



Yuletide Bride (Regency Christmas Brides)

Author: *Kasey Stockton*

Category: Historical

Description: When a marriage of convenience becomes inconveniently complicated

Mercy Caldwell, the vicar's eldest daughter, has watched her younger sisters march down the aisle while she remains resolutely on the shelf. When a chance at matrimony arrives mere hours after her youngest sister's engagement, Mercy seizes the opportunity—and the man she's secretly admired for years.

Colin Birchall's grand estate is crumbling, and his aunt's generous inheritance comes with one condition: he must be married by Twelfth Night. In Mercy, he finds the perfect candidate to meet his aunt's exacting standards. It seems an ideal arrangement—until they're forced to actually live together.

From differing views on marriage to clashing Christmas traditions, Mercy and Colin discover that convenience and compatibility are two very different things. But when Colin's aunt arrives unannounced demanding proof of their love, they must convince her—and perhaps themselves—that their hastily forged union is more than just a festive facade.

Total Pages (Source): 24

CHAPTER ONE

November 1815

London, England

There was nothing more satisfying for Colin Birchall than a good, clean, organized desk. His house was falling apart around him—the rope cordoning off the drawing room was only the latest in temporary measures to ensure no one hurt themselves on one of the many faulty structures in Winterbourne—but he had left his desk tidy. The ability to face a crumbling estate with equanimity and patience was the mark of a good man; the ability to do so with preparation, intentional lists, and methodical planning was the mark of a great one.

Colin strived for greatness.

His estate was falling to ruin. His money was gone. His servants were abandoning him. In the midst of all that, he had to travel through frigid weather to London to attend a summoning by his eccentric great aunt. None of his week had gone according to plan.

Yet, when Colin entered the stuffy office for his Great-aunt Edith's solicitor, he was pleased to note the tidy desk with neatly arranged piles and no unnecessary knickknacks strewn about. This lawyer was a man who could be taken seriously.

Unlike the woman he worked for.

Mr. Davidson pushed his glasses up his thin nose and looked at Colin and each of his three cousins in turn. Colin suspiciously noted there were only four cousins in attendance—himself included—one from each family: Colin, Richard, Alden, and Rose. While Lady Edith was eccentric by anyone's standards, she tended to have methods for her madness. Everything with her was a puzzle to be solved. There was something each of these cousins shared, and he would discover what it—ah. They were each...dark haired.

No, that was not enough. Colin's younger sister was equally dark, but she hadn't been invited.

He glanced from Alden, who stood at the end of their row of chairs, to Rose, then to Richard. Why had they been chosen to represent their families in this absurd meeting? None of the cousins currently present were much like Colin in temperament, and Colin's sister was far more similar to Rose in appearance than he was. There was a binding thread for the four cousins seated in this solicitor's office today. But what ...

He snapped his fingers. They were each unmarried . All their siblings who weren't present were married. Surely that was what linked them.

Mr. Davidson looked at him, his brow raised. Richard shot him a questioning glance .

He hadn't meant to snap so loudly.

Colin cleared his throat. "Why are we here?" Now that he'd figured out the connection, he wanted to know if he was correct.

"I'm afraid I'm the bearer of bad news," the solicitor said. "Lady Edith is dying."

Rose gasped, and Alden muttered something under his breath.

Colin's mind raced. What had being unmarried to do with his aunt's propensity for dramatics? Surely she was not actually dying. If that was the case, Colin would have expected much more fanfare than this. No, games were certainly afoot.

Unless he had incorrectly surmised why these particular cousins were gathered together and their unmarried state was merely a coincidence.

Mr. Davidson lifted a stack of folded papers from his desk. "I will now pass out a personal letter to each of you explaining the terms of your aunt's will."

Her will? Surely he could not be in earnest. A reading of the will before her death was not the proper order of things. This could be nothing other than another of her games.

Mr. Davidson proceeded to hand each of them a folded missive. "Each letter has been tailored to your individual circumstances. You may proceed to open them. I will be here to answer any questions you may have."

Colin accepted his letter and turned it over in his hands, the calluses on his fingers scraping over the smooth paper. His name was written across the front in his aunt's shaky, loopy writing, making his stomach twist with niggling uncertainty. She was too saucy and spry to be truly dying...wasn't she ?

He broke the seal and unfolded the paper.

My dearest Colin,

Mr. Davidson spoke the truth. I am dying. You were never one to believe my wretched tricks, always looking behind my skirts for the missing ha'penny or double counting my cards at whist. I will admit that you've caught me cheating a time or two, but this time there is no deception. The doctor has told me to put my affairs in

order, so I am being obedient—perhaps for the first time ever.

If you were forced to guess what my greatest achievement was in my long life, I imagine you would believe it to be my husband's fortune.

Colin dipped his head to the side, conceding. He certainly knew she had enjoyed spending her merchant husband's money.

