



# Unmasked by the Earl

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** She saved his life, but can she keep her secret?

Left for dead...

Charlie—Lady Charlotte Penrose and her twin brother Caden are traveling with their grandmother, to Bocka Morrow for the upcoming annual Witches' Ball. But their plans veer off course when they come to the rescue of a gentleman beset by cutthroat thieves. Transporting the wounded man to their home, Charlie can't help but be mesmerized by the handsome stranger with dark wavy hair and sky-blue eyes. She struggles to heed her grandmother's warning about getting too close to the stranger. To do so would endanger all those she holds dear.

Is she real or a dream?

From the moment he awakens from his feverish dream, Logan Thomas, the Earl of Fitzwater is enchanted by the beautiful young woman with silvery blonde hair and extraordinary cat-like green eyes. Logan is indebted to Charlie and her family for saving him. But once his wounds are healed, he must return to Cornwall to take the reins of a title and estate he never wanted. Being drawn to Charlie and agreeing to escort her to an upcoming ball was never part of his plan.

Because of Charlie's growing feelings for Logan, she must tell him the truth about who she is. But when evil comes back to haunt them, can Charlie and Logan find their way, or will they be forever lost in the darkness?

**Total Pages (Source):** 13

## CHAPTER 1

### LATE OCTOBER 1814 ~ ON THE ROAD TO CORNWALL

A raven's piercing cry, followed by an owl's "hoot," startled Logan Thomas, the Fifth Earl of Fitzwater, as he and his valet made their way on the Great South-West Road. Their destination in Cornwall was close. The sun had dropped behind the hills an hour earlier, leaving behind a dark sky with only the promise of a three-quarter moon to light their way. Logan didn't expect to see the source of the noise; still, he scanned the dusky sky. Four years he'd been away. "It'll be good to get home, but not for this. Never for this."

Word of the death of Gilbert, his older brother, had made him an earl but was received weeks after the funeral—too late to be there or say goodbye. Now he had to return home and claim a title he never wanted. Three years had separated them in age, and the war had separated them by land and sea, but regardless of the distance, they had always been close friends as well as brothers. They'd always included each other in everything they did—whether it was fishing, buying horses and livestock, or having a pint with friends at The Fresh Flask in town, they'd done it together. For the first time in his life, Logan felt truly alone. He'd never wanted Gil's title and had been content to make his way in life as a soldier.

Gil had recently become betrothed and died without issue. Despite having resisted his mother's matchmaking efforts for years, Gil relented after their father died, and he became Earl. While he'd conceded to his mother's wishes, the wedding had still been weeks away. Logan wasn't ready to marry. But without an heir secured, Logan would be constantly dodging his mother's efforts. She would be as determined to see him

wed as she had been with Gil. Despite that, it would be good to see his sister, Beth, again.

He held up his hand, signaling Bronson to stop. "I hear voices and they sound close. Let's make ourselves scarce," he whispered.

"Oh, Lord, I hope it's not highwaymen," the valet whispered back. "Remember the farmer that arrived when we were leaving the Rooster's Inn warnin' us about the rash of robberies on this road? I wouldn't have minded a brawl after a pint or two, but not afore."

"Aye, I remember." All Logan wanted was a hot meal, a warm bath, and a clean pallet for the night. He never backed down from a fight, but he never went looking for one either.

"And the horses are exhausted," Bronson said, reaching down and petting his horse's neck. "Poor Moonbeam. Looks like you won't be getting your oats until later."

The horse nickered in reply, bobbing her head.

"If we're quick, we can hide up there," Logan said, pointing to a path obscured by large mulberry bushes. "The rocks and undergrowth will provide cover."

"You always had eyesight like an owl. How in the heck did you spot those bushes? It's as dark as pitch." Bronson stilled. "I don't hear carriage wheels, but the horses...they sound almost upon us."

Before they could take cover, six masked men on horseback, all dressed in black, swarmed Logan and Bronson from both sides.

"Closer than I imagined," Bronson muttered.

“Yes,” Logan whispered. He felt beneath his greatcoat for his pistol, finding it strapped to his side, beneath his shirt. At least he’d remembered to load it.

“Stand and deliver,” the tallest of the six ordered, clearly asserting himself as the group’s leader and waving his gun. “Don’t try anything funny or I’ll use this.”

A sudden breeze carrying the pungent odor of stale grog and body odor from the thieves’ direction assaulted Logan’s nostrils. Silently, he took notice of the bandits. The men were unshaven, with various degrees of unkept beards and tattered clothing. Their horses looked to be in a bad state, with ribs showing and matted manes. Several had tattered tails, no doubt from being bitten by the more dominant ones—a sure sign they were poorly cared for.

Bloody hell! It was clear the highwaymen wanted fresh horses. Well, he had no intention of obliging them. Justice had been a gift from his father and had survived the battles on the continent. Logan had no desire to see him injured—or lose him to a bunch of miscreants who were too lazy to do a decent day’s work. He shrugged. “We have nothing of any value,” he called out, stalling.

One thief sat on a light-colored mare. He moved the mare forward a step and glared at Logan. “An unlikely story, my lord,” he ground out. “Your cultured voice and air of authority tell me different. Both of you get down from the horses.”

Logan glanced at Bronson before casually reaching into his pocket.

“Put yer hands where ’oi can see ’em,” the man demanded.

Instead, Logan withdrew a handkerchief and pretended to mop sweat from his brow. He was going to have to fight. “If you intend to steal my horse, I should warn you, Justice will not allow it. He has fought beside me on the battlefield and will not leave my side. The other horse is his mare. They are bonded.”

A second bandit straddled upon an almost sway-back, black hag, straggled forward next to the first man. "Rubbish. I ain't never seen a horse that cared who rode him," he said, spitting a mouthful of brown tobacco juice on the road. "Ye 'eard what the boss said." He nodded to the apparent leader. "Now get down from yer horses."

The ridiculous look of the burly man on the swayback almost made Logan laugh. But he held his tongue. If he fired a shot, he was certain Justice would remain beneath him.

Two other men got off their horses and approached Logan. One carried a club and the other a rope, most likely not the only weapons they had.

Bronson gave an almost imperceptible nod to his lower left coat pocket, signaling to Logan that he was armed. As his former batman, Bronson had been in battle, even though Logan couldn't recall ever seeing the man shoot a pistol. Despite that, Logan never doubted Bronson's bravery. He'd witnessed the older man run into the thick of battle time and again to rescue a wounded soldier.

"Climb down from the horses and back away," the leader said again in his raspy voice.

As much as he hated to do it, Logan slid down from his horse, but with an almost imperceptible shake of his head to Bronson, told him to remain on Moonbeam.

"I would urge you to heed my warning about Justice," Logan said calmly as the tobacco-spitting bandit pulled out a knife and reached for the reins of Bronson's horse. Justice turned and showed his teeth, then reared up, knocking the thief away from Moonbeam. Before the ruffian could get back up, Justice's front legs came down fast and furious. A loud crack echoed in the night, followed by a howl of pain, as the thief's leg had clearly been broken. The man's knife clattered to the ground as he yowled and writhed.

As the thieves had been watching the altercation unfold, Logan had loosened his cravat, looped the fabric through the handle of his almost-full canteen, and created a blackjack. From the corner of his eye, he caught sight of a second attacker with a huge knife that gleamed in the moonlight, sneaking up on Justice's other side. Logan spun low and swung the blackjack into the brute's chin.

The attacker staggered but remained standing. Turning in Logan's direction, the ruffian ripped off his black cape, revealing a thread-bare shirt straining with every movement of the barbarian's wide shoulders and powerful muscles. "Ye will die fer that," he growled, moving a step closer.

"Just try me," Logan said through clenched teeth.

"Logan, behind you!" Bronson shouted. Logan whipped around to see another ruffian about to swing a huge tree branch at his head. Kicking out, he landed a blow in the thief's midsection, knocking him down. Logan heard Bronson curse and struggle as two of the other thieves tried to wrestle him off Moonbeam. He turned and saw Justice let out a furious snort and with his hind legs, he kicked one highwayman in the back. The thief screamed in pain as he fell to the ground. Logan grinned as Justice was about to stomp on the downed thief when another thief distracted him. A few seconds later, he felt a sharp pain in his midsection.

Logan swung at his attacker and connected with his fist, but felt himself falter. He shook his head, trying to stay alert. He couldn't recall ever being hit as hard as that, not even on the battlefield. Shots were fired, and he heard the scream of a horse. Justice? Logan strained to see when another shot went off, and something knocked him flat on his back. His arm and his gut hurt like hell.

Blinking to clear his vision, he thought he saw two figures in dark clothing arrive and jump into the fray, along with a black cat with white markings. The cat leaped on Justice's back as the horse reared up with a swift kick at one of the thieves attempting

to take Moonbeam from under Bronson. Bronson got a shot off but appeared to miss.

A cap fell from one of the black-cloaked figures and Logan's breath caught at the sight of long, blonde hair that glowed like silver in the moonlight, framing a pale oval face with striking green cat-like eyes. A woman? Logan tried to shout a warning to her, but it came out sounding like a wheezing cough. He tried to get up but for some reason, he couldn't get his legs to move. Darkness was pressing in around him, and his vision began to blur. His last thought was that he must save her.

"You cannot have my horse," she heard a man yell. Lady Charlotte Penrose, Charlie to her friends, dodged a shot fired by a man on the horse and silently thanked her lucky stars for her powerful hearing. The man— Bronson , she'd heard his friend call him—was defending himself. When his friend's stallion reared, Bronson's horse followed suit. Bronson fired off a shot, but it hit a tree across the road. Another shot fired by one of the highwaymen felled his friend.

"Behind you, Caden," Charlie yelled, deftly ducking a punch thrown by a shorter thief. She glanced at the crumpled man lying on the side of the road. The slight rise of his chest let her know he still lived.

"Charlie, look at that," her brother whispered as he leaped over the wounded man and picked up something lying next to him. In a flash, he stepped around her, slinging a bottle attached to a...wait...was that a cravat ?

Her brother turned and flashed a brilliant smile. Caden enjoyed nothing better than an opportunity to use his cunning fighting skills—something he frequently did at Gentleman Jackson's when in London. Even though they were fraternal twins, they were as different as night and day. Caden enjoyed fighting, whereas she only fought when necessary.

Using the improvised blackjack, her brother aimed for the closest thief and whacked

him behind the knees, causing him to crumple with a squeal of pain. It gave Charlie a chance to leverage the low-hanging branch and launch herself onto the back of the horse occupied by the supposed leader, sending him into the path of her brother and his very effective weapon. In the ensuing chaos, one man got off a shot, which ricocheted off a rock near the wounded gentleman. With any luck, she could get to him soon.

What seemed like an hour later but was no doubt just a few minutes, the skirmish ended, and Charlie ran to the man who was lying on the side of the road. She knelt and gently checked for a pulse in his neck, relief washing over her when she realized he wasn't dead. "My lord, can you speak to me?" she whispered, having sensed right away that the injured man was a titled gentleman. She put her ear close to his mouth and heard an almost inaudible groan.

"He needs a doctor," she cried to her brother. "His breathing is faint."

"We'll get him to the carriage," Caden said, nodding to the man called Bronson, who was helping him tie up the thieves. You need to change back into your dress," her brother urged her via his thoughts. You can't do that out here. Go into the carriage and blink or wiggle your finger or something.

I'll do it later, Charlie nodded, forgetting that she'd magically changed into men's attire in the carriage under the watchful eye of their grandmother before she and Caden had launched their surprise attack on the highwaymen. Well, she'd have to magically change back once they were safely away from Mr. Bronson. Her grandmother could cover the wounded gentleman's eyes.

She wished she could levitate the injured man into the carriage or simply send him to the townhouse in a blink of an eye. But her grandmother would be angry for her reckless use of magic in front of mortals who weren't in their trusted circle. As witches went, Charlie was powerful, with several special skills that included an



ability to move objects and people with her mind. She couldn't levitate animals, at least not without their permission. She'd learned that the hard way. When she was ten, she tried to lift Chapelle off the bed and was roundly chastised by her feline friend. Animals, unlike humans, Chapelle had scolded, should be treated with respect and sensitivity.

Remarkably, Caden...even though he was her twin...had no powers that Charlie knew of unless you counted his ability to communicate with her and his athletic prowess as powers. Like her father, he was mortal.

Charlie tended to the wounded man, ripping his shirt sleeves, and wrapping his wounds as Caden, with the help of Mr. Bronson, finished trussing up the unconscious highwaymen into a neat pile, with hands and feet tied and mouths gagged.

"My lady," Mr. Bronson said in a low voice, "I have never in my life seen a woman fight like you."

And not likely again. "Thank you, Mr. Bronson. I only hope you will not share that with anyone," she said with a nervous chuckle.

"Aye, my lady. I understand. I doubt the highwaymen will have much to say about you, in any case, given that you and your brother subdued them before they even realized what hit them. They may, however, wonder about the cat riding my friend's horse. May I ask where you are headed?"

"Oh!" she said. "That is Chapelle. I've had her since childhood, and she has always had a special bond with horses, almost as if they understand each other."

"I see," Bronson said.

"We were on our way to Bocka Morrow for the annual ball," Charlie added as her

grandmother's carriage arrived, guarded by two footmen. As she said it, she had an idea and glanced at her grandmother, who was watching from the carriage window. Grandmama, who had a keen intuitive sense and could communicate her thoughts with Charlie, nodded her consent. "My family has a home there, and there is plenty of room," Charlie offered, thankful for her grandmother's kindness. "We would welcome you both to rest and recover before continuing on your journey."

"We are most grateful for your generosity, my lady," Bronson said. "Please thank your grandmother for her kindness. In the meantime, I'll help your brother take these thieves to the local sheriff."

Caden nodded. "I'd already asked one of our other footmen to ride ahead to the sheriff when we found out what was happening. They should be here soon."

"Good. I wouldn't want to see these thieves escape after your daring efforts in capturing them," Bronson said, flashing a grin.

She wanted to ask Mr. Bronson details about his wounded friend—his name, for one thing. But she was worried about the gleam she'd seen in the man's eyes. Charlie wondered if the older man also had some magical ability. He seemed to possess an uncanny shrewdness that gave her pause.

As she directed the footmen to carry the wounded gentleman into the carriage, Charlie pondered at what would transpire once they reached her family's townhouse. Whether Mr. Bronson decided to tell his friend what he perceived was another matter, but Charlie could not contend with it now. Her primary concern was getting the wounded man to their home in Bocka Morrow before it was too late.

She leaned back and smiled as a plan began to form.

## Page 2

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### CHAPTER 2

Charlie leaned against the black leather squabs in the carriage and gazed at the injured man lying in the seat across from her. His eyes were closed, but she remembered them as sky blue. Even with a well-sprung carriage, the road was rugged, and the poor man groaned each time the conveyance hit a bump.

“I hope the sheriff gets there soon. I don’t want Caden guarding those brutes on his own,” the Dowager Countess Winnie Penrose lamented. “Caden should have ridden ahead to fetch the doctor.”

“I already sent a footman ahead to fetch the doctor,” Charlie told her grandmother. “And Caden is not alone, Mr. Bronson is with him. Besides, those thieves were still unconscious when we left, and you didn’t see how Caden had them all tied up. Honestly, I don’t know where Caden learned how to tie knots like that. There is no way those thieves are getting loose.”

Her gaze returned to the man stretched out on the seat across from her and her grandmother. “It looks like he is bleeding again. I don’t think the binding I made from my shift is holding.” Drat! The original bindings she’d made from the gentleman’s fine shirt sleeves had been drenched with blood, and so she had to act swiftly. She thought she’d made the fresh bindings tight enough to keep the pressure on his wound. She lifted the bottom of her traveling dress, having changed back in the carriage, while her grandmother covered the poor man’s eyes. Exposing the torn underskirt, she was about to rip another section, but her grandmother stayed her hand.

“I can help you double the bindings, and you won’t have to tear up the rest of your

shift,” the dowager said. She leaned down and opened a small box beneath her seat and retrieved a tightly wound roll of white cloth. “Here, use this.”

Charlie grinned. “You just happened to have these in your carriage, and you said nothing earlier?”

Her grandmother shrugged. “My dear, one needs to be prepared. As far as not saying anything, you seemed determined, and you had already begun ripping at your shift before I could stop you, so I thought it best to let you finish. But now, I’m afraid you will be completely without a shift if I allow that to continue. Not a suitable appearance for a young lady.”

Charlie smiled at her very proper grandmother. Witch or not, Grandmama was a lady through and through. The two of them made quick work of rebinding the man’s wounded arm. But lifting him to bind up his knife wound was another matter. She turned to her grandmother and was about to ask for permission to use her gifts when the older woman anticipated her request yet again and whispered, “Very well, but just this once.”

Charlie smiled and kissed her grandmother on the cheek. She turned back to the man and noted his eyes were closed, but she didn’t want to take any chances. Covering his eyes just in case, she wiggled her index finger, making the bandage swirl snugly around the man’s muscled torso. She knotted the bandage and leaned back to inspect her work. “I think that should hold him until the doctor can see him.”

The old woman nodded as she studied the wounded man for a moment. “He’s a big fellow, isn’t he? Looks strong as an ox, I’m sure he’ll mend quickly. Handsome too, wouldn’t you say?”

Charlie’s hands trembled at her grandmother’s words. She leaned over and fussed with the knot of the binding on the chest wound, avoiding the dowager’s all-too-

shrewd eyes. Of course, Charlie thought him most handsome, but she wouldn't admit that to Grandmama.

"I feel for the dear boy," the dowager continued, "but I don't think his pain is overwhelming—which is a good thing. Despite the rough road, he's managed to remain asleep."

"I hope so," Charlie said, as she checked the knot on his arm once more to make certain it was secure as well. "There was an awful lot of blood."

"Well, it's a good thing we have little farther to travel."

After a few more moments of fussing with the bindings, Charlie finally sat back in the seat next to her grandmother. "Do you plan to tell Mama and Papa everything?" she blurted. She was thankful that her parents weren't there, at least. They'd decided to visit her newly married sister, Caroline, in Kent before traveling on to Bocka Morrow. Carrie, who was pregnant, lived a good distance from their family's home in Cornwall, and since twins ran in both their family and Carrie's husband's family, their mother had insisted on checking in with her before traveling on to their townhouse.

"Mmm. I suspect your mother has already seen the incident as it was taking place," the dowager whispered. "She cannot resist peeking in her looking glass. But I'll wager she's said nothing to your father...yet."

"Could you speak to Mama?" Charlie begged. "Please convince her not to tell Papa?"

The dowager gave an exasperated sigh. "Charlotte, you know your mother and father have a special bond. They never lie to each other. Your mother knows that your father objects when you use your... skills in public. Of course, she will tell him. Secrets in a marriage are never good. You would do well to remember that, my

darling girl.”

“But I didn’t... Not really,” Charlie said in her defense. “Besides, it was a matter of life and death.”

Her grandmother gave her that look that Papa called the, should I believe my eyes or your lies look.

It was a look Charlie knew better than to ignore. She swallowed. “Yes, well. I suppose there was that pistol I zapped out of one of the highwayman’s hands just before he fired a second time at the poor gentleman,” she whispered. “But that was only because I had my hands full.” She gazed at the deliciously handsome man lying on the bench seat across from them and only resisted the urge to reach out and ruffle his dark wavy hair by sitting on her hands.

The dowager cupped Charlie’s cheek. “My dear, you have a heart as big as the moon. I’m sure your mama will be circumspect about this lapse in judgment given the circumstances.”

“And you will speak to Mama when we see her?”

“I will do what I can,” the dowager replied. “We shall have to see how your mother reacts when she and your father arrive. Right now, they want to make sure all is well with your sister.” The old woman patted Charlie’s hand. “Now, sit back and calm yourself. Cuddle Chapelle or something.” She looked around. “Where is that cat?”

Charlie couldn’t help but grin as she nodded toward the man across from her. “Chapelle is riding his horse, Justice, behind us—with a footman, of course.” She paused as her gaze took in the gentleman’s sleeping visage. High cheekbones, a strong square jaw with a dimple in the center that she longed to touch. And those tantalizing azure eyes that left her impatient to see them again. “I wish I knew more

about him.”

Her grandmother gave her a sly smile. “There are things, my dear, that despite my advanced age, I understand.” She lowered her voice again and whispered, “However, this mortal world we live in does not. And the man lying on that bench hails from that world—even if his beauty is godly. You simply must...”

“But he would have died, Grandmama,” Charlie persisted. “I couldn’t allow that to happen.”

“We both know you could have intervened without giving yourself away, darling grandchild. Now we must try to find out if he did indeed see everything and decipher his attitude toward you. The man is mortal, after all, and may not understand our... ways . And for goodness’ sake! Tell your cat to hide herself in the horse’s mane. What if she’s seen by someone we pass on the road or in town?”

Her grandmother’s whisper became almost shrill, and Charlie recognized the need to repair the situation immediately. She closed her eyes and sent Chapelle a quick thought message to behave herself.

Don’t worry, Charlie, I’ll be as meek as a mouse.

Charlie smiled at the cat’s cheeky reply. Chapelle was as droll as she was clever. For the moment, she felt grateful the wounded man was unconscious and couldn’t hear their conversation. At least, she hoped he could not. She hung her head and studied her hands. “I apologize, Grandmama. You are right. I should have considered the consequences... But there is something special about him that calls to me.” She raised her head and looked at her grandmother. “Am I being foolish?”

“What I see is a young woman with a romantic soul,” her grandmother said. “However, I do agree with you, there is something about him. But take care, or all

that you are hoping to achieve may unravel before it's even begun."

Of course, the dowager knew what Charlie was thinking. Nothing got past Grandmama...or Mama, for that matter. Charlie needed to be less obvious, or she would have no chance to stay a step ahead of her parents. "You will help me, then?"

