sure I remembered correctly. I did not want to tell you in case I was wrong. Thank God I was right."

Tears pricked at Jessica's eyes again. She had cried more this afternoon than she had since Haverford took her home, but this time they were happy tears. "I am so glad," which was an understatement. "I am so grateful."

Martin frowned. "I don't want your gratitude, Jessica." The next sentence was a mutter to himself, but she heard it, nonetheless. "This complicates matters."

What did that mean? And what about the other thing he had said. "You were on your way back to me? Why?"

"Because I didn't want it to be over!" Martin said, the words rushed and almost angry, as if they had been forced from him. Then, even as she felt herself tense at his tone, he gentled his voice. "I do not want it to be over, Jessica, but I do not want you to feel obligated to give me what I want. I want you to be free to choose. What do you want?"

Time to be brave. You can do this, Jessica. Martin won't laugh at you or get angry . "I want you. I had already decided to chase after you to Yorkshire and ask you what I meant to you. Things have changed, though, Martin. I have four daughters to consider. I am not as free to choose as I thought."

"What you mean to me?" Martin's smile was warm, accepting. "You mean the world to me. Without you, I am a lonely glum fool, stolid and boring—"

"You are not a fool," she protested. "Nor glum, nor stolid, nor boring."

“Without you, I am,” he insisted. “Perhaps you will say we have only known one another a few days, but what days they were, Jessica. We spent all our time together. We talked, we played, we worked side by side. I know you far better than any lady that is not a relative, and I know that I love you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I know viscountess is a step down from countess, but—”

Once again, Jessica interrupted him. “Wait. Are you asking me to marry you?”

“Of course.” Martin looked bewildered. “What did you think... You thought I wanted an affair?”

“I have four children,” Jessica pointed out.

“Four children I am already beginning to love,” said Martin. “You are their mother, though only one of them was born to you. I could be their father, if they would have me. If you would have me.”

It was the greatest inducement he could have offered her, did he know that?

Yes, he did, for he added, “But don’t marry me for that. The children, even Catherine, will grow up and marry, and leave home. You and I will be together for our whole lives.” He slipped forward and off the chair to kneel at her feet, picking up her hands. “Marry me, and be my love, my wife, my viscountess, my partner, my friend—today, tomorrow, and always. Not for me, because you owe me. Not for the girls, because they need a father. For you. Because you want to me as your love, your husband, your partner and your friend.”

Jessica could not speak for the sobs lodged in her throat. Happy sobs. Martin must have thought she was hesitating, for he said, “If you cannot say yes, at least do not say no. Let me court you. Let me prove I can be trusted.”

“Yes.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Yes, I have your permission to court you?”

“Yes, I will marry you, Martin. I love you, too. That is why I was going to Yorkshire. I love you, Martin.”

“And I love you. My love. My Jessica. My darling.” By the time he reached the last words, his mouth was on hers, and they spoke very little, except for endearments, directions, and exclamations of pleasure, for the next hour.

“I must return to my room, in case the children need me,” Jessica said, afterwards.

“I shall walk you back to your room,” Martin decided. “Marry me soon, darling. I sleep better when you are in the bed with me.”

“It is the same with me,” Jessica confided. “I will marry you as soon as it can be organised.”

### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Their first announcement was to Jessica's daughters, who were thrilled to be asked for their approval. After several intent and searching questions about Martin's attitude to daughters, his approach to punishing girls who had broken the rules, and how he behaved when he was angry, they declared themselves happy to give their consent.

Haverford was next, as head of Jessica's family. Jessica pointed out that she was an adult and could give her own consent, but she graciously conceded that she would like her brother's blessing.

Apparently, "as soon as it can be organised" only needed the support of the Duke of Haverford to turn into a mere week. A messenger to the Bishop of Oxford took a full day to ride in both directions, leaving at dawn and arriving back at Hollystone Hall in the dark, but his errand was successful. The duke's letter had produced the required results, and Martin and Jessica had a marriage licence.

The vicar from the local village was happy to officiate at the service, which was set for January the fifth, the day before the house party would finish—and, of course, no one was leaving until after the wedding.

There was not a lot for Martin to do. He wrote a few letters—to his steward, his butler, his housekeeper. They would prepare rooms for his new family, and what a surprise that would be for them. It was not common for a viscount to leave for London as a single man and return three months later as a married man with four daughters.

Once that task was accomplished, he sat down with Haverford to hammer out a marriage agreement that provided for Jessica if he predeceased her and for any children of the marriage—dowries for the girls and endowments for the sons after the first, since the first would be Viscount Tavistock after him. He'd have to include his three new Colyton daughters, too, since that brute Colyton had ignored them in his will, so only Catherine had an inheritance, and that—no doubt—only because Haverford had also negotiated Jessica's marriage agreement.

Martin could manage it. The Tavistock lands were modest, but Martin's uncle had diversified into canals, coal, and woollen mills, and Martin had continued those investments. He might not be as wealthy as Haverford, but he had enough to look after his family.

The first surprise was that Jessica had a fortune of her own. "I put the same terms into the agreement with Colyton," Haverford said. "The bulk of the dowry remains in trust, and Jessica retains it if the marriage breaks down. You and Jessica can draw on the income at any time, but can only draw on the principal if the pair of you and all three of the trustees agree. On Jessica's death, any remaining principal is left to Jessica's children, also in trust. If no children survive her, it goes to beneficiaries of her choice, which choice must also be ratified by the trustees."

Martin was impressed. "You have set it up well to protect your sister. I'm glad. That's a weight off my mind. It doesn't change what she should inherit from me, however. She should still have her rights as my wife if she outlives me."