You are wrong, my boy. Dear Mr. Walker is my crowning achievement—not his money. The happiness and joy he brought to my life is unmatched, and I promise you I have only been able to live as wholly and as freely as I have because of the good man at my side.

As you know, Mr. Walker awaits me in Heaven. As I have no children to leave my fortune to, I've decided to use my remaining money for good. I want you to have the same joy and contentment I've found in my life, so I am leaving you twenty thousand pounds?—

Colin choked, coughing on his own spit. Twenty thousand pounds? It was a veritable fortune. Where was the puzzle? The trick to be solved? She would not do something so outrageous without an equally perplexing riddle, surely. His eyes greedily sought the remainder of the sentence.

—on the condition that you are married before Twelfth Night of the year of our Lord 1815. I do not wish for you to find the most suitable match and marry for money, Colin. I am certain you already began to make a list of eligible women who would agree to the scheme the moment you learned of it, but this marriage must be for love. If not right away, then find someone you can grow to love.

I've developed a list of qualifications I think will lead you to such a match.

“Oh, good grief,” he muttered before continuing to read. If Lady Edith was responsible for choosing Colin’s wife, the woman was bound to be the most ridiculous creature imaginable.

To receive the inheritance by Twelfth Night, you must marry a woman who makes you laugh. Someone I would approve of. Someone with a kind heart, a good deal of patience—she must be, if she is to put up with your forever straightening things—and a healthy dose of charity. You know my love of puzzles—I want your wife to deliver a good riddle.

She is out there, Colin. Find her and the money will be yours to do with what you wish. If you’d like to repair your father’s dreadful estate, do so. If you’d like to purchase a different one, that is your choice. I care not what you do with the money so long as you marry a woman exactly as I’ve outlined. I will visit shortly so I might meet this paragon firsthand .

All my love,

Aunt Edith

Colin lowered the paper and scoffed. Lady Edith had blown past eccentricity with this scheme, delivering pure madness instead. How the devil was he supposed to find a woman who fit those parameters and convince her to marry him, all before Twelfth Night? That was less than two months away.

To say nothing of the list of qualifications. How would a good laugh or a knack for telling riddles give him a steady partner? Kind, charitable, patient, and comical ? It was a tall order, mostly because there weren’t many people who could make him laugh. Unlike Aunt’s predictions, there were currently no women on his list. No prospects floated to mind.

Alden stalked toward the door, casting them a farewell nod. “I wish you luck, but I want nothing to do with this ruse.”

Colin was startled to awareness by the closing door at Alden’s back. He had a choice. Lady Edith was not entitled to direct his life for him. But twenty thousand pounds ! With that fortune, he could repair the entirety of his estate, hire back the servants who had left, and replace his old, rickety carriage. He felt a twinge in his back as though it recalled the rough state of travel he’d endured to reach London. How glorious it would be to ride in something well-sprung! But more than a new carriage, Colin could provide for his mother, allowing his sister to focus on her husband and young family.

Rose searched his eyes. “Colin? ”

He let out a slow exhale, opting for the truth. “It’s a lot of money. And we all know I need it. I just don’t know.”

Marriages of convenience were not unheard of. But this? Did the conditions set by Lady Edith turn Colin into a fortune-seeker, or was he merely embracing an opportunity to change his life?

Rose stood, speaking to Mr. Davidson. She bopped Richard and Colin each on the head on her way out. Colin shot Richard a look, which was returned.

“Do you have any questions?” Mr. Davidson asked, looking a little harassed. The man likely appreciated order, and this situation was far from smooth.

Colin pushed to his feet. “No, I thank you.” He nodded to Richard and turned to leave. If he was going to find a woman who fit these parameters and prove to Lady Edith he loved her in a matter of weeks, he needed to start working. He climbed into his drafty carriage, then pulled his small notebook and pencil from his pocket.

He had hours ahead of him on the return journey to Winterbourne Park, just outside of Bath, and an entire half of a notebook at his disposal. It was time for one of his favorite pastimes: Colin needed to create a series of lists.

No list, however impeccably designed, could form a woman out of thin air. Colin should know. He'd written an extensive amount of lists over his twenty-eight years, but it was his hard work that completed his tasks, not the magic of writing them down.

Despite spending the duration of his ride home from London considering the women he knew who could possibly be persuaded to marry him, he could not settle his mind on a single person who embodied all the things his aunt required in his wife.

Miss Fairfax was known to smile and laugh overly much, but she was not what he would consider kind or charitable. He'd seen her turn her nose up at one too many people.

Miss Donnelly might be considered charitable, but she was quieter than a mouse.

There was always the Allen family. He did not know them well, but they had three daughters of marrying age, he believed. Perhaps one of them embodied kindness, charity, and humor. Though, given the sullen nature of their mother's face when he saw them at church on Sundays, he very much doubted it.