The dowager smiled. "Of course. After all, you are my favorite granddaughter."

"Grandmama," Charlie said with a giggle before hugging the old woman's neck, "you said that to Caroline just before she left on her honeymoon last year."

Her Grandmother shrugged. "Can I help it that I have two favorite granddaughters?"

The horses slowed, and her grandmother peered out the carriage window. "It seems we have reached the edge of town. It shouldn't be much longer before we arrive at the townhouse."

Charlie smiled at the dowager's use of the word "townhouse" in reference to the massive three-storied mansion that the locals had dubbed Rose Manse. Built of rose-colored stone, Charlie thought it was the most beautiful house in the world, next to their family estate in Cornwall. Even though they visited Bocka Morrow once a year for the Drakos' annual ball, Charlie always felt at home.

Ten minutes later, the call of a raven perched above the front door announced their arrival.

"I wondered where Sven had flown to," her grandmother murmured under her breath. "He's a very protective bird."

"Sven is always one step ahead of us, Grandmama." Her grandmother's bird could be unnerving, but she supposed no more so than Chapelle, who at this moment was



sitting astride Justice, hopefully, hidden in his mane.

“He’s extremely beneficial to have on these trips,” Grandmama acknowledged.

Gas lamps cast a welcoming glow from the entrance as a heavy oak door opened and a tall, thin man with sparse hair stepped out, immediately taking charge. With an uncanny ability to assess things, Harrison scanned the carriage, and the horses stopped behind it. Discreetly, from his place at the door, Harrison signaled for the stable hand to take the horses to the mews. He then ordered a small army of liveried footmen to assist Charlie and the dowager from the carriage, carry the wounded gentleman inside, and remove the luggage to their rooms. Charlie was in awe that the butler had seen to everything in the span of a few moments.

As Charlie and her grandmother reached the top step, the wiry man bowed. “Welcome, Lady Penrose, Lady Charlotte. Doctor Thakur arrived moments ago and is waiting in the blue guest room to see to the gentleman.”

“Good, good!” the dowager said. “I appreciate your usual thoroughness. Make sure the staff are gentle with the poor young man. His wounds have us quite concerned.”

“Yes, my lady. And I will have the doctor examine the gentleman’s horse once he’s attended to his patient,” Harrison added.

An hour later, Charlie emerged from her room, feeling refreshed after a bath and a change of dresses—one more suitable for a late dinner. Her stomach growled, reminding her it would be some time before they could dine. She paused outside the guestroom, wanting so much to go inside and speak to the doctor as he tended the wounded man, but Grandmama would frown upon that. She would have to be patient and wait for permission.

Making her way downstairs, Charlie knocked on the parlor door and waited for the

dowager to bid her enter. Stepping inside the cheery room, she approached her grandmother, who was reviewing correspondence. The older woman looked up and gave a wry smile. "It's hard to believe this is only a holiday home. One might think with this much correspondence we lived here year-round."

"Harrison always takes care of having the mail redirected when he knows we are coming," Charlie admitted.

"Hmm. Yes. Not much gets past that one," the dowager said, reading a missive and placing it back on the desk. "How long will your brother be gone?"

"Caden should be back soon. He planned to accompany the sheriff and his men when they picked up the highwaymen."

"Good. I need to make him aware of a few things," the dowager muttered.

"I'm starving and wondering about dinner," Charlie said, as she watched her grandmother shove a small address book into the drawer of her desk. The rose-themed parlor was large enough to accommodate both her mother's and grandmother's needs. With subtle hints of gold in the off-white wallpaper, the space looked more expansive than it was. Rose-colored drapes framed a large picture window in the center of the front wall. To the left sat a tall, maple secretary, and to the right, an oversized gold and white settee with three matching chairs provided a cozy sitting area.

"You worked up an appetite fending off the bandits with your brother. But we will wait for Caden to return before we dine."

Charlie nodded, hoping Caden would hurry.

"Now then," the dowager continued. "Sit, and I shall tell you all of what I have

learned.”

Charlie followed her grandmother to the settee and sat beside her.

“Harrison has informed me he spoke with Mr. Bronson upon his arrival. Caden had evidently insisted that one footman accompany Mr. Bronson here as soon as the sheriff and his men arrived to haul those ruffians away. Apparently, the highwaymen have been plaguing the main road into Bocka Morrow for months. The sheriff had been unable to apprehend them until you and Caden did his work for him.” The dowager harrumphed. “I always considered Sheriff Slothman to be lackadaisical, but I realize he is as incompetent as he is lazy.”

“It’s a good thing Caden is there to make sure the sheriff locks the highwaymen in the local gaol,” Charlie said.

“Yes, but what will happen after Caden leaves? Will the sheriff send for the magistrate? He can’t keep them locked up in town indefinitely.

“When Mama and Papa get here, Papa will step in and make certain Sheriff Slothman does his due diligence,” Charlie said. She was eager to hear more about their handsome houseguest upstairs. “What else did Harrison say?”

The dowager regarded her with shrewd eyes. “Harrison also found out who our injured guest is. He is Lord Logan Thomas, the Fifth Earl of Fitzwater. From what I know of the Fitzwater family, they have the Prince Regent’s ear and are very influential.” She looked up at Charlie. “Not a man to be taken lightly, if you ken my meaning. And based on the seriousness of the earl’s wounds, he and Mr. Bronson will remain as our guests for at least a week, perhaps longer. I have instructed Harrison to make certain the members of the household staff understand the situation and behave accordingly around Lord Fitzwater and Mr. Bronson, and to be careful of what they say, even if they think no one is around to overhear it.”

“Yes, undoubtedly you are right about their need to stay and the importance of the staff being careful.” Charlie swallowed hard. Is Grandmama unhappy with me? “I know it will be a challenge. But it could not be avoided. We had to help.”

“Yes, darling. I know you did,” her grandmother said with a tender smile. “But you must remember, mortals view us with suspicion and hostility in this world. So many of our sisters have been tortured and put to death as recently as my lifetime. We must be careful with our gifts.”

Grandmother was right. Charlie worried her bottom lip, knowing her mother had most likely seen everything that had transpired through her looking glass. But Charlie wouldn’t know if Mama had shared her vision with Papa—until she saw her. There were but a handful of days until the ball, so she wouldn’t be in suspense for very long. Mama had a hard time not saying what was on her mind and would likely address the subject upon their arrival.

“That reminds me,” the dowager continued. “The modiste will be here the day after tomorrow with the dresses we commissioned when we were here last. Your mother’s idea of having our dresses made so far in advance was a smart one. Had we waited, we might have missed out on that delicious opalescent silk. I, for one, cannot wait to see the gowns.”

“I cannot wait to see Rose,” Charlie said, not caring about the fancy fabric. “She’ll be here the same day as the modiste, before the fitting, I hope.”

“I’m sure she will be, dear.”

“Yes, and it was nice of her parents to allow her to join us for this year’s ball. Otherwise, she would not have been able to come.” Rose was her best friend and had been since the cradle. She couldn’t wait to tell her all about the skirmish with the highwaymen and their daring rescue of the handsome earl.

Her grandmother regarded her with an arched brow. “Doctor Thakur is still with the earl,” she said, clearly reading her thoughts. “I think we should discuss the situation and decide how you plan to explain it to your parents. Remember, less is more. Your parents should be here before the ball, so there is plenty of time to speak to them.”

“Yes, Grandmama,” Charlie said, looking down and examining her fingernails. She hated when she upset her grandmother—the one person she could always count on to be her champion.

“I believe,” the dowager continued, adjusting her spectacles on the end of her nose as she sorted through the invitations from the silver salver, “This couldn’t be helped. And based on what we now understand, these bandits have been plaguing this area for months.” The dowager peered above the top of the glasses at Charlie. “You and Caden did the community a tremendous service, although if they knew how you did it, their appreciation would sour. Mortals can be so fickle.”

“Yes...particularly when witchcraft is involved,” Charlie added. “Although I will never understand why. We only use our powers for good. And as you know, I used my human abilities to fight Grandmama. I didn’t twitch my nose or anything.”

The dowager countess gave her an incredulous look. “Charlotte, you would not have that fighting ability without your special skills. I suggest we divest of these excuses and strategize.”

To Charlie’s way of thinking, knowledge was necessary to strategize. And she wanted—needed—to know what her parents knew...and she was desperate to know what the earl had seen, and Mr. Bronson, for that matter. That would make it easier. Grandmama also had a looking glass and could see things, just as Mama did, and she desperately wanted to ask to use it. Charlie had to bite her tongue to keep from asking her. While her own powers were impressive, they were practical. Aside from her ability to communicate telepathically, which many of them shared, Charlie could

blink and make things move, start a fire, create a gust of wind—that sort of thing, but there were skills she needed to practice having better control. She didn't have a tool like a looking glass that acted as a window into another place or time. It would have to be her grandmother's idea to look, and Charlie had already asked too much of her.

As she deliberated, a knock sounded on the door of the parlor. Jumping up, she ran to open it. "Harrison, is there any word about the earl?"

"Lady Charlotte," Harrison said, stepping into the room. "Lady Penrose," he said, turning to address the dowager. "Doctor Thakur informed me he plans to stop by and speak to you when he finishes tending to the patient."

"We will await the doctor in here, Harrison," the dowager said, giving Charlie a meaningful look.

"Yes, my lady," the butler said, giving a quick bow before leaving and closing the door behind him.

"Thakur's one of the few doctors around here that doesn't believe in leaches and bleeding for every ailment." The dowager sighed. "We were lucky to get him, and so quickly."

"Yes, lucky indeed, Grandmama." Charlie had begun to pace, so agitated she was.

"Sit down, my dear girl, and be patient. Some things in life do not move as fast as you would like."

Charlie nodded and sat back down, but her thoughts were swirling in her mind as she worried about the fate of the earl and what bringing him into their home could mean.

### CHAPTER 3

Logan drifted in and out of consciousness. He heard people speaking around him, but he didn't recognize the voices. Earlier, he thought he'd heard women's voices, but right now he only heard a man's voice, and it wasn't his valet's.

Where is Bronson? Something was very wrong. The last he recalled, he and Bronson were approaching the village of Bocka Morrow in Cornwall, where they'd planned to stay the night and rest—but they were set upon by highwaymen. They had only needed another day to reach his home.

Snatches of memory shot through his mind. Green cat eyes gazing down at him surrounded by a curtain of long, blonde hair. Two figures dressed in black fighting alongside him and Bronson against the highwaymen. A black and white cat sitting on his horse. Bronson's warning shouts...and pain—lots of pain. Surely, this was some sort of strange dream brought on by too much ale. Bronson and he must have overindulged at the inn. He would open his eyes and it would be over. He would find himself in a room at the inn...where people weren't hovering around, discussing him.

But he didn't recall making it to the lodgings. So where am I? Logan tried to calm his racing thoughts and listened.

"Clean his wounds twice a day," a man with a deep voice was saying. "Here is a tin of salve to use before the bandages are reapplied. When he wakes, give him the laudanum drops for the pain. His injuries are deep and need time to heal. But he's young and strong. Sleep is the best thing for him."

“Dr. Thakur, will he be able to get up from his bed and walk in three or four days?” an older female voice asked.

Logan wished he could get up and walk right now. But he was as weak as a newborn colt. It sounded like his presence was taking up room meant for other guests.

“He will, but I cannot say if it will be a few days or longer. He’s healthy and should survive these wounds easily enough if he stays in bed and rests as long as necessary ,” Thakur emphasized.

Logan decided to ask Bronson to hire a comfortable coach to take them the rest of the way home. That is, once he found out where Bronson was. Obviously, he couldn’t ride Justice. What happened to my horse? More memories flooded him. Men swathed in black surrounded them. Justice kicking out, fighting back. Blood. Logan remembered seeing blood on Justice.

He groaned and uttered, “Just...” But nothing else came out. Frustrated, he moved his head back and forth. Logan needed to ask about his horse, but his tongue felt too thick; he couldn’t form the words.

“There you are, Mr. Bronson. Perhaps you can speak to Lord Fitzwater. He’ll recognize your voice,” a young female voice said. It was lilting, with a songbird quality...beautiful. An image of blonde hair gleaming like silver in the moonlight and emerald green eyes flashed in his mind once more, and he wondered if the lovely voice belonged to the same woman who’d fought off the thieves. But he was being nonsensical. It must have been a dream. When had he ever known a woman to dress in men’s clothes and fight a group of brutes with the skill of a combat soldier?

A man cleared his throat. “My lord, it’s Bronson. We were attacked by highwaymen, and you were shot and stabbed. We were fortunate to have been rescued. At the moment, we are staying at Lord and Lady Penrose’s home in Bocka Morrow.



Squeeze my hand if you understand what I am saying, sir.”

Finally! Someone who made sense. Logan squeezed Bronson’s hand. He remembered that name. Lord Penrose had been a close ally of his father’s in Parliament. They had worked together on various important road acts, including the turnpike. Logan nodded and managed to crack open his eyes. He lay in a mahogany post bed with a dark green canopy.

He blinked several times, and his vision became clearer as he noticed the paintings of hunting parties hanging on the wall beyond the foot of the bed. He shifted his gaze and counted four people sitting or standing in the room—and then he saw her. There couldn’t be another that looked like her. My God! She is real! A delicate beauty with long blonde hair and the most mesmerizing green eyes he’d ever seen looked back at him from the right side of the bed, closest to the window.

“Lord Fitzwater, it’s good to have you join us,” the now familiar, deep-voiced man said with levity. “I’m Dr. Thakur. You’ve had a ball removed from your arm and a deep stab wound repaired on your lower chest, just above the stomach. My best advice is that you rest and allow your wounds to mend.”

Logan tried to form a reply, but his darn tongue wasn’t cooperating. He managed to say something, but it sounded like a garbled mess to his ears, and he was sure no one had understood him.

“Try to rest, my lord. The medicine will wear off soon, and you’ll be able to speak clearly again,” Thakur said.

Bronson stood there, nervously squeezing his floppy brown hat in his hands. “My lord, allow me to make the introductions,” he said, indicating the older woman. “This is the Dowager Countess Penrose. And the young woman next to her is her granddaughter, Lady Charlotte Penrose.”

That's who they were calling Charlie , he suddenly realized, but wondered if he had imagined the black breeches and shirt. He nodded, indicating for Bronson to continue. At a minimum, the introductions were a pleasant distraction from the pain, which plagued him greatly.

"And you've already met Dr. Thakur," Bronson said. "He fixed you up and didn't do any bleeding like other doctors do."

Dr. Thakur chuckled. "It's true that I don't agree with some of the medical treatments practiced by some of my fellow doctors. I learned my techniques on the battlefield."

Logan was grateful for the doctor's skills.

"And mind your stitches," Dr. Thakur added. "I can't claim to have as fine a hand at needlepoint as the ladies present, but I think I did a fair job of stitching you up."

"Aye," Bronson added, his eyes crinkling with humor. "The good news is you're going to be all right in a few days, and then we can continue home."

"The knife missed your heart and other internal organs," Thakur said in a serious tone. "You're a lucky man, my lord. But I must emphasize that the next twenty-four hours will be critical, and you must rest to prevent putrefaction. That means staying in this bed. You may experience a fever overnight, but you are in excellent hands here, my lord. I will return tomorrow to check on your progress."

Logan's eyes were heavy. Even though he didn't feel tired, he struggled to keep them open. Logan wanted to know more about her . Lady Charlotte Penrose. She may have saved his life.

The dowager cleared her throat. "I will let Cook know you're awake. She's fixed a special beef broth for you that will help you regain your strength. We have taken your

clothes to be washed and mended, so you are wearing my grandson, Caden's, nightshirt. He's about your size." A maid stepped into the room. "Millie, can you remain here with Lady Charlotte?"

"Yes, my lady," the maid said, before taking a seat in the far corner of the room and pulling some sewing from her pocket.

"I need to check on Moonbeam and Justice," Bronson said. "Justice was shot, but he's doing fine. He fought like a devil, he did."

"I will follow you to the stable, Mr. Bronson," Dr. Thakur said, snapping his black bag closed. "I promised to look in on the horses before I left."

Logan grimaced. Justice had been wounded, so he hadn't imagined that either. He hoped it truly was only a flesh wound and that Bronson wasn't making light of it to keep him from worrying. He would worry in any case.

"As I mentioned, I'll be back tomorrow to check on you," the doctor said over his shoulder as he disappeared out the door.

Logan was surprised that the young woman was willing to stay with him and was glad her grandmother had been willing to let her. If only he could talk. Hell, he could barely keep his eyes open.

Lady Charlotte Penrose... Charlie .... He remembered her brother calling her that. He liked it. His head started to swim but this time it was because of the warm smile Charlie gave him as she pulled a chair closer to his bedside.

"I suppose you have questions," she said in a soft voice.

He tried to answer but settled for, "Yes."

“You are staying in my parents’ Bocka Morrow home. We come a couple of times a year—especially for the Halloween season. There is to be a ball in five days. Many people stay at Nightshade Manor, Lord Wharton’s estate, but because we have a home here, we don’t.”

He’d heard of the annual ball. Rumors had abounded about Nightshade Manor for years. Stories about witches and warlocks. Of strange goings on and magical spells. His parents had scoffed at the stories. His father and brother had had a great deal of respect for Wharton, even though Logan had never formally met the man. Even so, he didn’t believe the tall tales told by superstitious old folk around a hearth fire at night or by mothers and fathers to scare children who misbehaved. Besides, there was no such thing as witches. Yes, women had been accused of witchcraft throughout history, but women with magical powers...? It can’t be true, can it?

“Yes,” Charlie answered without hesitation. Her emerald eyes stared into his.

His eyes narrowed in confusion.

Millie cleared her throat as she continued with her needlework, drawing Charlie’s attention.

“My apologies—frog in my throat,” the maid said. “There’s a bite in the air. Best to be careful, Lady Charlotte. Your grandmother wouldn’t want you to catch a chill.”

Charlie nodded. “Y-yes of course, I will remember to be careful, Millie.”

Why did Logan think the two women were discussing something other than catching a chill?

Charlie turned back to him and shrugged nonchalantly. “Sorry. I thought I heard someone at the door asking if it was all right to enter, and that is why I said, yes . It

was probably a maid attending a different room.”

She smiled, and he blinked, wondering if her eyes could get any greener than they were at that moment.

There were voices in the hall, so it was plausible that Charlie had been responding to a perceived knock at the door and had not, in fact, read his thoughts about witches, he thought. Foolish notions flitted through his mind. He’d thought for a moment that Charlie had somehow heard what he’d said. Whatever the doctor gave me must be making me feel daft.

“I hope you’re hungry,” Charlie said. “I can hear a maid bringing up a tray. Frankly, I’m starving,” she blurted. Her eyes widened and her cheeks turned a delightful shade of pink as she must have realized what she’d said, apparently realizing her misstep.

His lips twitched.

Millie clucked her tongue but continued to sew.

He smiled. The pain that had plagued him since he’d woken from his stupor had begun to dull. Charlie’s presence was like a healing balm.

Charlie smiled back, and Logan was mesmerized once again by her beauty. She had the most beautiful smile he’d ever seen.

“I tend to stick my foot in it—say things I shouldn’t, like being hungry. I know it’s unladylike.” She gave a short laugh. “It’s just that my stomach rumbled at the sound of the dishes, and I simply reacted. I do that.”

The door opened, and a maid entered, carrying a tray. Millie rose and helped them pull a small table to the side of the bed.

“Wait. I think I have a better idea. I know just the thing,” Charlie said, hurrying from the room. She returned a few moments later, holding a large wooden tray that stood on short legs about ten inches high. “My parents brought these trays with us last year. We have several more at home as well. They are quite practical when one is unwell and must remain abed.” She and Millie carefully helped Logan sit up, fluffed his pillows, and nestled the bed tray comfortably over his lap, being careful of his stitches.

Charlie leaned in closer, her sweet perfume tickling his nose. She whispered, “Will you be able to manage, my lord, or shall I send for Mr. Bronson or Caden’s valet to assist you?”

Logan felt his face heat with embarrassment at his predicament. With determination, he reached for the spoon with his good hand, scooped up some of the broth, and brought the utensil to his mouth. Tasting it, he sighed, pleased that he had spilled none on his bedclothes.

Charlie beamed at him. “Cook’s broth is as fortifying as it is delicious.”

Logan smiled and nodded. Despite the pleasure of Charlie’s company, he did not want to eat in front of her and possibly make a fool of himself.

“Your grandmother will be wanting to speak with ye, Lady Charlie,” Millie said, with a meaningful look at her mistress. This time, he wondered if the maid had read his mind.

“Yes, of course.” Fishing in her pocket, Charlie withdrew a bell and set it on Logan’s tray. “This is for you, my lord. Ring this and someone will hear you and return for the tray. Or whenever you require assistance.”

What a clever idea. He nodded in appreciation.

“You’re quite welcome,” Charlie said. She turned to the maids. “Thank you, both.”

She turned back to him and curtsied. “I hope you enjoy your meal, my lord.”

He nodded again.

“Well, then. I shall leave you to your privacy.” She seemed to hesitate, and another blush pinkened her cheeks. “Perhaps I might check back after dinner. If you’d like some company, I can read to you, or we can talk.” She chuckled. “Well, hopefully, you can speak by then. Or I can talk, and you can listen. I hope the food and drink will revive your voice.”

Logan smiled again , hoping she would return, wanting to know more about her. There is something about her. I don’t know what it is, but I like her.

Charlie left the room and turned to the maid. “Thank you, Millie, for everything. Please ask a footman to come up here in about twenty minutes and wait in the hall so he can hear the bell. Lord Fitzwater should be finished eating around that time.”

“Yes, milady,” Millie said before disappearing down the servants’ stairs.