Haverford smiled at him. "Good man," he said, which made Martin wonder what Colyton had said when he was in negotiations with Haverford.

Since both Martin and Haverford wanted to protect Jessica and the children, the session was both amicable and easy. Haverford had commandeered his mother's secretary, who was some sort of relation and therefore on holiday with the rest of the house party. But she assured Martin she was happy to make several fair copies of the

final agreement for their signature, and that she would have them ready the next day.

After that, it was just a matter of waiting until the wedding. The ladies were all busy. Apparently, Jessica had to have a new gown, and so did Martin's four new daughters. "We have nothing fit to wear," Johanna told Martin, in a voice that precisely mimicked the Duchess of Winshire. "Black is not suitable for a wedding." She slipped back into her own voice. "Besides, while I can wear Elizabeth's old dresses, and Elizabeth can wear Margaret's, Margaret's clothes are 'disgracefully too small'." Those last three words were clearly another quote from the august duchess.

All the ladies were contributing pieces of material and their own labour to create the necessary garments, and Martin and the other men would please stay out of their way.

At least Martin was able to see a bit of the younger three girls. Margaret was caught up in the sewing circles. She assured Martin she was having a marvellous time. "I like sewing, when it is with the other girls of my age, and we are making something that matters."

Johanna and Elizabeth were happy to be needed only for fittings, and to otherwise be free to spend their time as they pleased. All three had been absorbed into the schoolroom crowd, and were making firm friendships within it.

So, Martin saw his ladies only in company, and mostly at meals.

"Mother says we have worn black for long enough," said Johanna. "She says these will be only the first of our new gowns."

"I do not wish to be disrespectful to Grandmama," Elizabeth mused, "But I must say it will be pleasant to wear colours again."

"I will take you all shopping in York," Martin offered.

“When it comes to Margaret’s debut,” Chloe said, “my sister Susana will have some ideas, I’m certain.”

“And the silks,” Martin acknowledged. Their stepsister, Susana Arquette, was a gifted dressmaker, and also, through her mother, the heiress to the silk manufactory, Macclesfield Silks. He didn’t like to think of Margaret’s debut, however. She was so young!

Apparently, Jessica felt the same, for Margaret said, “Mother says I shall not debut this coming Season, and I do not need to debut the following Season, either, if I would prefer to wait until I am eighteen.”

Thank goodness for that ! “And you need be in no hurry to choose a husband,” Martin assured her. Eighteen was far too young to be making such an important decision, although of course Martin and Haverford would be there to look out for her interests.

“I did not debut until I was twenty-two,” Chloe said. “Of course, if it had been left to Uncle Swithin, I would never have debuted at all. Uncle Swithin did not approve of such goings on. Fortunately, he died.”

“Chloe,” Martin chided, trying not to laugh.

“Oh, Martin, I did not mean that the way it sounded, but you must admit Uncle Swithin was a killjoy.”

“Grandmama was a killjoy,” Johanna said. Which was undoubtedly true, though a proper father should probably chide her for the sentiment. Martin changed the subject, instead.

“Chloe debuted in York with her stepsisters,” Martin told the girls. “Seven of them. Chloe, the seven sisters, and their stepmother all made matches that Season.”

Then Martin, Chloe and Dom started telling stories from their York Season, and others around the table chimed in with their own stories, most from London but a few from Cheltenham or Bath. Margaret left the table looking thoughtful.

\* \* \*

They had done a magnificent job with the dressmaking, Martin decided, when he stood before the altar of the little parish church looking back down the aisle, with his new daughters walking towards him, first Johanna, then Elizabeth, then Margaret, each in a pretty winter gown in a cheerful jewel tone, blue, green, and red. Then came Jessica, all in gold, carrying Catherine dressed in white.

Martin could not take his eyes off her. How beautiful she was!

She reached his side, stopping to pass Catherine to Margaret. Then her hands were in his. At last. It seemed he had been waiting for her his entire life, and now they would be joined for a lifetime.

And so, they were. The wedding was short but sweet. Jessica said her vows in a clear determined voice, and he responded fervently, joyfully. The wedding breakfast was fun, and although Martin would have preferred to immediately carry Jessica off to the cottage on the grounds that the Duchess of Winshire had given them for the night, he understood the need to show his friends and family, and especially his new daughters, how much he appreciated their support.

The other house guests had all come up with an appropriate wedding gift, even though they were in the middle of the Warwickshire countryside with only a small village to provide shops. Martin liked the one from Dom and Chloe most of all.

“When you take your family home to Yorkshire,” Dom told him as they stood with glasses of champagne watching the impromptu dancing, “Chloe and I will travel in convoy with you, and take charge of the girls at each stop. And then they can come



home with us for the first fortnight. We've spoken to the girls, and they're all for it. Call it a wedding present from all of us."

Martin had had a lonely childhood under his uncle's stern and repressive eye, with only Chloe as company near his own age. Even as an adult, he did not make friends easily. Chloe and his Bigglesworth sisters had ignored his walls and been friends with him anyway. Dom, since he had married Chloe, had also become a friend.

And now, it seemed, he was married to the dearest friend of all, and through her, he had acquired a whole tribe of friends and family. And four daughters whom he already loved more than life. His wife walked up to him and he snagged her hand. "Are you happy?" he asked.

"More happy than I could have imagined possible," Jessica replied. "There is only one cloud on my horizon, Martin."

"Tell me what it is, and I shall try to banish it for you," he promised.

Jessica pouted, even as her eyes danced with humour. "I am going to have to thank Emily Mannering for my Christmas Rogue."

"Dash it," said Martin. "Porrit is never going to let me live this down."

T H E E N D