Charlie made her way down the hall and into her room. Closing the door, she slumped against it to catch her breath. “That was close,” she murmured. “I cannot believe I just answered his thoughts like that.”

You recovered nicely enough , Chapelle told her.

Charlie looked up and saw the cat reclining on her bed, calmly licking her paws.

“Cheeky devil.” She grinned. Chapelle had a way of just popping up when she least expected it.

Happy to oblige, the cat replied.

“It was almost as if there is a connection between the two of us, as odd as that sounds even to me,” she said. “It was a good thing Grandmama hadn’t witnessed it, especially after the careful warning she gave me. Still, there is something I cannot deny about Lord Fitzwater, and it’s been there since I first laid eyes on him,” she whispered.

If I wasn’t a cat, I might be attracted to him. He’s very good-looking. And he’s tall and fit, and yet there’s a refined quality about him. A true gentleman. Not just in title but in his very being.

“Indeed?” Charlie said aloud. “Well, I saw him first.”

Hmm... Your grandmother wants to speak to you. She heard you walking down the hall.

Oh, no! Do you think she listened to our conversation?

I’m not sure. I think she was too busy with her looking glass, Chapelle replied . You’d better see what she wants. You know how impatient the old witch can be.

Charlie wagged her finger at her feline friend and made her way down the hall to her grandmother’s suite. With a gentle knock on the door, she waited to be admitted.

“Charlie, is that you?” the dowager’s voice sounded from inside.

“Yes, Grandmama.” Charlie opened the door and stepped into the dowager’s elegant sitting room. A door led to an adjoining bedroom.

“I used my looking glass and checked in on your parents. If they know anything



about what transpired today, they aren't discussing it. But I would encourage you to be guarded with your mind-reading."

Charlie felt the heat of a blush invade her cheeks. Did she hear my thoughts about Lord Fitzwater?

Her grandmother gave her that shrewd look. "I was too busy. But I wanted to warn you to be careful. Did something happen?"

"Yes, and no. I heard his thoughts as clearly as if he were saying them aloud. It was most unusual because I wasn't trying to hear them. And this has never happened to me before." The only other mortal man whose thoughts she could hear was Caden, but he was her twin, and that was understandable. Even mortal twins could sometimes sense what the other was thinking and feeling. "Lord Fitzwater was thinking about Nightshade Manor and rumors he'd heard about magical goings-on and about witches and such. Anyway, I foolishly agreed with him."

"Goodness! It may not have been a good idea to have him stay here," the dowager lamented. "We will have to see it through, however. And it is most unusual for that to happen, as you say."

"Millie tactfully reminded me to be careful. I came up with some reason for blurting out what I did, and I don't believe he caught on to my error," Charlie said. "In any case, he's in a great deal of pain and I'm sure disoriented from the laudanum, so I don't think he will recall this incident." She tried to sound positive, but she wasn't certain.

"Nonetheless, I do not believe you should check in on him this evening as you might have planned." Her grandmother gave her that look again.

"I had planned it...you are right, of course, Grandmama. I will leave things alone and

check on him tomorrow, as is more proper,” Charlie said. Darn! I was looking forward to reading to him.

Her grandmother expelled a deep breath. “Yes...and as I said earlier, less is more . Believe it or not, I did not call you in here to remind you of what you know very well. Rather, I wanted to remind you that Rose will arrive on another day. You should focus your energies on making sure she has everything she needs. I put her in the room adjoining yours.”

“With all the excitement, it slipped my mind,” Charlie said, guilt washing over her.

“Caden has also arrived home from the sheriff’s,” the dowager said. “He will join us for dinner.”

“At least Rose will be able to travel safely without the threat of being attacked by those horrid cutthroats,” Charlie murmured. She couldn’t wait for her best friend to arrive. How in the world had she gotten so sidetracked with Lord Fitzwater that she could forget dear Rose? The memory of Logan’s handsome face flashed in her mind, and she realized how easy it was to be distracted by such a man. She would have to be much more careful from now on.

“By the way, I don’t believe we discussed this, but Rose is bringing along her Aunt Agnes as her chaperone.” Grandmama chuckled. “Had those thieves tried to mess with Agnes, they might have ended up tangled in the trees, hanging from their boots. As tangled as her magic sometimes gets, Agnes is delightful to have around. It’ll be good to see her again.”

“I agree, Grandmama. But I fear that if I don’t get some food in my belly, I may faint from hunger. If you are ready to dine, we can go down together,” Charlie said, offering her arm to her grandmother. She wished she hadn’t offered to read to Lord Fitzwater. She hoped he would not think less of her for not visiting him after dinner.

But there was nothing for it. He would probably benefit more from sleep, she thought to herself, to justify the change of plans. She couldn't risk angering her grandmother.

The next morning, Charlie made her way down to breakfast. Despite her best efforts to cover her exhaustion, she knew the dark circles beneath her eyes betrayed her.

"Charlie, dear, did you get enough sleep?" her grandmother asked, arching her brow in concern.

"Mmm," she responded, with a slight nod. "I think it was all the excitement of yesterday." She placed a cup of chocolate on the table and went back to the sideboard to get her breakfast. "I wonder how the earl is doing," she murmured as she helped herself to eggs and toast, not realizing she had spoken out loud.

"Funny you should mention the earl," Caden said. "I checked on him before I came down and found his friend Bronson mopping his brow. Apparently, the earl fought through a difficult fever during the night."

"Yes, I sent for Dr. Thakur and asked him to stop here early on his rounds," Grandmama said, flipping the page of the newspaper she was reading. "I expect he's on the mend, given the care and attention he's received." The dowager shot Charlie a sharp glance.

"I agree, Grandmama," Caden said, popping a piece of bacon in his mouth and crunching loudly. "I asked my valet to assist Bronson—the poor chap refuses to leave the earl's side today. He's a good man."

"That was kind of you," Grandmama said with an approving smile.

"Thank you, Grandmama." Caden beamed. "Bronson assured me the earl was resting comfortably and expects he'll sleep most of the day—hopefully without the fever

returning. He glanced at Charlie, his eyes dancing with mischief. “Don’t you think that’s good news, Charlie?”

“Yes, that’s very good news,” she replied stiffly. Hells bells! Does everyone have to know everything I do in this house?

He gave a barely perceptible nod.

Charlie wished she could check on Logan as well. But she didn’t dare. Not after last night. Charlie hadn’t planned on defying her grandmother, but that’s exactly what she’d ended up doing.

Something or someone had jarred Charlie out of a deep sleep in the middle of the night. Considering how tired she had been when she went to bed, she couldn’t make sense of it. She’d glanced at her clock and had noted it was just after two in the morning. And then in a flash, Charlie knew it was Logan. Throwing on a shawl, she’d tiptoed down the hall to his room and was shocked to discover him in a fevered state, writhing in bed, his sheet in a tangle around his long legs.

Panicked, she’d filled a basin of water and proceeded to cool him down with wet compresses. For the next two hours, the earl’s fever continued to climb, and he’d thrashed about, muttering and mumbling in a disoriented state.

“Damn you, Gil,” he’d muttered as his fever spiked. “Why did you die on me? Someone else could have broken the horse...someone else...but not you. Oh, God! How are you gone from my life? ”

Charlie had choked back tears as she continued to bathe Logan, her heart breaking at the sorrow he must have been keeping inside. Clearly, he’d been wracked with guilt over the death of this older brother. Charlie didn’t know what she would do in the same situation if she’d lost Caden. She couldn’t fathom that kind of loss.

Just thinking about it this morning made Charlie's chest tighten.

She'd continued to cool his face and neck with compresses, praying his fever would break, while debating whether she should fetch her grandmother when she suddenly felt a hand clamp around her wrist. Charlie let out a yelp as Logan tugged her close.

"Why are you haunting me?" he'd rasped, his eyes glazed with fever.

"I-I just want to help you," she'd whispered.

"Those eyes," he'd muttered. "Cat's eyes...so green...so mesmerizing. And your hair...so beautiful."

Charlie hadn't known what to make of his ramblings; it was as though Logan was accusing her of something, but she had no idea what it was.

As she gazed upon those finely chiseled features, Charlie did something she would never have dared, had he not been in a feverish state—she dipped her finger in the cool water and traced the curve of his mouth. Leaning over him, her lips had hovered above his, close enough to kiss...

"You will return to your room, young lady, at once!"

Charlie had jumped at the stern order and turned to see her grandmother enter the room with a flourish of her long burgundy silk robe, Millie trailing close behind. The way her grandmother had looked at her and then at Logan and then back at her; it was as though she'd known what Charlie had done, or almost done. Perhaps she saw everything in her looking glass, Charlie had thought.

"Never you mind, the hows and whys, my dear child," Grandmama had said as she gestured to Millie to cover the earl's exposed form. "Harrison has gone to fetch

Bronson. He will see to his master's care. While you need to get back to your room, pronto .”

Charlie had realized there was no point in arguing. She'd glanced at her grandmother, expecting to see disapproval written all over her face, and was surprised to see compassion and understanding, instead.

“It will be all right,” Grandmama said in a softer voice, reaching out to caress Charlie's cheek.

Charlie had returned to her room and spent the remaining hours until dawn tossing and turning until sleep finally claimed her as the sun was beginning to rise.

Just be careful, Charlie, Caden warned her, jolting her from her reverie.

What do you mean? She looked at him, no longer concerned her grandmother could hear her thoughts.

You're in danger of losing your heart, sis.

I'm not in danger. Charlie frowned as she sipped her tea, trying not to let Caden's warning get to her.

“Are you going to finish that?” Caden asked, watching her push her eggs about her plate.

Charlie jolted from her reverie and looked down at her plate. “Sorry. I was just thinking about Caroline, wondering how she was getting along,” she lied.

“Your head seems to be in the clouds, my dear,” Grandmama said, that shrewd look in her eyes again.

Harrison stepped into the dining room and approached the dowager. “Dr. Thakur is here, my lady. I sent him up to Lord Fitzwater’s room.”

“Thank you, Harrison,” her grandmother replied. She took a sip of her tea and said calmly, “I spoke with your mother earlier through the looking glass, and she informed me that Caroline seems as fit as a fiddle. Your parents plan to arrive the morning of the ball, as scheduled.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Charlie said, genuinely happy that Caroline was doing well. Their parents had made a point of visiting Caroline several times since learning of her pregnancy.

“Yes, your mother was excited. She was decorating the nursery with Caroline and putting your father and William to work painting the cradle and rocking horse.” She chuckled.

“It’s a good thing they get along,” Caden said, getting up and sauntering back to the sideboard.

It was true that their father and Caroline’s husband had grown close over the past year, which was a miracle, considering the wedding might never have happened if William’s former mistress had had her way.

“I suggest you get as much rest as possible today, Charlie,” Grandmama said. “Tomorrow will be a full day. Rose and her aunt will arrive early and the modiste will also be here for your fittings.”

“Sounds like you ladies will be busy all day tomorrow,” Caden said with a smirk as he lifted the serving lid of the newly replenished bacon.

Charlie heaved a deep sigh. It’s going to be a long day.

## Page 4

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### CHAPTER 4

#### A DAY LATER

Bright sunlight streamed through the open, purple velvet curtains, wrestling Charlie from the dream she was enjoying. In her dream, she and the handsome earl were riding along the lush green grass that edged the cliffs, while the relentless surf crashed and foamed below when Lord Fitzwater challenged her to a race. Justice, was neck and neck with her mare, teasing and tempting her to go farther and faster, just as the earl did and Charlie was determined to win.

The rush of wind in her face exhilarated her as she raced beside him along the edge of the cliff. Leaning into the wind with her legs hugging the horse and her hair flying behind her, she urged the mare on. Sable was a nose ahead of Justice when the stinging persistence of the bright sun forced her eyes open.

Charlie stared at the opened curtains, frustrated that her abigail insisted on waking her this way, and realizing that her race with the earl had been just a dream. I would love nothing better than to ride into the future with that handsome man beside me. But that could only ever happen in a dream, she reminded herself. The earl would head home as soon as he was well enough.

Terribly sorry your delicious dream had to end. I would have closed that curtain, but I spotted that annoying night owl, and it was a perfect opportunity to see where he hides during the day , Chapelle expressed, as she sat on the pillow next to Charlie's head and examined the length of her nails.



“Not nice!” Charlie retorted aloud, taking back her negative thought about Millie.

A quick knock at the door announced Millie’s entrance. The maid walked in carrying a tray of chocolate and biscuits. “Good morning, milady. Your grandmother asked that I remind you of Lady Rose’s arrival. She should be here within the hour. And the modiste will be here at ten o’clock.”

Biting back her irritation, Charlie swung the covers back and sat up. “I was having the most delightful dream.” One that she knew she’d never get back.

“Yes, milady,” the maid said, pulling a deep green day dress from the clothespress and laying it across the end of the bed. “I think your grandmother expects you to break your fast with her. She asked that I wake you early.”

“I see.” As much as she loved her grandmother’s company, Charlie wasn’t fond of her grandmama’s habit of waking with the sun. She preferred to sleep later...and dream.

If it’s all the same to you, I rather enjoy an early breakfast because it means I get my choice of the rashers of bacon. When you sleep late, I miss out on all the good bits because they get picked over by the staff. Chapelle casually hopped off the bed and sat expectantly by the door.

Don’t forget who makes sure you get your bacon, Charlie reminded the cat. Mother would prefer you receive the same as the pigs, the staff’s leftovers—porridge, and that sort of thing .

Chapelle glared from her position near the door. Need I remind you, my status is higher than that of the pigs ? It’s their bacon I’ll be eating. Besides, I’d like to see a pig try to ride an injured stallion.

“I brought your kitty a cup of cream, milady,” Millie said, unknowingly interrupting the conversation.

Nice! You could learn a lesson or two from this one , Chapelle said, rubbing her front paws in anticipation. The maid laid a small bowl in front of the cat, who lost no time in lapping it up.

Charlie regarded her reflection as Millie helped her into the olive-green dress. The color highlighted her blonde hair and emphasized her green eyes, features that suffered when paired with washed-out tones, like pastels.

Do something simple with your hair. Don’t forget, when the modiste shows up, she’ll be pulling dresses on and off you, and those annoying pins will pop out all over the place. Besides, I’d like to get to the bacon, Chapelle said, cleaning her face with her white paws. I feel your earl would prefer your hair long, too, but probably for different reasons .

That’s the first good suggestion you’ve given me, Chapelle, and I hope you’re right about the earl , Charlie thought. “Millie, could we try to style my hair down this morning? The modiste will have us in and out of so many gowns that I fear an updo will come undone.”

“That’s an excellent suggestion, milady.”

Millie helps me; I help her. It’s what they call a symbiotic relationship , the cat continued, settling down to wait.

It’s as if you and Millie are in cahoots to annoy me this morning , Charlie thought back.

The cat grinned. What can I say? Who doesn’t like bacon?

Ten minutes later, Charlie made her way downstairs to the dining room, with Chapelle on her heels. When she opened the door to the room, it startled her to see Lord Fitzwater seated at the table. He struggled to stand.

“No! Please stay seated. I’m just glad to see you were able to join us. That must be a good sign, right, Grandmama?” she asked.

“I was determined.” He shifted in his chair and winced. “It only hurts a little. A slight twinge of pain in exchange for sharing breakfast with two lovely ladies made it a simple decision.”

The dowager raised her brows and gave Charlie a wry smile. “Your brother should be down in a minute,” she said, and then turned to the earl. “We are thrilled to see you feeling better, Lord Fitzwater. If there is anything we can do to make your stay more comfortable, please don’t hesitate to ask. As I recall, the doctor will be by to check on you again this afternoon.”

“Thank you, but I’m afraid I may be taking advantage of your hospitality. I overheard that there’s a ball this week, and my guess is you may need all the room you have here,” he said.

Charlie started. “Oh no, my lord. I’m afraid you misunderstood. We do have a ball coming up, but we have no expected guests staying here—except my friend Rose, who should be here shortly. Besides, our home has endless rooms. You and your manservant are welcome to stay on as long as you need to. Isn’t that right, Grandmama?” she effused. “Nor, should you rush your recovery, or you may have a relapse.”

Charlie saw her grandmother’s brow arch, clearly intrigued by her words, and felt the heat rise in her cheeks. Good grief! She even caught herself gushing. Why in the world couldn’t she stop herself from blabbering?

A tap at the door preceded Harrison's entrance. He cleared his throat and announced, "Ladies, your guests, Lady Rose and Viscountess Agnes Wilburn, have arrived."

Phew! Rose had arrived just in time, giving Charlie an excuse to duck out for a much-needed diversion.

Grandmama clapped her hands together with enthusiasm. "This will be so much fun. Madame Soyeuse has promised the latest designs. I cannot wait to see them. She should be here within the hour."

Charlie noticed an uncomfortable look on Lord Fitzwater's face. "Grandmama, I'm certain our chattering on about dresses is tedious to a man's ears."

"Oh, on the contrary," the earl replied. "It's just that you seem to have a busy week ahead, and I do not want my presence to interfere with that."

"My lord, please do not feel unwelcome," Charlie said, hoping he would change his mind. "You simply cannot leave until your wounds have healed."

"Quite right!" agreed the dowager. "It seems busy at this moment, but we rarely have guests during this time of year. Even so, you simply must stay until the doctor feels you are well enough to travel. We insist." She glanced at her granddaughter. "The entire family and I welcome your company."

"Good! Then it's all decided. Lord Fitzwater and Mr. Bronson will stay on until the doctor has deemed you fit to depart," Charlie said before the earl could reply. "If you will excuse me," Charlie said, standing. "I will attend to Rose and her Aunt Agnes and see they are settled." With that, she hurried from the room.

Logan had hoped Lady Charlotte... Charlie ...would stay longer. She had been his motivation for dragging himself out of bed and coming down to break his fast. While

his wounds had not healed, the pain had become more manageable. When she had not returned to his room last evening, he decided he'd try to make it to the dining room for breakfast. But unwittingly, his asking about the upcoming ball had created angst. Other than the silent exchange between the dowager and her granddaughter, he was unsure what had caused Charlie to leave so abruptly. Maids usually prepared the rooms for guests, not the hosts—at least in his home. Something had made her uncomfortable and he couldn't be sure it wasn't him.

Adding to his confusion was the cat. It was nonsensical, but Logan had the feeling the creature was scrutinizing him in between bites and glares from the corner of the room as she devoured a plate of bacon.

He wanted to know more about this woman who could don men's clothing and fight like a man. Had it not been for those cat-like green eyes and that mane of glorious silvery-blond hair that had haunted his imagination, he might have cast the memories of the other night aside as some sort of weird dream. Instead, the images had wrapped themselves around his unconscious mind until all he could think about was knowing her better. He was just getting ready to leave when a tall, fair-haired gentleman joined them. He looked like a male version of Charlie, except his hair was darker.

"Caden, darling, it's good for you to join us this morning," the dowager said before turning to Logan. "You may have noticed the similarities with his sister. This is Lady Charlotte's twin."

Logan cleared his napkin from his lap and started to stand to greet his host.

"Please, stay seated, Lord Fitzwater. It's enough that you could join us this morning. Viscount Caden Penrose, at your service." He extended his hand in greeting.

"Bronson told me you saw to our horses' care. I thank you for your kindness," Logan

said.

“Yes. Mr. Bronson told me he was your batman on the continent. We owe you both a debt of gratitude for your service.”

“Not meaning to change the subject, Caden, but I have a favor to ask,” the dowager said. “You see, I rarely have occasion to pin down my grandson, Lord Fitzwater. I promised Rose’s mother I would give Rose an opportunity to practice her dancing before the ball and I hoped I could count on you. Of course, I hired a dance instructor who will join us tomorrow.”

“What does he have to do with me?” Caden asked, piling his plate with bacon, ham, and sausages.

“Yes. I am truly sorry. With the activities of these past couple of days, I quite forgot. I hired Mr. Grindle to help the girls improve their dancing, which means you will be on duty tomorrow as Rose’s partner.”

“Rose’s partner? And I am just hearing of this?” Penrose sounded irritated.

“Yes, Rose’s partner. We must undo the damage from last year and help boost Rose’s confidence to avoid another unfortunate incident.”

Caden’s sigh turned into a smile. “Very well, Grandmama, I could never refuse you,” he replied.

She smiled. “And I can never refuse you. Now. I must leave you to greet our guests and make certain Lady Rose and her Aunt Agnes are settled comfortably.”

“Would you be referring to the viscountess?” Penrose asked.

The dowager arched a brow. “Yes. I have been looking forward to their arrival,” she replied before dabbing her lips with her napkin. “You gentlemen take your time and get to know each other a little. I need to greet our guests.”

When the door closed behind the dowager, Logan glanced at the viscount and didn’t miss the pained expression on the younger man’s face.

“I was unaware her aunt was joining her,” he said.

“Young ladies do tend to travel with chaperones.” Logan’s lips quirked up in a smile. “Unless there is something particular or unusual about this Aunt Agnes acting as a chaperone?”

“Nothing other than her presence always makes things more...interesting. The last time I saw Aunt Agnes, she declared in front of everyone present how wonderful it would be if Rose and I married,” the younger man said, clearing his throat. “Dash it! I’m barely one and twenty. I’ve only just come down from Cambridge. Why would I want to get married before I’ve had a chance to see the world?”

“Time and experience can be the greatest of teachers,” Logan said, suppressing a smile at the young man’s frustration.

“Exactly,” Caden agreed. He seemed about to say something more when a movement to his right made him pause.

“Is something the matter?” Logan asked.

“Only that Chapelle has polished off the rashers of bacon. Again.”

Logan chuckled as he turned to see the cat in question, sitting next to the sideboard, calmly cleaning her face.

“Perhaps I should ring for more,” Caden said, glaring at the feline.

Perhaps I should stay , thought Chapelle, to no one in particular. There’s no such thing as too much bacon.



### CHAPTER 5

“Charlie, I need those dance lessons. My entire future depends on it,” Rose said in a wobbly voice. “Remember the fiasco at last year’s ball? I simply could not survive that again this year. I would have no choice but to retreat from Society and live the rest of my days as a spinster. Alone and unloved.”

“All because you lost your accounts on Caden’s shoes?” Charlie rolled her eyes. “Stuff and nonsense!”

“It’s not nonsense,” Rose said, her eyes filling with tears. “I am almost certain it’s why Caden won’t even look in my direction. He’s afraid he’ll be forced to partner with me.”

Caden only has so many pairs of shoes, Chapelle quipped.

Chapelle, don’t be unkind, Charlie said, clearly reading the cat’s thoughts.

I’m only speaking the truth, the cat added. What we should do, is keep Rose away from the champagne. That would solve more problems than a hundred dance lessons.

“I’m sure Caden is not avoiding you because of last year’s unfortunate incident.” Charlie was almost certain her cake of a brother was avoiding Rose for entirely different reasons. Her brother needed to grow up and see what was right in front of his nose! Rose. She was perfect for him. Unfortunately, Rose had always had the worst self-image, despite her sweet disposition, innate goodness, and bountiful kindness. She had a way about her that, with the touch of her hand, made people feel

good about themselves and their circumstances—well, unless you had vomit covering your britches from the knees down. And yet, when it came to her own heart, Rose was a disaster. So anxious she would make herself dizzy and prone to fainting spells and, yes, vomiting as well.

Last year Rose did just that, all over Caden's shoes. Poor Rose had been mortified. It had taken the combined efforts of Grandmama, Aunt Agnes, Chapelle, and Charlie to convince Rose to come back. Charlie worried that if Rose's nerves got the better of her again this year, her self-image would sink so low that she would indeed become a recluse.

Poor Rose had very little support at home. Rose's mother, Lady Kenwood, was a loving mother, but had become distracted since a debilitating illness struck Rose's father three years ago. Lady Kenwood had become so focused on caring for him, she could not provide Rose with motherly guidance.

Charlie would do everything in her power to make sure that Rose had all the support she required. However, just because Rose needed additional dance lessons to calm her nerves, didn't mean Charlie had to suffer through the same thing. Charlie felt no need to polish her own dancing skills, nor did she relish having to deal with the stuffy dancing instructor.

"Rose, you have nothing to worry about. Grandmama will make certain you'll have enough lessons this year to give you all the confidence you need."

"I do hope so," Rose said. "I so wish to impress Caden this year. I would not want him to think worse of me."

"Pish! We all know who is to blame for what happened—that horrid Lord Phelps plied you with too much champagne. My brother has never said a word otherwise...at least none that I've heard. So please try to remain positive. This year will be

different.”

Rose nodded, but Charlie could see her best friend was far from convinced. Her cheeks were ashen, and her eyes were rimmed with dark circles. Charlie blew out a breath. “All right, fine. We’ll take the lessons together. I don’t want you making yourself ill over this. I know if you trip or if anything happens, you will forever blame me for not agreeing to the lessons.”

“Thank you! Thank you!” Rose threw her arms around Charlie and hugged her close. “Just so you know, I would only blame you for this year. I could never hold it against you forever,” Rose quipped, obviously elated by her small victory.

“But you owe me. One day you might be called upon to return the favor.”

“Of course! You know I would do anything for you. You are my dearest friend, Charlie.”

Charlie tucked a coppery curl behind Rose’s ear. “I am completely confident that with all this extra practice we’ll be the belles of the ball.” Charlie crossed her fingers behind her back for good measure. She wanted to have one ball that wasn’t marred by some horrible mishap. She had ideas of her own about this year’s ball and it had nothing to do with tossing up one’s accounts.

“The only man I wish to impress is Caden,” Rose said in a soft voice. “You know how I’ve always felt about him. I hope this will be the year that Caden truly sees me.”

“My brother does see you, Rose. He knows what a wonderful person you are.”

“Oh, I know he cares about me as a friend, but that is not what I mean. It’s not what I want. I’m drawn to him and see only him when he’s in a room. When he laughs or looks in my direction with those green eyes, it makes me weak in the knees. He’s

simply the most handsome man in all the world. Have you ever remarked that his dark gold hair reminds one of a vintage coin?" she effused breathlessly.

Charlie rolled her eyes. "Caden's hair is blond like mine."

"Your hair is a beautiful shade of golden blonde with silver streaks," Rose said, making Charlie smile. "But Caden's hair is darker than yours, you must admit that. And his skin is bronzed from spending so much time in the sun, which makes his beautiful green eyes even more striking. I so admire Caden's love of the outdoors."

Charlie agreed with Rose on that point. Her brother was usually fishing, hunting, in the stables with the horses, or helping one of the tenants on the family estate. He never shirked physical labor, in fact, he thrived on it. He seemed to have an endless supply of stamina that made him constantly seek active pursuits.

"Caden is the most handsome man I've ever known," Rose said with a sigh.

Charlie couldn't fault Rose for having such feelings, for she too felt the same about the earl.

Charlie regarded her friend and hoped that Caden could see who she truly was. Rose was a lovely young woman with arresting amber eyes, long curly red hair, and a delightful sprinkling of freckles over the bridge of her nose that gave her the appearance of a lovely woodland sprite. She also possessed a petite, curvaceous figure that would no doubt attract attention, if only she carried herself with more confidence. Of course, it didn't help that Rose's gowns were not exactly flattering to her curves or coloring. Luckily, Grandmama had remedied that by engaging one of the most talented modistes in London to create their ball gowns.

Charlie hoped this year would be different for Rose and that gentlemen would flock to her side, despite her meager dowry and last year's unfortunate incident. Her

dearest friend deserved true love. “Caden has said nothing that would indicate he wished to avoid you,” Charlie said. She knew her brother and secretly hoped seeing other men woo Rose would spur him into action. Why must love be so complicated? An image of the handsome earl popped into her head. Damn complicated, indeed!

Hearing a ruckus downstairs in the front hall, Charlie poked her head out of Rose’s room. “The modiste has already arrived,” she said over her shoulder. “Grandmama will expect us in her rooms. We should hurry.”

“I cannot wait to see the dresses your grandmother commissioned from that stunning material,” Rose said with a sigh. She smoothed down the fabric of her drab gray gown and followed Charlie down the hall.

“Ah, there you are, my dears,” the dowager said, meeting them on the landing. “Both the modiste and the dance instructor have arrived at the same time. Mr. Grindle is a bit early and keen to get started. Therefore, I have asked Madame to take her time organizing herself. I invited her to enjoy tea in my sitting room and relax for a couple of hours. We will delay the fittings for a short dance lesson—just to satisfy Mr. Grindle. Really! The man should have stuck to the agreed upon schedule. I’ve placed him in the ballroom. Hurry along, ladies. Caden has agreed to partner. I already spoke to him at breakfast.”

Rose smiled.

Charlie inwardly grimaced. Grandmama would insist on partnering Rose with Caden, which was all well and good, unfortunately that left Charlie to partner with Grindle. The man’s breath smelled like the stables after the horses had gotten into the wheels of cheese Cook had left there to age. And she wondered if he ever aired his clothing like normal people. It reeked of garlic... Honestly, it was as if he thought he was in the company of vampires! She bit back a laugh. The foul-smelling toady would likely die of apoplexy if he realized they were witches.

Her grandmother cleared her throat and gave Charlie a warning glance. Dang it! She was reading her thoughts again. Really! It took every bit of control for Charlie to restrain the impulse to give Grindle a bar of soap and a box of tooth powder. With her whole heart, Charlie wished the earl could be her partner, but that was preposterous. The man could barely stand.

“Madame Soyeuse will be in my rooms shortly,” the dowager said as they made their way to the ballroom. “She said something about last-minute alterations. Because of the delicate, tissue-like texture of the fabric, measuring for alterations may take a little longer. You know the saying: measure twice, cut once,” the dowager said, chuckling. “I am glad I could convince her to come here. She mentioned having close relatives in Tintagel. I suppose she plans to stay there.”

“Do they have a French brandy business?” Charlie asked, not realizing she had said her thought out loud. Tintagel was known for its smuggling.

“Remember yourself, my dear. Thoughts such as that are not meant to be shared—mortal or not. Your...er...contemplations can be very loud,” the dowager chided. In a quiet voice, she added, “But I believe you are correct. Madame Soyeuse might indeed have relations who are so inclined because she declined my invitation to stay here. And it’s a long way to travel, and as well as I pay, I’m sure there had to be more enticements. I am most welcoming, as you know, so I can only assume she has made other arrangements.”

Charlie could just guess what those other arrangements were.

They entered the ballroom and found Mr. Grindle standing with arms crossed, his foot beating a rapid tattoo on the polished wood floor. “I have zee music and hope you have someone to play the pianoforte,” he demanded in an impatient voice.

“I will play,” Charlie quickly volunteered.

“Nonsense, my dear. I will ask Agnes to play,” the dowager said. “She plays beautifully. In the meantime, you and Rose round up your brother. Check the stables.”

Instinctively, Charlie knew this would not go as her grandmother had intended. But somehow, she felt Grandmama knew that. Maybe I can convince the stablehands to saddle up the mounts so I can escape , she thought deviously.

“And don’t dawdle,” her grandmother said, with eyes narrowed.

Chapelle trailed behind her mistress. You really should control your thoughts. You know how shrewd the dowager is, she thought .

And you really should behave yourself, Chapelle. If you embarrass me, I will put you on porridge rations, Charlie returned.

The cat scurried ahead and leaped over the fence in front of the stables. She tossed a huffy glare in Charlie’s direction. Fine. I promise.

When they arrived at the stable, Caden was nowhere to be found. His horse was still in its stall, munching on hay. Male voices at the other end of the stables drew Charlie’s attention. It was Lord Fitzwater and his manservant, Mr. Bronson. The earl was brushing his horse and talking gently to it. Her heart hitched at the sight, and she fought the urge to challenge him to a race along the cliffs, which would have been her preference over dancing with Grindle. “Pardon me, Lord Fitzwater, but have you seen my brother this morning?”

The earl turned around and smiled, making Charlie’s breath catch.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, Mr. Bronson and I spent an enjoyable hour with Viscount Penrose. He accompanied us here to check on Justice and make certain he was on the

mend. Your brother truly has a gift for healing horses, and he indicated he shares that gift with you, Lady Charlotte.”

“Thank you, my lord.” Charlie felt the heat of a blush creep up her neck to her cheeks. The earl wasn’t far off the truth. Did he suspect her gifts went beyond what mortals could do? He had a strange look in his eyes. Why can’t I figure out what he’s thinking? “Do you know if my brother returned to the house?”

“ I believe he mentioned something about heading to his favorite stream for a spot of fishing, didn’t he, Bronson?”

“He did indeed. I saw him take one of those fishing poles hanging on the wall over there.”

“He invited us, though I doubt that Dr. Thakur would have approved of my traipsing through the woods to a fishing pond,” the earl quipped.

“Damn and blast you, Caden, you sneaky rat!” Charlie blurted. Her eyes widened and her hand flew to her mouth as she realized she’d uttered the unladylike curse aloud and not in her head.

Lord Fitzwater’s lips twitched in what looked like amusement, making her feel even more embarrassed. How unladylike of her!

“Forgive my language, my lord. But my brother has left us in a quandary. You see, he was meant to partner Rose in our dancing lessons.”

“Oh, dear. Mr. Grindle will be most upset at Caden’s absence,” Rose said, wringing her hands. “He might very well leave. And that will surely mean disaster.”

The earl’s mouth curved up in a smile. “Allow me to be of assistance. I’m almost



finished brushing Justice and would be honored to offer myself as a partner for your dancing lesson.”

Charlie’s heart did several somersaults. “Thank you, my lord, for your kind offer. That is so gallant of you. Of course, we would love to have you, but only if you are certain. We wouldn’t want you to re-injure yourself.” She glanced at her friend, who looked crushed that Caden had wormed his way out of helping with the dance lessons.

“I am most certain. In fact, the good doctor recommended gentle exercise to speed up the healing, did he not, Bronson?”

“He did indeed, my lord.”

“Then it’s settled.” The earl gave them another charming smile that made Charlie’s heart skip a beat.

Oh Lord, how am I going to get through the dance lesson?

I’m sure you’ll manage just fine . Chapelle chuckled. And what better way to spend the morning than in the arms of Lord Hunky.

May I remind you that the earl will be partnering with Rose? I’ll still be stuck with Garlic Man.

Charlie smiled at Rose and gave her friend a side hug. It was a good thing Rose wasn’t privy to Charlie’s thought conversations with Chapelle.

Oh, when I get my hands on Caden, I’ll ring his damn neck.

I think you would do well to let your grandmama handle Caden,” Chapelle said as she

licked her paw. The dowager has far more clout than you do.

“I will give it a go if we can avoid the more taxing dances. I’m not sure I’m ready for those.” The earl rinsed off his hands in a nearby bucket of water and dried them on a towel. “Bronson, what say you fetch your fiddle?”

“I’d be delighted, my lord.”

“Splendid!” the earl said slapping his friend on the back. “Bronson here, is one of the most talented musicians in England.”

“Well, now, the earl does exaggerate.” Bronson chuckled.

“That would be wonderful,” exclaimed Charlie. “Rose’s aunt will also be accompanying us on the pianoforte.

“It will surely sound more like an orchestra at a real ball!” Rose enthused.

At least I can admire the earl from afar. Charlie sighed inwardly.

I’m not even commenting, Chapelle said through a yawn, as she seated herself on the top of the fence while they waited for the two men.

Don’t, warned Charlie. He’s very chivalrous and a true gentleman. The small group headed back to the house, where Mr. Grindle and her grandmother waited.

This is going to be so much fun. Chapelle meowed with glee. I shall quite enjoy watching you try not to swoon in the earl’s presence.

Swoon? I’m not Rose, for God’s sake! Why ever would I swoon?

Because, my dear Charlie, you're head over heels in love with Lord Fitzwater. That's why.

### CHAPTER 6

Logan had been careful not to take on the dances that required too much exertion. Even so, he felt himself tire with this third dance. As he swung Lady Rose about the dance floor in a waltz, he noticed her counting. He gave her a reassuring smile. “You dance beautifully, but I could not help noticing that you seem a little nervous. I wonder if I might offer a suggestion.”

“It’s that obvious?” she said, wincing. “I thought I was only counting in my head.”

“I’m afraid so...you probably were in the beginning, but I’m glad I heard you because I think I can help.” Logan smiled. He could not embarrass her by telling her he heard her counting with every move. “Take a deep breath and let it out slowly.”

She did as he asked and she looked so endearing, he was reminded of his younger sister, Beth, or Elizabeth as she liked to be called now that she was nearing her come out.

“Excellent. Now, close your eyes and we will start again. Relax and let me guide you. Allow yourself to feel my lead. Try closing your eyes.”

As she closed her eyes, Logan placed his right hand around her waist.

“Do you feel where my hand is here on the small of your back?” His fingers lightly moved.

“Yes.” She giggled.

“Good.” He chuckled at her laughter. It sounded like a tinkling bell. He regretted Caden wasn’t here as her partner. She was a lovely young woman, and clearly besotted with Caden. If she could keep herself calm, she would be able to maintain her natural grace throughout the dance.

“Now keep your eyes closed and I’m going to take your left hand and place it on my shoulder.”

Rose nodded as he did so.

“Remember to relax and keep breathing.”

Rose smiled.

“Now I’m going to take your right hand and hold it up in the correct position for a waltz.”

Rose nodded as he clasped her right hand in his.

“Eyes closed and breathe deeply. Let’s stand here for a few moments so we can feel our feet and get our bearings before we begin.”

Rose smiled again and Logan could see the color return to her cheeks as she continued to breathe, he felt her begin to calm herself into a natural state of relaxation.

Logan noticed a movement out of his right and looked up as Charlie and Mr. Grindle waltzed by. Her extraordinary green eyes met his and she winked as her thumb shot up in encouragement behind Grindle’s back. Logan couldn’t help but grin at the way she expressed herself. Charlie was the most intriguing and unique woman he’d ever met.

Returning his attention to Rose, he waited for the music to reach a particular point and said, “You’re doing very well, Lady Rose. Keep breathing and let me guide you.” With gentle pressure, Logan guided Rose about the dance floor. Once she allowed him to lead, he noticed, she stopped counting, and he felt her relax into the music. He nodded to Bronson to keep playing and watched as Bronson whispered something to Lady Agnes, who blushed and smiled as she continued to play. Rose’s counting stopped, and she flowed like silk around the dance floor.

After a few turns around the ballroom, Logan could see that Rose was enjoying herself. Her eyes remained closed, but her lips curved up in a sweet smile as they danced. As the music finally came to an end. Logan slowed down until he came to a stop. “Could you feel the difference?” he asked her.

“I could. This helped so much!” she gushed, finally opening her eyes. “It felt like I can dance. I can really dance!” She beamed. “Thank you, my lord. You have worked wonders today.”

“You are most welcome, Lady Rose. But it takes two to waltz, and you did beautifully. If you get nervous, take a calming breath, and remind yourself to relax. You have a natural grace, and any man would be lucky to be granted a dance with you,” he said, sketching a bow.

Rose curtsied and said, “I was always so nervous that I never allowed myself to truly feel the music. I never realized how enjoyable it is to dance. But today, I did, because of you, my Lord. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

Logan lifted her hand and kissed it. “I was happy to be of service, my lady.” He straightened and felt a twinge of pain. “And now, I must beg your patience for a moment of respite.”

“Of course, I hope you’re not in pain,” Rose said, concern etched on her face.

“Nothing that a short break won’t put to right,” Logan replied as he led her to the chairs along the side of the room.

Charlie joined them, clapping enthusiastically. “Oh, Rose, you danced like an angel. I told you that you could do it. You are a natural.”

Genuinely pleased, Rose blushed and smiled at Charlie before turning to Logan. “Thank you again, Lord Fitzwater.”

“No need to thank me. You did the work. Remember, all you need to do is feel the music, breathe, and enjoy yourself,” Logan said.

Logan watched as Charlie listened attentively to Rose’s excited description of their dance. He sighed inwardly, wishing he could have had the opportunity to dance with Charlie as well. For some reason, he felt a sense of unease building at the thought of the coming ball. Charlie would be there, dancing with other men. She would be the belle of the ball, with dozens of eager suitors flocking to her side. Who could resist those eyes, that figure, and that luscious, sun-kissed hair? What in the world has come over me? I had no interest in any woman until I met her. And now, I can’t get her off my mind.

“Do you really think I will attract suitors?” Rose whispered. “There is one person I hope will ask me to dance. But what if he doesn’t show?”

Logan knew exactly whom she meant. He cleared his throat. “If you’ll permit me to offer an opinion. I believe the young man in question does indeed plan to attend the ball. I think he simply wanted some time to himself and a chance to enjoy nature.”

“Caden said he still plans to come to the ball?” Charlie blurted.

Logan suppressed a smile at Charlie’s faux pas. Her cheeks had turned an adorable

shade of pink. Logan looked into her eyes, but before he could speak, Rose's aunt got up from the pianoforte and clapped her hands, drawing everyone's attention. Aunt Agnes reminded him of his favorite aunt, who had passed away a few years before his father, her brother. Aunt Mary had always added life to any family event she attended.

Bronson rested his fiddle on his knee and looked at the diminutive woman in amusement.

"Those last dances were beautifully executed. Well done, everyone." She turned to Bronson and smiled. "I must confess, it's been a while since I've played so many songs continuously. Perhaps refreshments and a slight break are in order."

"You read my mind, my dear friend," drawled the dowager approaching Aunt Agnes. "I've ordered tea and biscuits, which—"

The door to the ballroom opened, and a footman entered with a teacart.

"Are here," she finished. "Thank you, Markham. I will serve." The footman gave a nod and turned to leave.

Aunt Agnes laughed. "Mind reading runs in the family."

Uh oh , Chapelle thought, sauntering into the room just as Markham closed the door. Aunt Agnes is in full swing. Let the fun begin .

Charlie couldn't help noticing the curious looks on both Bronson and Lord Fitzwater's faces at Aunt Agnes' remark . I hope Grandmama apprised Aunt Agnes that these men are mortals who know nothing about our magical ways .

Would it matter? I utterly detest the saying, but Aunt Agnes always lets the cat out of



the bag. It's only a matter of time , Chappelle opined.

Her grandmother walked up to the cart and whispered something in the ear of Aunt Agnes, who nodded. "Excellent idea, my dear." Without another word, the two of them worked together, pouring tea and passing out the biscuits.

Once everyone had partaken of the refreshments, Aunt Agnes stepped forward. "Mr. Grindle, would you be so kind as to partner with our dear Rose?" She turned to Lord Fitzwater. You have done wonders, Lord Fitzwater, but I think it would be good for Rose to dance with another gentleman today. For the practice, you see."

"That's an excellent idea," Mr. Grindle said with a sniff before Logan could reply. "Lady Rose will benefit greatly from my added tutelage."

Charlie suppressed a smile at Grindle's huffy tone. She couldn't help noticing he'd had his knickers in a knot at Rose's effusive praise of the earl's teaching ability.

Right there! I knew they had something cooking. Chappelle chuckled as she made herself comfortable on the chair next to Charlie. A cat can smell shenanigans a mile away. And look who's coming this way. Chappelle wacked Charlie's arm with her paw, making Charlie jump in her seat as the earl approached.

Might as well suck it up and say yes, mistress. After all, what do you have to lose?

My heart, for one, thought Charlie. She frowned at her cat as she rubbed her arm. And ow, that hurt.

Chappelle shrugged. What can I say, love hurts.

I would love nothing more than to dance with him. But not like this...under Grandmama's eagle eyes.

It looks like you have no choice, Chapelle purred, swatting her large tail in Charlie's direction. Besides, your grandmother will be at the ball watching you, so what's the difference if you dance here with her watching you?

"Would you honor me with the next dance?" Logan smiled, sketching a light bow.

Cat got your tongue? Chapelle meowed in laughter. And do try to relax. You look as nervous as Rose did just before she vomited on Caden last year.

Oh, just you wait. I'm going to hide your catnip where you'll never find it.

Charlie felt her cheeks heat. She smiled at the earl as he seemed to wait expectantly for her answer. It felt as if they were at the ball—the very place she dreamed of being with him. Charlie tried to speak but couldn't. Her tongue wouldn't move. Hearing her heartbeat thunder in her ears reminded her to breathe. And nod. "Y-yes, Lord Fitzwater, that would be lovely." Charlie stood and placed her hand in his, mesmerized by his sea-blue eyes.

"Can I ask a favor?" he asked as he escorted her to the dance floor.

"Y-yes."

"It would please me if you would call me Logan when we are together. Lord Fitzwater seems too formal."

I'd love to call you Logan, especially since you've been in my dreams and every waking thought since I met you. "If you'll call me Charlie," she replied.

Logan placed an arm around her waist and reached for her hand—his touch sending bolts of sensation spinning in her midsection.

As Bronson's fiddle struck up the introductory notes to a waltz, he was joined by Aunt Agnes on the pianoforte.

Lost in the music and the whirling of the dance, Charlie remembered Logan's advice to Rose and took a deep breath. As he twirled her around, she glanced up and noticed the large crystal chandelier—something she had seen for years—suddenly looked different. No longer just a chandelier, the magical glow it cast about the room felt dreamlike. As her eyes met Logan's, she felt a strange weightlessness, as though her feet were moving far above the ground, as though they were both in some enchanted dream.

"I must confess that while Lady Rose is a delightful young woman, I have been wanting to dance with you all morning. I am glad for the opportunity now," he said in a whisper as they whirled past the far corner of the room.

Charlie barely noticed Chapelle lounging on a chair, grinning like she'd just lapped up a bowl of cream.

Yes, I see you, the cat mused. This is more interesting than cornering a kitchen mouse.

Not now, Charlie thought. Leave me to my dreams just this once.

Of course, mistress. You know how I like to tease. All in good fun. Chapelle stretched out and began licking her paws.

Charlie ignored her feline friend and her eyes met Logan's once more. "This dancing...it isn't causing you pain, is it?" she asked, feeling ridiculous as soon as the words left her mouth. Of course, it hurt. But he was such a gentleman.

"I cannot lie. There is still pain, but dancing with you is a balm to the wounds."

She beamed. “Well, perhaps the ball will finish healing those wounds,” she teased. “If you could go, it would make it so much more enjoyable—for Rose, and uh, all of us.”

“Are you asking me to attend the ball with you?” he asked as he twirled her.

We barely know each other, but yes , her heart screamed. “Are you telling me you would consider it?” she asked. She had wanted to ask earlier but had waited to see how he was feeling. It appeared he was, indeed, healing quickly.

“What would your grandmother say if I said yes?” he parried.

“Oh, Grandmama believes that every Society event should have an abundance of gentlemen in attendance and a dearth of ladies. It’s all about numbers, you see.” She grinned.

“Ah, that is wise thinking.” His lips twitched.

“Grandmama is wise,” Charlie said.

“I agree with you there, but you haven’t answered my original question,” he said, a teasing glint in his eyes. “Were you asking me to accompany you to the ball?”

“And if I was?” she countered, arching a brow.

He chuckled. “Then my answer is yes.”

### CHAPTER 7

#### OCTOBER 31, 1814, THE DAY OF THE BALL

“These are the most beautiful gowns I have ever seen!” exclaimed Rose, as she sat on the bed and touched the dress Millie had laid out.

“Grandmama has certainly outdone herself,” Charlie said.

“How will I ever be able to thank the dowager for her kindness and generosity?” Rose said, her eyes brimming with tears.

“By being happy and enjoying yourself and dancing with every handsome young man who asks you. And they will all ask you, mark my words.” Charlie hugged her friend close.

“That would be lovely, but I hope Caden will be among them.”

“I am certain he will,” Charlie said, “or I’ll wring his neck.” She pantomimed her hands around an imaginary Caden, making Rose burst into giggles.

Charlie encouraged Rose to look at herself in the mirror. Rose held the gown up over her dress, her face glowing with excitement as she swished this way and that. “I love the deep blue color...I simply love it!”

“You look beautiful, Rose. The color suits you to perfection.”

“Thank you. But now it’s your turn,” Rose said.

Charlie’s dress was comprised of several layers of delicate silver fabric. The silver threads intricately woven into the gauzy material caught the light as she moved. She hadn’t been able to get a good look at the dress during their fittings while Madame Soyeuse and her assistant fussed over the alterations, measuring, tucking, and pinning. But as she twirled in front of the looking glass, the silvery confection seemed to twinkle back at her.

“You must try this,” Charlie said, swishing the skirt. “Look at what happens when I move the skirt. It’s almost like it leaves a shimmering blur in its wake!”

“I love the way it almost blurs behind me,” Rose gushed, as she tried hers in front of the mirror.

“These will be the most beautiful dresses at the ball. We’ll look grand on the dance floor,” Charlie said, still fingering the fabric. “I’m certain no one will wear anything that could possibly compare!”

“If I make it to the dance floor,” Rose lamented. “I was tempted to ask Mr. Grindle to accompany me to the ball. That way I’d be assured not to hold up the wallflower wall.”

Charlie gave Rose a reassuring smile. “Pish! I know my brother and he will be there.” Charlie was only half-kidding when she said she’d wring her brother’s neck. She was disappointed with her brother’s treatment of Rose by sneaking off to go fishing instead of attending their dance lesson as he’d promised their grandmother.

The dowager gave him a full dressing down, I assure you , Chapelle piped up, reading her thoughts. I was taking my morning bacon...from under the table at the time.

You're lucky Caden didn't catch you there, Charlie countered, glancing at her feline friend, who was stretched out at the end of her bed. He knows you tell me everything.

I was as quiet as a mouse, Chapelle shot back.

Charlie ignored Chapelle's comment and turned to her friend. "You have nothing to worry about," Charlie said aloud to Rose, who'd begun to pace from one end of the room to the other.

"You have more faith than I do, I'm afraid," Rose said.

Charlie was doing her best to calm her friend, but inside, her stomach was full of fluttering butterflies. Charlie had taken the plunge in asking Logan to join them. It was lovely to be on a first-name basis with him, even if only in private.

Charlie had been thrilled that Logan had accepted her invitation, but then the doctor had stopped by the evening of their dance lessons and found two of the stitches had come undone, making the earl's wound tear and bleed again. The doctor repaired the stitches and warned the earl about over-exerting himself.

Charlie had been beside herself with worry. She'd heard nothing since the doctor's last visit. He was due to check on Logan again today. Charlie hoped the earl would be well enough to attend, but she would rather he forgo the ball than risk re-opening his wound.

He'll be fine, Chapelle reassured, holding her nails up to the light of the window. Darn it! I think I broke a nail grabbing that last piece of bacon this morning. I really need to fix this. I need to find a scratching post. I'll be right back. She climbed onto the windowsill and pushing open the window with her paw, gracefully leaped onto the closest branch of the nearby oak tree.

Charlie heard her cat furiously scratching the tree limb and shook her head. When Chapelle wanted something, she had no patience.

I heard that! Chapelle thought. No need to put off until tomorrow what I can do today. I appreciate expediency.

Charlie rolled her eyes.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to go on about me,” said Rose with a sigh. She kissed Charlie on the cheek. “You are such a dear friend.”

Ashamed, Charlie realized Rose had seen her roll her eyes. She really needed to be more careful with her conversations with her kitty. “Rose, I’m the one who should apologize. I rolled my eyes. But not at you. At Chapelle. She broke a nail and had to fix it immediately.”

Rose chuckled. “It’s all right. But I realize that I’m being a tad silly and seem to overreact to every little thing. It’s my nerves.”

“Everything will be right as rain, I promise,” Charlie said.

“Thank you. But I must accept the challenges of life without turning into a ninny. Caden’s regard is important to me, but I can’t allow it to supersede everything else.” She hugged Charlie. “You and your grandmama are the only ones that care about whether I even make it to the ball—any ball.”

“I know how difficult it’s been for you because of your father’s illness,” Charlie said.

“Thank you, but it’s been harder on Mama. Papa requires so much care and attention.” She expelled a deep breath. “That was not the case when I was a child. Mama was the most attentive mother in the world. She lavished me with birthday



parties, trips to the park, and stories at bedtime. She always had a smile on her face and would go about her day humming and singing. And you know how lovely Mama's voice is. Like an angel. Now, I'm lucky to see her at mealtimes." Her lips trembled as she spoke. "I do what I can to help her, but she is always so tired."

Charlie knew that was an understatement. Rose was just as caring as her mother was. Rose took breakfast to her father every morning, feeding him so that her mother could have an extra hour of sleep. And Rose also sat with her father every evening, reading to him so that her mother could take some much-needed time for herself. That was why Charlie's grandmother had been so insistent that Rose come for a visit and that Aunt Agnes should accompany her as chaperone. That way, Rose could attend the ball with them under Grandmama's protection.

A brief tap at the door announced Millie, and she entered the room, holding the door open, as two maids followed with buckets of warm water. "The dowager asked me to attend you both. Lady Rose, the other maids have already filled the tub in your room. If you leave your dress here, I will bring it to you when you are finished bathing."

"That is so kind. Thank you, Millie. I'll see you soon, Charlie," Rose said as she left the room.

"I hope you don't mind, my lady. You were both in here admiring the dresses, and I didn't wish to intrude. But the dowager wishes to be one of the first to arrive, so it's time to get ready," the maid explained.

Charlie rolled her eyes and meant it this time. She hated arriving early. Those that walked in later barely got noticed, and that's how she preferred it.

"Come. We must hurry," Millie urged, lightly touching her arm.

I'll just stay out here and watch for that annoying owl, if it's all the same to you. It

would make my day if I caught him , sighed Chapelle, perched on the branch outside the window.

“Please don’t latch the window, Millie,” Charlie instructed as the maid reached up to secure the window sashes. “Chapelle is still out there.”

“Ah! Yes, my lady. I see she is still trying to snare the owl. She might find that owl is more than she bargained for, should she get too close.”

“Yes! I quite agree. All that bacon is bound to slow her down,” Charlie said. Both women laughed.

“The doctor approved your attending the ball if you avoid the dances that require exertion. He had to replace a few stitches and worries you will risk an infection if you are not cautious, my lord,” Bronson said, concerned. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“I wouldn’t miss this ball for the world,” Logan replied. “I cannot think of any event I have looked more forward to in years.”

“Listen to you! Your mother would be most pleased to see you putting yourself in the center of all the matchmaking mamas. She’s made no secret of wanting grandchildren,” Bronson teased.

“True. But I assure you, there is only one reason I am attending.”

“Aye! I am guessing that’s Lady Charlotte. A most unusual young lady, indeed,” Bronson said with a wink. “In that case, you’re fortunate to have some of your dress clothes with you, or attending the ball would have been difficult.” The valet spread the clothing out on the bed. “I prepared your bath.”

“And it is that thoroughness that I truly appreciate,” Logan said. “I can count on having an outfit for any unplanned event. The best decision I ever made was asking you to accompany me home from the continent. I appreciate you, Bronson.”

“Thank you, my lord. But we were friends long before I was your employee. When you offered, I had nowhere else to go and snatched the opportunity. You and your family have become my family,” Bronson said, sounding a little melancholy.

Logan felt a wave of guilt wash over him at his thoughtlessness. His friend had lost his wife and children to influenza while they had been away at war. It was what had made Logan offer him the position of valet. Knowing that Bronson had lost his entire family in one fell swoop. What a nightmare for Bronson to have faced. Logan cleared his throat. “You’re a good man, Bronson, and as strong and affable as you are, I’m certain that one day, love will find you again.” Indeed, Bronson was only ten years his senior, and Logan noticed the appreciative looks his valet received from women when they traveled. He had also noticed the appreciative smiles Rose’s Aunt Agnes had given Bronson. “You never know when that person will come into your life.” As soon as he’d said it, he realized it also applied to him. He had never expected to meet anyone like Lady Charlotte Penrose— Charlie .

“I will leave you to bathe. The water is warm, and the soap and towel are next to the tub. I will return in twenty minutes and help you dress,” Bronson said, stepping from the room.

Logan lay back in the tub and thought about the dance lesson the other day. He couldn’t fathom what had gotten into him. Considering no alternative, he’d asked Lady Charlotte to dance, just as Viscountess Wilburn had suggested—silently reminding himself not to call her Aunt Agnes at the ball. Who am I fooling? I was looking for an excuse to dance with Charlie.

As he remembered holding her, familiar waves of warmth shot through him. Never

had a woman affected him so. His time on the continent had placed him in the company of plenty of women, with social events before battles that were, oddly, commonplace.

Attending a ball had been the furthest thing from his mind; however, the thought of her dancing with other men tormented him with jealousy. He'd never felt a jealous streak in his life! He couldn't make sense of it. Charlie so taunted his dreams, he'd dragged himself from his bed to attend breakfast the past two days—craving even a few minutes of her company. He only agreed to take dinner in his room, so Bronson would stop harassing him about the dangers of infection.

He leaned back and closed his eyes, thinking back to holding her in his arms and breathing in her essence. She smelled of jasmine and vanilla. The memory of it dulled the twinges of pain in his chest—and apparently his senses.

“Rose, you look like you were born to wear that dress. It's truly lovely on you!” exclaimed Charlie. “I wish your parents could see you in it. They would be so proud of you.”

“Do you think so?” Rose asked.

“Of course, they would! You both look lovely!” the dowager said, walking into the parlor.

“My dear, your mother and father want you to be happy,” Aunt Agnes said as she followed the dowager into the room. “Your parents gave me something special for you.” Reaching into her pocket, she withdrew a silver necklace with a heart-shaped sapphire. “Your mother asked that I give you this for the ball. She had planned to give it to you herself, but when your father took a bad turn before we left, she lost track of time. But she made me promise. It was a necklace your father had given your mother when they became engaged. She wanted you to have it.”

Rose wiped tears away from her cheeks. “I recognize it. It’s the necklace she often wears. I’ve always loved it.”

“Well, she wanted you to wear it and asked me to tell you she will be thinking of you, and wishing she could have gone with you to the ball.”

Charlie wiped tears from her face and realized she was also crying. “That’s lovely, Rose. It will suit your dress perfectly.”

“I told her your mother the color before we left, Rose, and yesterday she saw the dress—with her looking glass,” the dowager whispered, and then put her finger to her mouth. “I hear someone coming.”

Men’s heavy footsteps sounded in the hall.

“Speaking of parents, your mother and father had planned to join us at the ball,” the dowager said, looking at Charlie, and loud enough for whoever was approaching to hear. “But I received a message that they cannot attend. Caroline went into labor and was expected to deliver twins, and they felt they could not leave her. I’m very sorry, my dear. I know you had looked forward to their being here.”

Charlie choked back her disappointment. She had hoped to introduce Logan to them, hoping they approved. And she missed them. “I understand. Carrie needs to have them with her at this delicate time.” Silently, she sent a petition that everything would go well for her sister.

Before anything else could be said, Logan appeared in the doorway. “Are we all assembled and ready?”

Charlie’s heart did a dozen somersaults as she beheld how handsome Logan looked. She was thrilled that the doctor had allowed Logan to attend, provided he was careful,

of course. But seeing him standing before her, she'd never felt such anticipation.

"We are waiting for Caden," her grandmother said, clearly pleased as she regarded the earl. "You look very debonair, don't you think so, ladies?"

"No, need to flatter me, I'm here," Caden said, grinning as he walked in behind Logan. "And I must say, I have never been in more resplendent company."

"Grandmama was speaking of the earl," Charlie blurted. Her face heated as she realized she'd made yet another faux pas. She glanced at Rose, who was gazing up at Caden and beaming from ear to ear. I hope Caden dances with Rose tonight. If he doesn't, it'll break her heart.

"I'm glad to see you are honoring us with your presence, Caden," the dowager said in a wry tone.

Caden smiled. "I wouldn't dream of missing it, Grandmama." He turned to Rose. "I hope you will hold the first waltz for me, Rose," Caden said, affirming he'd heard Charlie's thoughts. He leaned over Rose's hand and kissed it. Then he straightened and turned to Charlie. "And you, as well, little sister."

They often heard each other's thoughts. It was a twin thing with them. But Charlie also knew Caden practiced selective hearing because he also ignored her when he didn't want to "hear" her thoughts. As kids, they used to share thoughts and tease those around them with antics. The smirk on his face told her he was still reading her thoughts, and she fought the urge to stick out her tongue. Apparently, he thought this last-minute gesture would place him back in Grandmama's good graces—a thought she dearly hoped he heard!

"And you both must save me a waltz," Logan said, bowing over Charlie's hand and giving it a light kiss.

“Of course! I’d be honored,” Charlie enthused, praying there would be more than one dance with him.

Of course, you would. You’ve thought of the handsome earl so often, you’ve got me seeing him in my dreams , Chapelle meowed loudly, as she sauntered into the room.

They must be preferable to dreams of chasing mice , Charlie countered, still smiling in Logan’s direction.

“And I will save you a place,” chimed in Rose, obviously still beaming over Caden’s request.

“The carriages are waiting in the drive,” the dowager announced. “While Nightshade Manor is in Boca Morrow, it is at the far end of the village and will take time to get there. I thought two coaches would be more comfortable for our party.”

“Thank you for the thoughtfulness. It’ll be nice to stretch out my legs,” said Caden.

Ha! You are not out of trouble yet, dear brother. Try harder. Perhaps, promise two dances to Rose! She suppressed a chuckle as she heard Caden’s sigh from behind her, signaling her brother had gotten that message.

The party made their way down the front steps of the townhouse to the two waiting coaches. Logan and Caden helped the ladies into the front coach before taking their places in the second, smaller coach. Charlie saw Chapelle sneak in and hide beneath her skirts before the door to the coach closed. She felt sure her grandmother wouldn’t have said anything since the men were riding separately. Besides, Chapelle typically remained in the carriage.

“I thought this would be the best arrangement,” the dowager said, as the door shut to the ladies’ carriage. “Everyone can stretch their legs and the men can have their own

carriage.”

“I concur,” Aunt Agnes agreed. “It would have been tighter quarters, and those beautiful dresses would have gotten wrinkled. This is far more preferable.”

Three-quarters of an hour later, the coach rumbled off the main road onto a long gravel drive, signaling they were now on the Drakos estate. Charlie peered out her window, hoping to catch the first glimpse of the well-hidden mansion, Nightshade Manor. It was built by the Drakos family centuries ago as a refuge from the witchfinders, who, at the time, had hunted down and tortured to death, so many witches. The mansion was hidden behind a rambling mass of dark, foreboding woodlands—so dense that the only light that could be seen was from the lamp on the front of the coaches or from the moon and the stars.

The four-storied stone mansion finally came into view as the drive curved around colorful flowerbeds, bursting with color, and illuminated by tall gas lamps. With its massive Corinthian pillars, Charlie was reminded of its resemblance to a Greek temple, rather than a typical English estate. All the windows were ablaze with light and music could be heard from the ballroom within. As the coaches came to a stop, they were met by liveried footmen.

“I’m just tingling with excitement,” exclaimed Rose, as she stepped from the vehicle and gazed up at the impressive mansion.

“Me too,” Charlie said, realizing she truly was. It was because he was here. For the first time since she’d attended her first Society event, she sensed this would be a very special night.



### CHAPTER 8

Charlie stood on the landing at the top of a grand staircase and gazed at the ballroom below. The opulence and grandeur were more than she had recalled from last year, and even though half the guests had yet to appear, the vast room buzzed with excitement. Charlie sucked in her breath. Many of the guests below had been staying at the manor.

White walls glimmered in warm satiny hues, capturing the flickering light given off by the thousands of candles in the huge candelabras. The ceiling was covered in a deep, iridescent blue fabric giving the illusion of dancing beneath the stars. A sheer tulle woven with silver thread had been used for the drapes that adorned the wall-to-wall windows. At the far end of the ballroom, glass doors opened onto the balcony and the elegant gardens below. The white marble floor sparkled from the reflections of the chandeliers, and luxurious iridescent ivory silk covered chairs and tables and accentuated the room, as if preparing everyone for a bewitching evening. Tables and benches had been strategically placed throughout the room, although the ballroom wasn't packed and only a few couples were dancing.

Rose squeezed her hand in excitement. "Nothing I imagined even comes close to this!" she whispered as she lightly tapped her feet in rhythm to the music. "I feel like Cinderella at the Prince's ball."

Cinderella was a wonderful description. "Grandmama has told me stories of some balls in the past when she was a young girl and they have always been this grand," Charlie said. Rose's unfortunate incident last year must have spoiled her memories of last year's décor, but she wouldn't remind her friend of that. She turned around and

spotted her brother and Logan emerging from the welcoming line.

“It seems the Countess of Wharton and Rose’s Aunt Agnes are old friends,” said Caden as he sauntered up. “Grandmama said she’d be here in a minute and asked us to wait.”

“Yes, as soon as she saw her, Lady Drakos pulled her aside and hugged her. Something about being in boarding school together,” Logan said, walking up to them.

“Aunt Agnes mentioned on the way here that she thought she knew the countess,” Rose commented. “They went to the Academy of Charm together.”

“It’s the same school most women in our family have all attended,” Charlie said, and then wished she hadn’t. It was a school that specialized in preparing young witches, and not something she could discuss in front of Logan. At least not yet.

Logan chuckled. “That’s an interesting name for a finishing school... I’ve never heard of it. My younger sister attended Miss Porter’s, and she hated every minute she was there. Said it was dreadfully dull.”

“I’m certain your sister would have preferred the Academy of Charm,” Caden said with a smirk—not covering his amusement at Logan’s misunderstanding of the school, but straightened his face when Charlie gave him a look.

“Ah! There you are, my dears,” Grandmama said, tapping Caden on the shoulder. “Our dear Agnes and Lady Drakos found themselves going down Memory Lane.”

“Yes, yes! It has been so long since we’ve seen each other,” Aunt Agnes said excitedly and with only a hint of contrition. “This has already been such an exciting and surprising night. I’m terribly sorry to have kept you waiting.”

“They should be announcing us in a moment,” the dowager murmured. “Going down these stairs is the only chance I must look over the attendees and see who arrived here before me. At least we are one of the earlier arrivals.”

“The Earl of Fitzwater, the Dowager Countess Penrose, Viscountess Wilburn, Lady Rose Kenwood, Lady Charlotte Penrose, and Viscount Penrose,” bellowed a tall, liveried man from the top step.

Heads turned and whispers began at the announcement of the Earl of Fitzwater. The loud buzz of whispers startled Charlie, who heard some of the questions— Who is he? Is he new to Cornwall? Inexplicably feeling protective and possessive, she fought the impulse to grip his arm a little tighter.

As they stepped onto the dance floor, soft strands of a waltz sounded, and Logan stepped in front of her and reached for her hand. “I wonder if you will do me the honor of this dance, Lady Charlotte?” he asked, seemingly oblivious to the looks and stares around them.

She nodded. “I would love to dance with you, my lord,” Charlie said with a shy smile. Worried about leaving Rose, she turned and noticed her friend smiling up at Caden, who had just asked her to dance. She saw Rose touch her necklace just before she placed her hand on Caden’s arm. Caden’s eyes seemed to be only for Rose. It was the first time she’d seen him smiling at her friend. Thank you, dear brother .

As Logan twirled her onto the dance floor, Charlie looked into his sky-blue eyes and relaxed into his arms. Her skin tingled where he touched her, and a wave of warmth whirled like butterflies in her stomach.

“Perhaps when we finish the dance, we can stroll through the garden. I’ve heard it’s quite beautiful,” Logan whispered. “And there’s a full moon to light our way.”

“Yes, but I should probably check with Grandmama before I leave the ballroom,” Charlie breathed, silently chastising herself for her dull-as-ditchwater response. She sounded like a young girl fresh from finishing school. She wanted nothing more than to step outside with Logan and sit beneath the stars.

“I understand,” he said. Logan wore a smile, but Charlie could see something else flicker in his eyes.

“The countess is well known for her gardens,” Charlie said, hoping to redeem herself. “Everything is lush...almost year-round. Even orange trees grow here, and the trees add a delicious citrus fragrance to the air. The garden is also populated by myriad species of birds and owls. Grandmama said there are so many nightingales and thrushes that if you walk through the garden in the morning, it sounds like nature’s orchestra.” Unless I miss my guess, Chapelle probably broke her promise to stay in the carriage and will be out there stalking owls—and spying on me.

Nay, mistress. I have been sleeping in the carriage, as promised, the cat replied with a yawn in her voice. But if you will be on the terrace with your handsome lord—perhaps that might hold a promising diversion for me. So far, this entire evening has been as boring as watching Harrison polish the silver.

Charlie tried to ignore Chapelle and closed her eyes as Logan whirled her around the room, delighting in the heady feeling of being in his arms. She did so want to be with him, alone in the garden, under that full moon.

“The dance is ending. I should take you back to your grandmother,” Logan said, guiding her with a light touch of his hand on her back as they made their way off the floor.

Charlie glanced across the room and noticed Caden had returned Rose to her aunt, but it seemed Pierce Drakos whisked Rose back onto the floor for the next dance. She

delighted in seeing her brother's discomfiture, noting Caden's crossed arms and angry stance— finally, he had noticed Rose . Charlie wished she could keep dancing...but only with Logan. That was why she kept her dance card in her reticule, so she could control who signed it. She knew it was pushing propriety to do so, and she also knew her grandmother would not approve. Dare she risk Grandmama's ire?

"You promised me a second dance," she blurted, throwing caution to the wind.

To her relief, he smiled. "And I intend to make good on that promise. But I'd like to make it a waltz. Anything more difficult may strain the stitches again." He grimaced. "I don't think I could tolerate any more stitches."

I'm such a ninny! Guilt washed over her at her selfishness. He had come here as a favor to her, and here she was trying to force him to dance just because she wanted to be alone with him. "Forgive me, for being so unthinking." She smiled. "I would prefer it be a waltz as well." Then I can enjoy the warmth of being in your arms again.

"Lemonade or champagne?" Logan asked.

"I don't understand?" Charlie replied.

"Instead of a dance, I thought we could enjoy some refreshment before I escort you back to your grandmother," Logan said with a smile.

"Definitely champagne, my lord—Logan," she said, returning his smile.

"I do as well." He winked, snagging two glasses from a passing footman.

He wanted to waltz with Charlie, wanted to twirl her around the dance floor for hours, but his side was throbbing and rather than risk bleeding onto the ballroom

floor, he decided it was best to heed the doctor's advice. Dancing had given him an excuse to hold her, touch her, gaze at her; sipping champagne was as good an excuse as he could think of to snatch a few more minutes alone with her. Charlie looked utterly mesmerizing. When he left the welcome line and walked out onto the landing, he saw her standing there with Rose, he was enthralled by her beauty.

After they finished their champagne, Logan set their empty glasses on the tray of a passing footman and then escorted Charlie back to her grandmother, who was at the other end of the ballroom. Logan noticed the dowager speaking to a distinguished-looking gentleman who was partially turned away.

The man turned just as they approached. "Lord Fitzwater, I thought I recognized your name when you entered," Lord Wharton said, extending his hand to Logan. "You may call me Drakos. I answer to either."

"It's nice to finally meet you," Logan said. "My late father mentioned your name often."

"I worked with your father and Lord Penrose on the turnpike project," Wharton amended.

Logan felt himself relax into an easy smile. "Of course! My father was honored to work with you on the turnpike project. Occasionally, I would get letters and he would update me on progress."

"Your late father had some interesting ideas—very modern and efficient," he said. Then he cleared his throat and leaned a little closer. "I heard about your unfortunate brush with a gang of highwaymen recently that forced you to stay in this area. My wife, Lady Drakos and I would be privileged to have you join us and invite you to stay with us as our guest," he said.

“Yes, it was quite unanticipated. And as much as I appreciate your invitation, Wharton, I’ve been enjoying the wonderful hospitality of the dowager countess and her family. I am healing well and anticipate leaving in a day or so,” Logan returned. “Speaking of which, allow me to introduce Lady Charlotte Penrose, granddaughter of the Dowager Countess Penrose.

“A pleasure to meet you again, Lady Charlotte.” The earl lifted Charlie’s hand to his lips and gave her a charming smile. “We have met at previous functions.”

Dash it. Logan noted Charlie’s pretty blush as the earl greeted her warmly. Wharton was rumored to have been on every matchmaking mama’s list for years until he married Iris. Now his son, Pierce, was looking for a wife and was probably following his father’s footsteps, making him high priority on the matchmaking lists. Logan hoped Pierce’s name was not on Charlie’s dance card or Logan would have had some stiff competition for Charlie’s attention.

The thought gave him pause. Is that what I truly want? True, Logan was having a hard time getting through the day without thinking about Charlie every second. But he hadn’t had a chance to speak privately with her about his thoughts, feelings or ask her how she felt about him. Bronson had teased him that if he couldn’t see that Charlie was in love with him, then his wound must have affected his eyesight too. Perhaps he could convince Charlie to go for a walk in the garden, but he’d have to convince the dowager as well.

“If you find your circumstances change, my invitation stands,” the earl said. “My wife had her come out with your mother and considers herself a close friend. We were saddened to hear about your brother’s passing.”

“Thank you. Losing my brother has been a very difficult adjustment,” he said.

Wharton nodded solemnly. “I can imagine the challenges you’ve faced, coming home

to such circumstances. Please, if there is anything we can do to assist you or your mother, please don't hesitate to ask." The earl excused himself to continue his rounds.

Charlie had rejoined her grandmother and Rose's aunt and was whispering excitedly about Caden and Rose. Logan's lips twitched at Charlie's attempts to match-make. But he agreed. Caden and Rose were well suited. Rose's sweet nature would balance Caden's mischievous streak, and Caden's tendency to break the rules of convention would have a positive effect on Rose's tendency toward timidity, Logan thought. He looked about, feeling a crackle of excitement in the air. While the Drakos' ball resembled the ones in London, it also didn't resemble them. It was hard to pinpoint exactly, but things felt different. For one, the decorations.

Lady Wharton had chosen earthier decorations blending trees, greenery, and florals. Nothing about that was novel; many hostesses used natural elements in their decorations—but this was beyond anything he'd ever seen before. Even the dark blue fabric stretched across the ceiling resembled a starry night. And the greenery around the room seemed as vibrant and lush as it would have in mid-summer, and yet, here they were in autumn... And even the trees were lush. He'd glimpsed orange trees in the gardens as he danced with Charlie—but he noticed they had fresh oranges. In November. He'd only ever seen such lush fruit in the south of Italy when he'd gone on his European tour after he'd come down from Oxford.

Still, it was beautiful, and the Drakos were very welcoming. Logan couldn't help but notice at least one thing was the same as in London. The matchmaking mamas were out in full force. Logan could turn in any direction and see a cluster of them staring and whispering. He was relieved when Caden walked his way, farcically reasoning it would be a safe harbor from the gaggle of matchmaking mamas staring at him.

"I just received an urgent message from the sheriff that the highwaymen we hauled into jail have escaped," Caden said, joining him, his face tense with worry. "We should be on the alert."



“How did they escape?” Logan asked.

“I suspect money passed hands.” Caden sighed with exasperation. “Although it would be hard to prove. But in these parts, people are distantly related to each other.”

It was nothing Logan was unfamiliar with, although it frustrated him to know that the highwayman and his cohorts would no doubt get back to causing more harm and destruction. He and Caden and Bronson would have to be vigilant where Charlie and her family were concerned.

The band struck up another waltz and Logan noted Caden’s shoulders stiffen as Pierce Drakos returned Rose back to her aunt. Caden was forever acting nonchalant about Rose, and yet Logan couldn’t help but notice the way he looked at her when he thought no one was watching.

“I promised to dance a second waltz with Rose,” Caden said, clearing his throat. “She’s having a much better go of it this year, and I’d like to get my dance in before things head south.”

“And how will things head south , exactly?” Logan asked.

“The woman cast up her accounts all over my trousers and shoes last year. I promised two dances, and I should get the second one in.” He shrugged.

“Ah, I see.” Logan thought that was just an excuse. Caden seemed eager to dance with Rose again.

“I too promised another waltz with Charlie,” Logan said.

Caden said nothing, but Logan didn’t miss the sparkle in his eyes. He had heard about twins and their unique ability to communicate. Caden was Charlie’s twin and likely

knew more than he could or would say. Logan wasn't sure how or when it had happened, but Charlie had come to mean a lot to him. He couldn't help but wonder what would happen when he had to leave. He was planning to head home tomorrow. He missed his mother and his sister, Beth, and there was much to do at the estate. He needed to talk to Charlie tonight.

He and Caden approached the four ladies who'd been engaged in an animated discussion.

"I wondered if you'd forgotten about us," Charlie said with a smile.

"We didn't want to interrupt your discussion," Logan quipped.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" Charlie asked.

"Indeed! It has been the most enjoyable evening thus far. I overheard Lord Pierce Drakos tell Lady Clara's brother that he was off to dance with his betrothed. It appears he's asked Lady Clara to be his wife." She nodded, indicating the couple on the floor. "Love is grand, don't you think? It's clear he only has eyes for her."

Logan followed the direction of her nod and noticed the couple dancing. Charlie was right. They did seem to have feelings for one another, he realized, feeling slightly foolish where his earlier jealousy over Drakos had been concerned. "I hope you will make the evening even more enjoyable by dancing the next waltz with me."

Charlie seemed to hesitate and glanced at her grandmother, who inclined her head and smiled.

She turned back to him, and her extraordinary green eyes glittered like emeralds under the glow of thousands of candles. "I would love to," she whispered.

“I don’t forget my promises,” he whispered back as he looped her arm through his and whisked her onto the dance floor. “I’ve noticed that this ball is quite unique and different from others I’ve attended,” he finally said.

Charlie’s head jerked up. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, things are different—subtle, but different.”

“Perhaps we should take that walk in the gardens you mentioned earlier,” Charlie murmured.

Elated to have her beside him with or without music, he agreed. “Let’s go back and tell your grandmother where we’re going.” They walked back to the dowager and Aunt Agnes, who were seated with several other older matrons. “I’d like to escort Lady Charlotte for a turn around the garden, if that is permissible, Lady Penrose.”

“We were just thinking of stepping out onto the veranda...”

“We were?” Agnes asked.

“Yes, Agnes. We, just this minute talked about it. Anyway, the garden is well-lit, and I think it would be fine,” the dowager said.

Logan readily agreed.

As he and Charlie walked ahead through the garden, they rounded a corner. Looking up, he noticed how the sky had an iridescent quality about it, like the blue silk ceiling in the ballroom. The full moon was bright and even if there hadn’t been hundreds of lamps lining their path, it would have offered ample illumination. Grasping her hand, he tugs her into a quiet corner shielded from the view of the balcony and the illuminating gas lamps. “It’s a night made for magic,” he commented, softly.

She whipped her head around with a surprised look on her face. “What do you mean?” she blurted.

“I mean the night sky,” he indicated with a slight gesture. “It’s beautiful, but I’ve discovered there’s a beauty that even the prettiest night sky doesn’t compete with.”

“Um...wh...what are you talking about?”

He took a step closer and, tracing the delicate line of her chin said, “I mean you.”

She opened and closed her mouth, still staring wide-eyed.

“We may have found the only place in the garden that isn’t well-lit.” His finger gently lifted her chin. “I wonder if you might permit me to kiss you.” In his dreams, there had almost been kisses, and he wanted that kiss.

She gazed into his eyes. “I...yes...I would like that.”

He smiled and leaned down, gently brushing his lips with hers...teasing. She opened her mouth, but before she could speak, he pressed a gentle finger on her lips. Her eyelids fluttered closed, and he leaned in.

Logan captured her mouth in a hungry kiss, and feeling her breathy sigh against his lips, kissed her deeply. Playfully joining his tongue with hers, he reveled in the taste of her. Like sweet nectar. A soft moan escaped her as she wrapped her hands around his neck, twirling her fingers through the hair at his nape. Her touch sent a strange feeling through his body, something he had never felt before, and his heart beat a wild tattoo in his chest. Logan had kissed and been with many women, but this was different. This was new. This was Charlie. His arms pulled her closer and his breath quickened as he deepened the kiss. All he wanted was for this moment to last forever. Just him and Charlie. Everything else fell away until heavy footsteps crunching

gravel and voices nearby jolted him from his fiery reverie.

For a moment he stared into her green eyes, trying to slow his breathing. “I couldn’t waste that beautiful moon, the glow of a million stars, and being alone with you. That kiss felt magical.”

“Well, this is Halloween,” Charlie said hoarsely.

He blew out a slow, calming breath and smiled. “Perhaps that would explain the verdant plant life here and the flowering fruit.” He pointed toward the line of orange trees that filled in the far corner of the property. “The air is cool as it should be at this time of year and yet there is such a profusion of fruit the likes of which I’ve only ever seen in greenhouses in England. How can that be?”

Charlie nibbled on her lower lip and seemed to hesitate. Finally, she looked up at him, her eyes serious. “Can I be honest?”

Surprised by her forthright question but intrigued, he nodded. “Yes.”

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “What you don’t know...or perhaps you may have wondered...is that the women in my family—a large group of women in this part of England—are natural witches,” she finished in a rush. “With only a few exceptions, most of the men are mortal,” she added in a more sedate tone.

Speechless. He was utterly without words. It was his turn to expel a deep breath. “I’m not sure what I was expecting, but that wasn’t it,” he said. Yes, Charlie’s family was a trifle eccentric, and Charlie herself was unlike any woman he’d ever met, which only added to her charm, but he did not know that she could craft a charm or a spell or whatever witches did. Then he remembered it all in a flash—Caden and Charlie suddenly swooping in, dressed in black, leaping at the highwaymen. They had the skill and abilities of the finest soldiers he’d marched with. It was understandable that

Caden had that level of strength and skill, but for Charlie, it could only have been magic. He recalled his fevered dreams of beautiful, catlike green eyes surrounded by long waves of striking silvery hair...

He shook off his wayward thoughts and met Charlie's gaze. Her beautiful green eyes were now brimming with tears. She opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Instead, Charlie grasped the folds of her dress and fled from the garden.

### CHAPTER 9

#### THE NEXT DAY

Charlie woke up before dawn, bathed in a cold sweat from a nightmare about being tied to a stake, choking on the smoke from the smoldering flames that were flaring up from burning branches surrounding her feet. Exhausted but unable to get back to sleep, Charlie dragged herself from bed, dressed, and headed down to the stables intending to help Barry, the young stable hand, feed the horses.

Life had dealt her a disappointing blow last night—and she brought it on herself.

It was her fault the night had turned into a disaster. Charlie had rattled on and on like she had tongue enough for two sets of teeth! Why had she thought that telling Logan she was a witch had been a good idea? One second, Logan was remarking on the oddity of the lush gardens in November, and the next he was staring at her as if she was an oddity. Admittedly, the gardens were lush compared to all the other homes in the area, but Charlie could have just changed the subject instead of blurting out the truth.

She should have known better. Grandmama would be so upset with her for breaking her cardinal rule: never reveal your true self to a mortal without first finding out how they feel about witches.

Aggravated with herself, she made her way downstairs to the kitchen. Opening the larder, she grabbed a small bag of sugar cubes. Cook prided herself on her ability to make cubes from sugar and did not approve of them being fed to the horses. But

Charlie found it convenient and helpful when she needed to coax the horses to do her bidding. She also grabbed several apples and stuffed them in her pockets. She briefly lamented leaving her own horse, Sable, back home, but she rarely took her horse with her for such a brief trip. Sable loved sugar cubes and apples, and she felt Justice and Moonbeam would, as well.

Charlie had planned to introduce Logan to her parents at the ball...hoping they would like him, and he them...but it turned out she didn't have to since they hadn't come. According to Grandmama, who'd used her looking glass, she'd received a message from Charlie's mother that Carrie had gone into premature labor and delivered twins. Charlie's parents had discussed the possibility of a premature delivery, given that twins ran in their family and William's family. Had the early labor not coincided with their visit, her parents would have been at the ball as planned. She didn't begrudge their visit to her sister, but she missed them. Charlie had contemplated feigning a headache and asking her grandmother if they could leave early after her blunder with Logan; instead, she'd ended up in the ladies' retiring room to have a good cry...

"How are you this morning, Justice?" She opened her hand, and the black stallion gobbled the sugar cubes. A neigh to the right of her made her laugh. "Moonbeam, I have some for you as well." Smiling, she gave the mare two cubes.

"Lady Charlie, I didn't realize you were here," Barry said as he approached from the other end of the stables. "I 'ave fresh hay and water fer the 'orses, milady."

"Thank you, Barry. They will appreciate that. I've brought an apple for each of them. And I didn't forget you enjoyed them, too," Charlie said, withdrawing a shiny red apple from her pocket.

Barry swept his hat off his head and held it in front of him. "Thank ye kindly, milady," the youth said, accepting the precious fruit. He put down the pitchfork and took a bite. Juice ran down the corners of his mouth. "This is very good. I 'ad to miss



my breakfast this morning on account of the head groom being under the weather. I 'ad to be 'ere sooner. So, this apple 'its the spot."

"You are taking such good care of the horses. Is Justice ready to ride?"

"I think so; 'is chest looks almost 'ealed. The doc did a good job, 'e did."

"Are we alone in here?" Charlie asked. She tilted her head, thinking she'd heard voices.

"Oh yes, milady. It's too early for most folk to be up and about."

"I thought I heard something, but I must be imagining it."

Barry shook fresh hay off the tongs of the fork into Justice's stall. "Probably just one of the 'orses scratching around the fresh straw. I'll be right back, Lady Charlie. I have to get more hay."

"Take your time, Barry. There's no rush." Justice let out a snort and stomped his hooves. "Whatever is the matter, Justice?" she asked, reaching out to pat his sleek neck. "I've got a few more sugar cubes left." She reached into her pocket for the treats when she suddenly felt an arm snake around her waist. Charlie had been leaning over the stall gate in an awkward position and they surprised her from behind. Before she could let out a scream, a grimy hand covered her mouth.

Panicking, Charlie struggled and tried to free herself, but whoever it was, had her in a vice-like hold from behind. They shoved a gag in her mouth, and they threw a burlap sack over her head, leaving her in complete darkness.

"Hold on to her, Gunter," said a deep voice. "I've got to tie her hands and feet."

“Aye, she’s bucking and kicking like a wild filly,” a high-pitched whiny voice replied with a cackling laugh.

Dash it all. If I cannot see, I cannot fight these men. She had often wondered if she could use her other senses to levitate objects, but had never spent the time figuring it out. Grandmama had warned her constantly to practice. Charlie’s eyes welled up in tears, now wishing she had.

“Well, lookie here. We came to get the horses...and got the blonde she-wolf, too! It looks like Providence has spoken in our favor today,” the deeper voice said. Charlie felt rough hands push her to the ground. Rolling her on her stomach, they tied her wrists behind her back and bound her feet.

Charlie turned the voice over and over in her head, knowing she’d heard it before, along with the whiny one. A foul stench like stale ale mixed with unwashed bodies overtook her senses, and in a flash, she remembered the highwaymen that she and Caden had fought on the night that Logan and Bronson were attacked. How did they get out of gaol?

She felt as tightly trussed as a roast goose on Winter Solstice. With her arms bound, she couldn’t use her martial arts training, and with her eyes covered she couldn’t use her magical levitation skills on the thieves. She couldn’t even scream for help because they’d gagged her. She strained against the bindings, struggling to untie herself.

“These are the ’orses we wanted,” the whiny voice said.

Charlie recalled the deeper-voiced thief call the whiny one Gunter.

“The pretty little blonde is a bonus,” Gunter cackled again.

“The horses will bring us a pretty penny...but she’ll bring us even more,” the deeper voice said. “After we have a go at ’er, that is. Here! Take the reins of the stallion and pull it behind your nag. I’ll ride this mare.”

“Then, I get to ride her first,” Gunter slurred, as he groped Charlie’s breasts and squeezed.

Charlie gasped in pain as fear shot through her. How am I going to get out of this? As Gunter grabbed her shoulders to turn her over, she knew she’d have to act fast. She tightened the muscles in her abdomen and pushed out with her bound feet with all the effort she could muster. She heard a howl of pain as she connected with a soft, squishy male part.

“Damn wench kicked me in the privates!” Gunter shrieked.

“You may have a tougher time riding her than you thought,” the deeper voice scoffed. “Stop whining and fooling around and help me get the horses,” he ordered. “There’ll be time enough for us to take our pleasure after we get away.”

“Right, guv’nor.” Gunter kicked her in the side, knocking the breath from her lungs.

Nauseous from the gag and the sharp pain in her torso, Charlie tried to calm her ragged breathing.

A few moments later, she heard Justice’s furious snorts again and sounds of a struggle along with a loud thumping of hooves against the gate. Then came a resounding crash, followed by a man’s high-pitched scream.

“Damn animal bit me and nearly ripped off my arm!” Gunter wailed.

Charlie felt a rush of wind whoosh by her and heard the rumble of the horse’s hooves.

The massive stallion must have crashed through the gate and escaped! Charlie would have cheered if she could!

“For God’s sake, Theo, help me!”

She heard what sounded like a punch to the face and bones crunching. “Idiot! I told you not to say my name out loud!” the deep voice roared.

“But you called me Gunter. I thought it were all right!”

Gunter howled, following another sound of a punch.

“Never mind that now. I told you to throw the blanket over the beast’s head while I grabbed his reins. I should kill you myself for messing this up,” Theo muttered.

Charlie felt herself being hauled over a shoulder and tossed over the back of a horse. “Here, take your nag and be thankful you’re alive to ride her,” Theo said. “And mind the wench. She’s a crafty one. Be careful not to let her roll off the horse. I’ll deal with the mare. She’s not as strong as the stallion.”

“That stallion has the strength of ten men,” Gunter grumbled. “He’s run off, and I can’t see him in this thick fog.”

“Aye, but I won’t leave both horses after all the work of finding them,” Theo bit out. “At least we’ll take the mare and the girl.”

The potent smell of blood mingled with the stale smell of ale and vomit nearly overwhelmed Charlie’s senses as Gunter climbed up behind her on the horse. If the thick smell of blood meant anything, the man would likely soon pass out.

Nearby, she heard sounds of a skirmish with another horse—probably the leader,

Theo, wrestling with Moonbeam.

Chapelle, if you can hear me, please send help!

Just as Gunter set off with her on the horse, Charlie heard the earth shake as Justice thundered back. She realized Justice must have returned to save Moonbeam. Then she heard more shouts and angry curses.

Gunter groaned, and she felt the reins go slack. He must have fainted, as she'd predicted. Abruptly, the horse broke into a gallop. She heard a thud, as the unconscious Gunter must have fallen off. Desperate to stay on, Charlie tried with all her might to communicate telepathically with the horse, but all she could sense was a wild fear. Faster and faster the horse galloped, and Charlie felt herself slip.

Logan. Please help me!

Charlie felt the horse lifting its body as though it were leaping over something.

She closed her eyes and screamed behind her gag, knowing she was doomed to fall off.

She was going to die, and she had no one to blame but herself.

I'm sorry, Grandmama, for all the times I broke the rules. Chapelle, please tell everyone how sorry I am...

She would never see her family again. Never live to see Caden finally come to his senses and marry dear, sweet, Rose. Never have the chance to meet her baby niece and nephew. Never again hear the musical, lilting laughter of her sister Carrie. Never again feel the warmth and love of her parents...

She felt herself slide and spin as she tumbled off the back of the horse, striking something with her head.

She would never see Logan again.

I love you, Logan.

Her last thought was of Logan kissing her in the garden at the ball.

### CHAPTER 10

Logan woke up with a start from a nightmare. They had tied Charlie to a stake that was smoking and smoldering with flames, but no matter how fast he ran, he couldn't reach her. Shuddering at the memory of the dark dream, he glanced out the window. The sun was coming up; it would be a good day to travel. And yet, he felt an unease that he could not shake. He'd tossed and turned all night and now felt a heaviness settle in his chest. Around his heart.

He sat up and rubbed the sleep from his face. Logan hoped to say his farewells when he broke his fast. Bronson was probably checking on the horses and making sure they were fit for travel. They wouldn't have more than a day's travel and he planned to ride Justice. The stallion wouldn't appreciate being tied to the back of a wagon, and Logan was certain they were both healed enough to make the journey home. He wanted to ride his horse, not sit in a carriage.

He would soon say his farewells to the family over breakfast. But what if Charlie didn't come down? He thought back to last night's ball—the last time he'd seen her. Charlie had blurted out she was a witch. Not just her but all the women in her family and most of the women at the ball as well. He'd been shocked at first and said nothing as his mind had tried to comprehend Charlie's revelation. Fool that he was, he could have kicked himself for his initial reaction. He remembered seeing the tears in her eyes before she turned and ran back down the garden path into the ballroom.

Charlie had avoided him the rest of the night and when they'd left the ball, she'd hurried into the women's carriage without even a glance in his direction.

Logan rubbed his forehead, unable to comprehend it. They— she had saved his life. But it wasn't with hocus pocus. A doctor had been there to do the healing. And Charlie had bathed his head and fed him tea and broth that first night when he was feverish.

Why am I questioning all this?

“Because I'm still in shock, I think,” he uttered aloud, “which explains why I'm speaking to myself.”

Why did it even matter? Charlie and her family were good people. They'd gone out of their way to help him and Bronson, and to care for Justice and Moonbeam. They'd been as kind and caring to him as his own family would have been.

Charlie.

Beautiful and brave, Charlie was an Incomparable . As funny as she was lovely, she was truly special. But it had nothing to do with her being a witch. It had to do with who she was inside: her kindness, her strength, her goodness.

Charlie is the same today as she was yesterday. Nothing had changed about her, except that she'd opened her heart to him.

She'd risked a lot to tell him, given how dangerous it was for her kind. He'd never believed in hocus pocus nonsense and had always attributed strange happenings to some naturally occurring phenomenon. But he also knew that throughout history women had been burned, hanged, and drowned for even the suspicion of practicing witchcraft. Women healers who worked with herbs, widows who owned property, even elderly spinsters who'd done nothing but live alone, had been accused and tortured to death. “People fear what they don't understand,” he muttered aloud. “I never asked her to explain—never said a word to her. Instead, I just gaped at her like



an idiot.”

Charlie had trusted him with the truth of who she was.

And how did he repay that trust?

By making her cry, you bloody oaf!

Did he care if she was a witch—whatever that really meant—when she and her brother had risked their lives to save his?

A vision of emerald-green eyes and cascading blonde hair rushed through his mind. And her sweet voice... He remembered her sitting next to his bedside, talking to him after the attack. He remembered feeling the heat pulsing through him as he waltzed with Charlie at their dancing lesson and then again last night at the ball. He remembered the warmth in her eyes when his gaze met hers. Yes, she'd been shy, but he saw the glimmer of passion in the depths of her green eyes. A passion that had called out to him, so much so, that he couldn't help but kiss her in the garden at the ball. And when her luscious lips tentatively kissed him back, he'd yearned for more. So much more. Yearned to discover and explore her sweetness...

What am I doing? I'm crazy about her.

It was as if a sudden bolt of lightning had struck him. A stark vision of her tears streaming down her face before she ran from him shot a knife-like pain to his heart. He straightened.

She must think me a cad! I cannot leave things this way.

He threw back the covers and called for Bronson.

The older man pushed open the door. “Yer up! Good. I was just about to head out to the stables to check on our horses. If ye still want to leave today, we should get an early start.”

“I did a terrible thing, Bronson.”

“I’d have a difficult time imagining that, but go ahead. What happened?” his valet asked.

“Charlie told me something last night, something that surprised the devil out of me. But my reaction was the opposite of what it should have been,” Logan lamented, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Then you must fix it, my lord,” the older man said in a firm tone.

“Yes! I need to find her, but she may still be asleep.” He knew Charlie enjoyed sleeping in, something else he found endearing about her. Well, there was nothing to be done. He’d send a servant to wake her so he could make amends.

He put on his pants and threw a linen shirt on, tucking it in. As he was pulling his boots on, someone pounded on the door. Bronson opened the door to Charlie’s maid, who stood there with Chapelle at her feet. The woman was wringing her hands and crying.

“Calm yourself, Millie,” Bronson said in a soothing tone. “And tell us what the matter is.”

But before the maid could answer, Caden showed up at the door. “Logan, something’s happened to Charlie,” Caden said, his face etched with worry. “She’s been kidnapped. I think it was the highwaymen. They found your horse and were going to steal it. Barry, the stable hand, said Charlie was feeding Justice and

Moonbeam sugar cubes and apples this morning just before dawn. He went to get more hay for the stall and when he returned, two men dressed in black had trussed her up and were trying to take your horses. Justice attacked one man and went after both when they tried to take Moonbeam. Barry hid behind a stack of wood; the poor lad's only fourteen. They might have killed him had he tried to intervene."

"The lad did the wise thing," Logan said, his gut twisting in knots at the thought of Charlie and his horses being harmed.

"Barry said both horses returned to the stable without riders as he was leaving to get help," Caden added.

"We must hurry. Where are my boots?" Logan muttered as he scanned the room.

"They're on your feet, m'lord," Bronson said.

"Quite right," Logan said as he glanced down at the worn-leather boots.

Millie hiccupped and let out a wail. "Oh, milord, ye have to save her."

"We will, Millie, I promise," Logan said as Bronson helped him into his jacket.

"Millie, go tell Grandmama and the others," Caden ordered. "And make sure they send for Dr. Thakur."

Logan reached for his leather satchel and winced as he felt the newly stitched skin stretch around his wound. He glanced up and saw the valet's eyes on him.

"Bronson," Logan said as he opened the satchel and pulled out his knife. "Don't warn me about the wound."

“Aye, my lord. The lass is what’s important. We have to find her before...” His voice trailed off. “We’ll find her.”

“I have two footmen armed and waiting to help,” Caden said.

“We’re right behind you,” Logan said, sliding the blade into his right boot, and grabbing his pistol.

The three men sprinted downstairs. The cat had run ahead and was out the door, leading the way to the stables.

I’m coming too! You’ll need me , Chapelle meowed as they caught up to her.

“You can ride with me, Chapelle,” Caden said as though he could understand the cat.

“I won’t ask,” Logan said, shaking his head. “But if the cat can help, we want her with us.”

“Aye! She’s special, that one,” Bronson added.

Logan had the distinct impression Bronson already knew that Charlie’s family was different. But for now, he wouldn’t think about it. They had to rescue Charlie. “If the men who abducted Charlie are the highwaymen who’d escaped from jail, they would be out for revenge.”

“If one hair on my sister’s head is harmed,” Caden seethed, “I’ll beat that lousy sheriff to a bloody pulp.”

The men entered the stables and saw the blood on the ground. Justice stood in front of his open stall, as if waiting for Logan. Logan quickly checked the horse. “This blood isn’t Justice’s. Where’s Moonbeam, Justice?”

“ Neighhhhh ...” Justice tossed his head and snorted. A whinny sounded from behind them.

The men turned their heads as the mare trotted back into the stables with her reins wrapped around the stableboy’s fist. “I was checking her out, milord. She doesn’t appear harmed. The blood on her back must be splatters from the man whose arm yer horse nearly bit off.”

“Barry, do you remember anything else?” Caden demanded.

“Yes, my lord, like I told ye, the earl’s horse reared up and those devils couldn’t catch him. But I saw them grab Lady Charlie. They stuffed something in her mouth and tossed a bag over her head.” Barry’s lips trembled and he sniffed back tears. “I’m sorry I couldn’t help her, my lord. The thieves had guns so I ran and fetched you as quick as I could. But Lady Charlie fought like a tiger cat, even if her arms and legs was tied up,” he added, with a note of pride in his voice.

That’s my girl! Chapelle mewed. I’m sorry, Caden. She’s still too far for me to reach her. We need to hurry. Something is very wrong. I can feel it. If they hurt a hair on her head, I’ll scratch their eyeballs out.

“We’re going to find her, Chapelle,” Caden said aloud, stroking the cat’s head.

“Oh! And I heard two names: Gunter and Theo,” Barry added. “Theo—he’s the bigger one and the leader. The man called Gunter said his name and the bigger man crushed in his face with ’is fist.”

“Good!” Logan said, patting the boy on the shoulder. “What you’ve told us will be of great help.”

“Otis,” Caden addressed one footman. “Alert Lord Drakos, the Earl of Wharton, to

what's happened. We believe the bastards who kidnapped Lady Charlie were the highwaymen who escaped from the gaol. Drakos will know what needs to be done."

"Does Lord Drakos know about the sheriff?" Otis asked grimly.

"I'm sure he has his suspicions," Caden replied. It appeared even the servants knew of the sheriff's suspected duplicity.

The footman nodded and leaped on his horse, kicking up a cloud of dirt as he raced down the lane.

Caden tucked a rifle and two boxes of bullets into his saddle and handed rifles and extra bullets to Logan and Bronson.

Caden, Logan, and Bronson gained their mounts and rode off, along with two other footmen.

Logan urged Justice into a gallop, his thoughts only of Charlie and bringing her home. Hang on, Charlie, we'll find you!

### CHAPTER 11

“How could the sheriff have allowed those thieves to escape from gaol?” Bronson muttered as they followed the trail the highwaymen left.

“Unless the gaol itself has a gaping hole in it, the sheriff will have a lot to answer to,” Caden said. “Especially once my father returns.”

“Allowed is the operative word,” Logan said. “I wonder how those highwaymen have been able to escape justice for so long.”

“Whatever the reason, Sheriff Slothman is finished,” Caden said, his voice filled with rage.

“I think I see something up ahead,” Logan said. “Whoa, Justice.” Logan pulled up the reins and slid from the horse. Reaching out he plucked a crumpled paper that had lodged itself in the low branches of a tree. Look at this, Caden.”

Caden took the paper and studied it, his brow furrowed. “It’s a map of Bocca Morrow, including the Drakos’ estate. But look at the mews. Some stables have been marked off with an X. They must have been systematically looking for your horses.”

“As far as the sheriff knew, Lord Fitzwater had traveled on to his country estate. He didn’t know you were still here,” Bronson said.

“The servants wouldn’t have mentioned it to anyone in the village either,” Caden added. He paused for a moment, then his eyes widened, and he uttered a curse. “That

blackguard! I've seen this map before, or one very much like it, framed on the wall in Sheriff Slothman's office."

"It would seem the sheriff is not incompetent, after all, but very much in league with the highwaymen," Logan said. "The larger stables marked here are yours," Logan pointed out. "They must have been working for several days to locate our horses."

"You'd think they'd know better after getting their arses kicked by Justice before," Bronson said.

"How would they have found out we'd still be here?" Logan asked.

"My guess is they didn't know for sure," Caden replied. "Until last night when you attended the ball. The sheriff must have had a few spies on the lookout."

"And when they came to steal the horses, they came upon Charlie..." Dread pooled in Logan's gut. "Damnation! Can't Charlie just wiggle an ear...or blink, or something to let us know where she is?"

Caden looked at him in surprise. "She told you." It wasn't a question.

"Yes." Logan nodded. "Before I could properly react, she ran from the ball. And like a fool, I didn't follow. I was shocked, but that is no excuse."

Logan noticed Bronson remained quiet. He already knows .

"I'm surprised," Caden said. "Charlie has always been quite cagey with our, er—family secrets."

Except her heart was engaged , Chapelle meowed. That's why she told the truth.



“Is that what happened?” Logan asked bemusedly before realizing he’d just heard Chapelle’s thoughts in his head.

“I don’t want to shock you even more, Fitzwater, but Chapelle is doing her damndest to communicate with you.”

“So, I gathered,” Logan muttered. “I’m not just hearing things.”

Bronson chuckled.

I assure you, the cat doesn’t have my tongue! Chapelle snapped.

Caden smirked. “Yes, Chapelle is Charlie’s cat—and I could swear sometimes she spouts out my sister’s sass when Charlie is trying to maintain a ladylike demeanor. You may hear her because of Charlie’s feelings for you. You’re the only man outside the family that Charlie’s ever given a flying fig for. As her twin, I share a mental connection with her, but that’s the extent of my abilities,” Caden explained. “However, we trained together in martial arts from a master from the Far East. If Charlie gets loose from her bindings, those men will have hell to pay.”

“I had a feeling her fighting skills were real,” Logan said. Now I’ve truly bitten the apple. If I can discern between Charlie’s magical and mortal abilities. He raked his hand through his hair. “Whatever we need to do to find her, we’ll do it.” Even if it means sharing my thoughts with a black and white hellcat, he silently added.

The cat turned and glared at him.

He arched a brow at her. If you insist on invading my thoughts, you’ll hear it all, whether you like it or not.

Narrowing her eyes, she turned to face the path in front of them.

She's up there, Chapelle meowed when their horses got to the turn in the road where the highwaymen had attacked them a week earlier.

Bronson edged his horse up beside Logan's and whispered, "Whatever you do, my lord, I wouldn't advise getting into a catfight with that one," he whispered, as they followed Caden's horse up the path.

"Do you hear her too?"

"No, but I can read horses, and I don't think cats display their emotions much differently. That swishing tail doesn't mean she wants a bowl of cream, I'm sure."

"You're right. Charlie is my priority, so I'd best mind my thoughts around her cat," he murmured, urging his horse around a sharp bend.

"This is the same hill you suggested we should have traveled before the highwaymen attacked us," Bronson said. "I suppose their camp was nearer than we'd imagined."

"Chapelle and I will sneak around back," Caden said. "There's a little used road..."

Guarded by a large dog, hissed Chapelle. He'll smell you before you get close enough to attack. He's blind but lethal.

"Perhaps the smartest approach is a frontal assault," Logan said. "It's usually the best one."

That's what I would do if I were cornering a mouse, Chapelle mewed. Use the element of surprise.

Blast! Now, I'm discussing military tactics with a cat. Logan shifted uncomfortably in his saddle as Chapelle shot him an angry frown. "The cat is right," he said, clearing

his throat. “They’re likely to concentrate their men at the back, thinking we’ll attack from behind. Attacking from the front will surprise them,” Logan explained.

And we avoid the devil dog , hissed Chapelle. I just did my claws, and don’t want to dull them on a large hairball .

Logan couldn’t help but smile. He hoped Caden was right, and Charlie’s cat reflected her spirited sass. Life would never be dull.

“I agree, my lord. Best to take the front. I can take the back with the other footman, in case one tries to escape,” Bronson said.

Having decided, Logan and Caden ordered Bronson and the footman to ride along behind the cabin.

Wait! Chapelle meowed. I brought a little distraction for Hell’s fur ball . She withdrew a wrapped package of meat from Caden’s saddlebag. I sprinkled it with a sleeping draught.

Logan and Caden gaped.

What? It’ll keep the dog from getting harmed , Chapelle insisted.

They waited for Bronson and the footman to situate themselves. When Bronson gave the prearranged hoot sound, they moved in.

Logan crashed through the front door, and Caden followed. When the surprised highwaymen lunged at them, they picked them off, one by one, until only the leader remained. Logan noticed the closed door behind the bastard. “Is that where you have her?”

“You might be right. But you’re too late, if you know what I mean,” he said with a sneer.

Don’t believe him , Chapelle warned.

“Move out of my way, or I swear I will make you rue the day they placed you on this earth,” Logan said in a lethal voice.

The man withdrew a hunting knife and circled Logan. “Seems I recall you getting shot...and maybe stabbed a week ago?” he taunted. “I wonder if you’re as nimble as you think.”

Logan knew Caden was behind him, but this man was his. He motioned for Caden to stand down. “I assure you, I am. And I’m giving you one more chance. Step aside and give yourself up, or I’ll send you straight to hell if you don’t.”

The man snickered. “You and whose army?”

“I don’t need an army,” Logan replied in a calm voice. Reaching for his knife in his boot, he spun and landed a brutal kick to the man’s groin. Not waiting to see his reaction, he whipped his left arm around the man’s neck and pulled it tight to cut off his air supply. The man flailed with his knife, but Logan was ready and sliced through the back of the man’s dominant arm, giving every ounce of strength he had.

With a sudden screech, Chapelle leaped onto the highwayman’s head and began biting and clawing. Moaning in pain, the man slumped in Logan’s arm. When Logan was sure the man was unconscious, he let go. “Tie him up,” he said to Caden.

The back door burst open, and Bronson and the footman ran in. “The dog is fast asleep, and we subdued the two bastards on guard duty.”

Logan nodded as he turned and kicked open the door.

The room was dark, and he had to blink several times to adjust his vision.

“Charlie,” his voice cracked as he found her on a pallet in the corner. “Charlie, my love, can you hear me?” Gently he untied her bindings and felt along her slender frame, checking for broken bones and wounds.

He looked up and saw Chapelle had followed him in and was sitting quietly beside her mistress. The cat looked at him and he saw the sadness in her eyes.

She’s going to be fine, Logan promised.

Chapelle meowed in reply and laid a gentle paw against Charlie’s cheek.

Logan swallowed the lump in his throat as he continued to examine Charlie. He breathed a sigh of relief when he found no broken bones or gaping wounds on her body. And yet, the metallic smell of blood was there. Gently, he moved his fingers around her scalp and gasped as he felt the thick sticky liquid oozing from a deep gash. Acting quickly, he tore the sleeves from his shirt and tenderly bandaged her wound. “You’re the bravest, toughest woman I know,” he said, forcing a light tone in his voice. “We’ll get you back home faster than you can blink those beautiful green eyes of yours.”

“How is she?” Caden asked, striding in.

“I cannot get her to wake up,” Logan choked out. “She has a deep wound at the back of her head. But she’s breathing.”

Caden nodded and wiped away a tear. “She’s alive, Logan. And I know my sister. She never gives up.”

Chapelle nodded, and Logan could have sworn the cat's eyes glistened with tears. He lifted Charlie in his arms and kissed her brow. "Whatever world you live in, Charlie, I want to be there with you," he whispered. "Don't you dare leave me when I've only just found you."

Charlie was floating. A deep male voice was speaking to her, but she couldn't quite make out what he was saying. The voice sounded so familiar, making her feel safe. She could also hear something thudding and realized it was her heartbeat. No, not hers, but someone else's heart, drumming against her ear. There were other voices too, but they sounded muffled like they were speaking at the end of a long tunnel.

She was floating, but not on water or air. She felt powerful arms holding her. And a familiar scent tickled her nostrils. She knew that scent. Sandalwood and bergamot.

Am I dreaming?

Had Logan somehow found her? Or was it her mind playing tricks on her again? The last conscious vision she'd had was of a man with broken yellow teeth and an odor fouler than anything she could recall. He was going to do bad things to her and told her so in disgusting detail. But was the evil highwayman still there? Or was it a nightmarish vision she had summoned up based on memory?

For a moment, panic set in again. The sheer panic she'd felt at the mercy of the thieves.

Help me, Logan!

Please! Find me before it's too late!

"Hush, my beauty," a deep gentle voice soothed in her ear. "You're safe now. No one will ever hurt you again."

Her panic subsided and she relaxed in the cocoon of warmth surrounding her, lulled by a rocking back and forth and that familiar scent that she'd come to love. She was so tired. So very tired. She would just take a few extra minutes to rest...

Charlie, darling. It's Mama. You must wake up now.

She must have fallen asleep. Was that her mother's voice? She no longer felt that warm masculine strength surrounding her, but she still felt comfortable and safe. She was somewhere familiar.

Am I home?

The doctor examined you, my darling. He said this is up to you now. Please come back to us, my sweet girl.

Water droplets dripped on her cheek and Charlie realized they were her mother's tears. Her mother gripped her hand and squeezed it. "Carrie had the babies."

Mama is here! She could tell her about Logan. Maybe Mama would like him. But maybe that didn't matter. He was gone. A pain took hold in her chest...a deep, stabbing pain.

"Charlie, please come back to us." Her mother sniffled. "Grandmama sent word about your injury, and I used my powers to get here, Charlie. Even your father approved of my using them. If I could help you wake up, I would," she sobbed. "What good is having powers when I can't help my darling girl?"

Charlie tried to rally...for Mama. How is Carrie ? she wanted to ask. Charlie felt her mother's hand on hers—its warmth and the scent of her rose perfume. She wanted to tuck her fingers into her mother's hand for warmth. She suddenly felt so cold. Very cold. I'm here, Mama. But I cannot seem to move .

Her mother kept talking, but it sounded more like crying and she had turned away in another direction—maybe to shield her tears? Nothing made sense.

You know your Mama could never hear your thoughts, Charlie. Chapelle edged up from the bottom of the bed and nestled beneath Charlie's arms. Wake up so I can finally get some sleep . Seriously, wake up. Not just for me...but for everyone .

Silly cat. I am trying to wake up . If only she could get that smelly burlap bag off her head.

There is no bag on your head , Chapelle reassured her.

So, why can I still smell it? Lord, she didn't think she could ever forget that smell. Would it haunt her for the rest of her life?

Don't think about the smell and try harder , Chapelle insisted.

I am trying.

“Charlie, it's Grandmama.”

Charlie felt a kiss on her temple and could smell her grandmother's honeysuckle scent. I didn't mean to tell him, Grandmama. It just happened. One minute we were talking about oranges and the trees in the garden and the next I was telling Logan about being a witch. You warned me never to reveal our secret unless it was to someone we could trust. Now we might all be in danger.

“Nonsense, child! You did nothing of the sort,” her grandmother said aloud. “We are all fine. Your earl is fine. And you can trust him. He and Caden found you and brought you home. We just need you to wake up, my sweet child. Please, please, Charlie...wake up. For the love of God, wake up,” her grandmother whispered in her



ear. "I can hear your thoughts. I hope you can hear me."

I hear you, Grandmama. But I can't move. I feel like I'm sinking into a foggy bottom and cannot get up. I love you. Please tell them, I love them all. Please tell Logan ... tell him I love him.

Her grandmother's voice clogged with tears. "You must listen to me, child. You need to tell him yourself, and the only way to do that is to fight. Fight the fog and return to us." Her whisper was fierce...the way Grandmama said things when she was angry. Why was her grandmother angry with her?

Charlie heard more voices and crying. It seemed everyone was crying. Didn't Grandmama tell them she loved them all?

"Charlie, if you don't come back to me, who will I talk to about Caden?" Rose whispered in her ear. "I count on you. You're my very best friend...the sister of my heart. I love you, Charlie. You must wake up now."

I can't seem to do it, Rose, Charlie thought. I'd like to but I'm so cold. Please ask Mama to tuck my hand in hers. It feels frozen. But don't worry, I think Caden will come around.

"I wish I could hear you, Charlie," Rose sobbed. She gripped Charlie's hand and squeezed it. "Your hands are so cold. Oh, please, Charlie, please come back to us."

Someone added another blanket over her, and she felt her mother tuck it in around her. She could smell her father's cherry blend pipe tobacco.

"Charlotte, I'm ordering you to open your eyes." It was her father's voice, raspy with emotion.

Papa. I'm scared. Please help me. The fog is getting thicker and colder. There's no light. And I'm so cold. Charlie felt a tear roll from the corner of her eye.

You shed a tear , Chapelle thought, licking it off Charlie's cheek. I promise to do anything if you will just come back. I'll be good, the cat mewed. I'll be the best cat who ever existed.

You already are the best cat, ever...

Charlie felt Chapelle leave her side . Chapelle, where are you going?

"She went to get me, Charlie," Caden said. "I know you can pull yourself out of this. You just need the right inspiration. You're strong. And I know you're in there. I love you, little sister."

I'm the same age as you , Charlie insisted, even if she couldn't move her lips.

"Yes. You are. And I need you around to keep reminding me. I need you to set me straight. So, wake up," Caden said. He leaned down. "The doctor said the longer you remained like this, the more dangerous it was. So, wake up, little sis!" He kissed her on the temple. "I'm going now, but there is someone who wants to see you."

Don't leave me, Caden.

She felt Chapelle jump back on the bed and curl into her arm. I'll be here, too. What kind of chaperone would I be here if I left you alone?

For a moment, the room fell silent.

"Just let me give her a kiss and then you can sit with her," she heard her Aunt Agnes say. The older woman leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. "Wake up,

Charlie-girl. Wake up,” she whispered. “Someone special is here to see you.”

Charlie felt someone sit down on her bed next to her. Warm lips gently kissed her forehead, and the scent of sandalwood and bergamot enveloped her. Logan .

You’re here. You didn’t leave...

“Charlie, it’s me, Logan. Please wake up.”

His voice seemed to sound farther away than Caden’s. Was she sinking deeper into the cold fog? Still, it was him and he was there. That had to count for something. There was that pain in her chest again. It seemed to happen when his name came up...or when he was there, she realized. She felt colder.

As if he could hear her, Logan picked up her hand and held it in his bigger, warmer one. “Charlie, I love you,” he said in a broken voice. “I think I have loved you since the first moment I laid eyes on you. Those beautiful green eyes focused on me...saving me.” He choked on tears. “Please open those beautiful green eyes...for me. Please, Charlie. Come back to me...”

### CHAPTER 12

#### TWO DAYS LATER

“ I n vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.”

Logan put down the copy of *Pride and Prejudice* he had been reading to Charlie—something Rose assured him that Charlie would like, even though she’d read it several times. Mr. Darcy had managed to win the heart of Elizabeth Bennet, the woman he loved, and Logan sorely hoped that he would somehow do the same.

Open your eyes and come back to me, Charlie . He leaned over to kiss her temple.

Logan had faced death many times on the battlefield when a split second determined whether you lived or died. He’d never dwelled on what that meant at the time. It had been easier to just keep moving, keep fighting, keep trying to stay alive. But sitting by Charlie’s bedside for the past two days, he’d had nothing to do but think. Too much thinking. When all he’d wanted to do was act. If only he could travel into the darkness that held her in its grip and bring her back. He would do it if he could. He would face the fires of hell to save Charlie.

The longer Lady Charlotte remains in a deep, comatose state, the more unlikely it is for her to regain consciousness... Dr. Thakur’s diagnosis continued to haunt Logan, but he refused to give up. He loved Charlie and wouldn’t leave her side if there was even a smidgen of a chance she would awaken.

Logan stood and stretched out the stiffness in his arms and legs. He rubbed his hands over his face to refresh himself and felt the rough growth of beard. Bronson had offered to shave him, but he'd been too preoccupied. Logan hadn't slept in two days—he wouldn't sleep for fear of not being by Charlie's side when she woke up. Except to tend to his personal needs, he hadn't left Charlie's side. Neither had Chapelle. He smiled as he regarded Charlie's feline friend, curled up and snoring. That darned cat had taken a liking to him if sleeping at his feet was any sign.

Logan sat back down beside Charlie on the bed and reached for her hand.

"I love you, Charlie. I do. I love you." He swiped at a rogue tear. "Please, my love, please wake up." Could she hear him? Could she hear his words? He prayed she could. He wouldn't stop talking. Wouldn't stop telling her how much he loved her. Not if there was a chance that he could somehow reach her.

He closed his eyes and smiled as he remembered his first vision of her. "I fell in love with you the first moment I saw you. You were fighting off the bad guys and saving me. Your beautiful green eyes and silver-blond hair had me besotted, even as I lay wounded."

Logan opened his eyes and gazed at Charlie, so lovely, so serene; like Sleeping Beauty. He reached out and threaded his fingers through her golden locks. He gasped and blinked. Had he just seen something? He could have sworn he saw her nose move.

"Did you see that?" He looked at Chapelle, who'd settled in her other favorite spot, under Charlie's arm. He ruffled the cat's furry head. Chapelle opened her eyes and regarded him with a grumpy, sleepy look.

No. I saw nothing. Chapelle didn't go back to sleep, though. She sat up and regarded her mistress for a moment, placing her paw gently on her cheek.

The cat must have sensed something, too. Encouraged, Logan continued, “Charlie, you were so brave—amazing, really. I have seen no one do what you and your brother did. When you get better...I want you to teach me your style of fighting—as long as you let me save you half the time.” He squeezed her hand; it felt warmer. A ray of hope kindled his heart.

“Do you remember our first dance? It was our practice dance. I’ll never forget it. Holding you in my arms—I could have danced with you all day—it was the headiest feeling I’ve ever experienced. I should have known you’d be a graceful dancer, having witnessed your incredible fighting skills. Logan continued to say positive words to encourage her to fight to wake up, to fight to come back.

“Ah, but then dancing with you at the ball was truly unforgettable. Though, I must confess to being jealous of all the gentlemen who couldn’t keep their eyes off you. I was the luckiest man there.” He kissed her hand. “When you are feeling better, my mother will demand that we host a ball of our own...that is, if you will honor me with your hand in marriage.”

Give him something, Charlie , Chapelle said, stretching and then licking Charlie’s face. The poor sot is pouring out his heart to you. He hasn’t left your bed in two days—not even to bathe, and it’s getting pretty stinky, let me tell you. Charlie, you’ve got to open those eyes! Do something. Anything .

“I hear you, Chapelle,” Logan said, arching a brow. “Thanks for making me think I stink.”

You’re welcome. If you heard me, then you also heard me beg her to wake up for you, Chapelle meowed.

“Bloody hell! Charlie, you’ve got to come back, or Chapelle and I will likely drive each other batty—and I’m having a conversation with your cat.”

I can concede to that, Chapelle thought. Charlie, this man loves you. And I know you love him. You must wake up; the poor fool is quite miserable without you. He's all you ever wanted. The cat looked up. I hope you appreciate the depths I've gone for you, Fitzwater.

Logan realized he'd come to rely on the cat's quips. They'd kept him alert, and he wanted to be alert for Charlie. "I do, Chapelle. I do."

He reached out and caressed Charlie's beloved face. "Chapelle is right, my love. I am miserable without you. I know we come from two different worlds, but all I can say is, I don't care about that. All I care about is you and being with you. Please come back to me. Give us a chance," he said, his voice cracking. He gazed at her through eyes blurred with tears. He'd fought the tears long enough, swiping them away. But he couldn't any longer. He lifted Charlie's hand to his face as the tears poured down. "I love you, Charlie." Logan leaned down and kissed her on the lips. "I love you, and I want you as my wife—magic and all."

Charlie clawed her way through the cold, thick fog toward his voice. It was warm and inviting and promised her the life and love she yearned for. Did he say he wanted me as his wife? With each word of encouragement, she felt the warmth begin to seep back into her limbs.

I want to go back. I want to be with Logan. I want to see my family and friends again, and my dear Chapelle.

She kept moving forward, and the fog began to dissipate. A light. She saw a light and warmth. She saw Logan and Chapelle...

How do I do this? I need to open my eyes. I need to wake up ...

She blinked and opened her eyes.

“Charlie, are you awake, or am I just seeing what I want to see?” Logan rasped.

“Wa...ter,” she whispered.

Chapelle stood and stared at Charlie. All it took was a kiss? Come on! I kissed you hours ago!

Logan grabbed the water glass from the bedside table and held it to her lips. She drank greedily.

When she’d had enough water, Charlie moved her head away. “Tell me what you said about giving a ball.” Her voice sounded strange to her ears, raspy and ragged.

“You heard that?”

“Yes. Tell me,” she cajoled.

“The part about my mother expecting us to throw a ball?” he asked.

She nodded.

“She would want to celebrate our union.”

Her eyes brightened. She had heard it right. “Are you asking me to marry you?”

“I am.” He grinned. “Did you actually awaken after I kissed you?”

“I did.”

He laughed. “My God! It might have been two days...but to me, it felt like a hundred years!”



“Yes, I suppose it was rather Sleeping Beauty-like. Does that make you my Prince Charming?” she asked. She felt like the luckiest woman in the world at this moment.

“I promise to be whoever you want me to be for whatever time this world gives us,” he said, his voice smiling. He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it in a courtly manner. “I will be your Prince Charming, your Knight in Shining Armor, and your Mr. Darcy.”

She giggled. “I like that. I think I like the Mr. Darcy part most of all.”

Logan leaned down and kissed her lips. It was a gentle kiss, but it held the promise of so much more.

“Chapelle, find Caden,” Logan said, happiness flooding his chest. “Tell him she’s awake... Tell everyone! Tell them Charlie has agreed to be my wife!”

It’s bad enough I must share her with Prince Charming, but I won’t tolerate you acting like King Tutt and issuing orders. I’ll find Caden...but I’m a cat, for goodness’ sake! Not your servant. We have our standards , Chapelle huffed. She flicked her tail and flounced from the room.

“Do you think there will be room enough for both of us?” Logan laughed after the cat had left.

“I do, my prince.” Charlie pulled him close and kissed him with every ounce of strength in her body, determined to spend the next hundred years warm and in his arms.

### EPILOGUE

#### ONE YEAR LATER

#### FALMOUTH, CORNWALL

Logan and Charlie walked into the large entry hall of Briarcliff Manor and gave their cloaks to the butler.

“Justice enjoys racing Sable. I’m glad your horse is acclimating to her new surroundings,” Logan said.

“Sable adores both Justice and Moonbeam. I love watching their spirited play in the field,” Charlie replied.

The butler returned. “My lord and lady, I’ve been asked to tell you that lunch is served. And your parents have arrived, Lady Fitzwater.”

“Thank you, Peters,” Logan said. “Please let them know we’ll join them shortly.”

“Very good, my lord,” the retainer said.

“At least those dreadful highwaymen are no longer a danger to travelers,” Charlie murmured.

“And neither is Sheriff Slothman. Lord Drakos and your father saw to that. The man will never see the outside of the tower again for his part in the robberies. Giving that

map to the thieves proved his complicity in your abduction.”

Charlie shuddered and Logan drew her into his arms and kissed her, wanting to chase the darkness away from her eyes. She still had nightmares about her abduction, but they were fewer and far between.

Keeping his arm around her, they made their way up the wide staircase that wound its way up the four floors of his ancestral home. Logan’s mother and his sister, Beth, had recently settled into the dower house. But before she moved, both she and Charlie had worked together to redecorate both homes. Logan had loved the changes—both the manor house and the dower house had retained their warmth but had gained a refreshing, airy quality.

“I truly appreciate your mother’s help,” Charlie said. “I especially love the tapestry she gifted us.” They stopped to admire the large tapestry hanging on the wall of the staircase.

Its muted colors depicted a beautiful castle surrounded by lush orchards and green meadows peppered with colorful flowers.

“It was a very thoughtful gift,” Logan agreed.

“It reminds me of the imaginary castle I dreamed of when I was a little girl, although I don’t recall ever telling her. Are you sure your mother isn’t a mind-reader?” she teased.

“I’ve always thought that she had some talent along those lines, although nothing close to what you and your family claim.” He chuckled. “I believe it was one of the many stories your grandmama must have regaled my mother with at our wedding.”

“I love that Grandmama and your mother have become friends,” Charlie said, leaning into his side.

“Did you dream of Prince Charming slaying the monsters and rescuing you even then?” Logan asked, pulling her close.

She grinned. “I’m afraid so. Show me a little girl that doesn’t want to be saved by a handsome prince...”

“...or Mr. Darcy,” he teased.

“Yes! Exactly. And then you came along and saved me.”

“Ah, but you saved me first.”

“I did, and then I saved you again from your stubbornness.”

He threw back his head and laughed.

She turned in his arms, then faced him and kissed him. “I have a secret, but first, you will need to rescue me from the first-floor tower.”

Playing ‘Sleeping Beauty’ again, I see, Chappelle meowed from her spot on the first-floor landing. Sunlight streaming in from one of the windows had pooled on the floor, creating a perfect place for Chappelle to curl up. She stretched out her right paw and admired it, then did the same with her left.

“Of course!” Charlie leaned down and kissed her kitty, then straightened again. As she moved to the stairwell, she teased.

And will I get to hear this secret?

“You will most definitely hear it. After I share it with my rescuer.”

Very well, I shall get back to my important nap. Wake me when it’s time.

“You promised to keep no more secrets.” Logan winked as they continued up to their bedchamber.

“I think you’ll make an exception this time,” she countered. “I promise you won’t be sorry.”

“As long as you are in my life, I am happy. What more can I ask for?” he said.

“Perhaps you should rescue me in our bedroom.” She giggled, running ahead. “I am not ready to share the secret with our family just yet,” she said over her shoulder.

“I have never been more ready...” he said, loving her playfulness. He followed her into their bedroom and swung her up into his arms. “Now, tell me this secret or—”

“I’m pregnant,” Charlie blurted.

“For real?” Logan breathed, his eyes wide.

“Yes...” She reached out and caressed his face. “Will you be disappointed if it is a girl?” She bit her lip, and he saw the worry flicker in her eyes.

“My love. My beautiful, brave, Charlie,” he whispered, blinking back tears. “I would be delighted to have a daughter. A girl with long golden hair and emerald green eyes just like her mama.” He twirled her around and around before thinking better of it and carefully set her down. He reached out and gently smoothed his palm along her still-flat belly. “I’m going to be a father. And you will be a mother.”

That’s generally how it works, Chapelle mewed, sauntering into their room.

“Chapelle, I thought you were going to take a nap?” Charlie scolded.

Who can sleep with all this racket? Chapelle trotted up to them and rubbed her fur

against Charlie's legs, then Logan's. Congratulations! I'm happy for both of you. Truly.

"Thank you, Chapelle." Logan smiled and ruffled the cat's sleek head.

And I can't wait to teach them all my secrets , Chapelle meowed, then sauntered off.

Charlie's eyes met Logan's and they burst out laughing.

God, how he loved this woman. He pulled her close and kissed her thoroughly and deeply.

"So, you won't mind if it's a little witch?" Charlie said breathlessly, between kisses.

He put his finger beneath her chin and lifted her face to his. "I will adore our children as much as I adore their mother. And I hope there will be many for us to love."

"I'm glad you said that, because there is always the chance it could be twins!" Her eyes twinkled with mischief.

Logan lifted her and, striding to their bed, laid her gently on the satiny counterpane.

Charlie wrapped her arms around him and tugged him down for another kiss. "I wish we could just hide in here and keep our secret for a little while longer."

"Yes, but Chapelle would no doubt tell on us." He chuckled. "I suggest we hurry and go down and greet the family, tell them the good news, and then steal away after dinner...just the two of us."

A smile flickered on her lips. "Consider it an invitation."

He kissed her deeply. "Count on my attendance."

~Probably Not The End~