Colin leaned his head back, which he quickly discovered to be a mistake. The wheel hit a rut and lurched him violently in his seat, banging his head against the carriage wall. He leaned forward, applying pressure to the bruised area on his scalp and scowling. He was a simple man with simple aspirations, comfort being high on his list of priorities. Currently, nothing about his life was very comfortable, but with Lady Edith's fortune, all that could change.

Not just for him, but for his family as well. His mother was cramped in Honora's house out in Devonshire. He would like to make it possible for her to return to live with him again.

He looked through the window and watched the tips of Winterbourne come into view. The house was formed of the same light honey-colored stone that had built most of Bath and the surrounding villages. It was of middling size, not so large as to be unruly, but grand enough in its own right. The front door was perfectly centered above a small, rising staircase, the windows fanning out evenly in both directions in a pleasing, balanced facade. The home was perfect in its layout, but the bones of the house needed work. Along with the roof, the left side of the split staircase, the drawing room, and the servants' quarters.

Perhaps it was time to attend some events in Bath and see if he could find a bride. There must be someone in Somerset who fit Lady Edith's list and was interested in coming to a matrimonial arrangement.

She existed. Colin only needed to find her.

CHAPTER TWO

It was commonly known in the hamlet of Millcombe, just outside of Bath, that the vicar of their small parish was never to be taken seriously unless he stood at his raised pulpit before the congregation. When scripture had advised him that a merry heart was good, Mr. Caldwell had thoroughly embraced it. He had been known to switch salt for sugar—thus losing the privilege of so much as passing through the kitchen from his cook—and hiding in the small alcove just inside the doorway to spook his wife as she turned in from tending to her garden.

Mr. Caldwell had jokes on hand equal to his knowledge of God's scriptures, and while it endeared him to a good number of people from Millcombe, it was inappropriate, abhorrent behavior to others.

The town was split down the middle.

Which was why Mercy Caldwell, oldest of the vicar's daughters, was used to the side-eye and upturned nose she had experienced with Mrs. Hoopes when she had knocked at the door to deliver a basket. But expectation did not always equal an extra measure of patience.

"I do hope Mr. Hoopes feels better quickly," Mercy said gravely, ignoring the aforementioned upturned nose and waspishly pinched lips. She passed the basket through the door and brushed a copper lock of hair from her temple. "My father asked me to mention that your household is in his particular prayers. We do not wish for anyone else to catch his cold, not when the choir is relying on your voices for the Christmas service."

Mrs. Hoopes preened, though her mouth remained pinched. “How kind.”

“My mother sent along her restorative calves’ foot jelly as well. It has done wonders for my sisters in the past.” Mercy herself couldn’t abide the stuff. Food ought not to jiggle, in her opinion.

“Thank your mother for me, Mercy.”

“Of course. Good day, Mrs. H?—”

“Is it true?” Mrs. Hoopes asked, taking the items from the basket and stacking them on a table just inside the door. “I heard Mr. Raybourne paid a visit to your house last night and was seen leaving with an exceptional grin. Talk around the village is very animated regarding young Grace.”

Mercy’s jaw clenched shut. As her sister’s prime chaperone last night, she’d had the misfortune of being a witness to Mr. Raybourne’s visit and the resulting engagement. But it had not been announced yet, so Mrs. Hoopes was not going to pry the details from her.

“I will take the basket with me now, if you have no need of it.”

Mrs. Hoopes clutched it to her stomach. “Will we see Grace this Sunday? Or will she be visiting any other parishes?”

“As far as I am aware, she will be at church with the rest of my family.” Mercy reached for the basket.

Mrs. Hoopes relinquished it, leaning in slightly. “There is no shame in younger sisters being married before the eldest, Mercy. Do not allow Grace’s possible news to be a blight on your day. Chin up.” She added the last bit with a quick nod to reaffirm her

words.

Mercy wanted to sink into the frozen mud at her feet. She pasted a smile on her face. “Thank you. Please send for my father if there is anything he can do for you or Mr. Hoopes.”

“Of course, dear.” The judgmental, upturned nose had returned. Mrs. Hoopes sided firmly with the pious half of town—the folks who could not stomach Papa’s aptitude for laughing.

Clearly, her righteousness did not extend to avoiding town gossip.

Gray clouds filled the sky, hiding the retreating sun. Mercy slid the basket handle over her arm and turned down the lane toward the vicarage. She lifted her skirt and hopped over a puddle, glad her half-boots were thick enough to withstand the wet road. The cold didn’t penetrate her thick cloak, but the muggy weather was thick with mist and the promise of more rain, hurrying her steps along the country road.

She hoped, with December around the corner, the snow would be here soon. There was nothing more beautiful than the hills surrounding Millcombe covered in frosted white blankets, fresh and pure. Perhaps, by the time the snow fell, Grace would be married and Mercy could be alone in the vicarage with her parents and her injured pride .

It wasn’t that she was envious of her sisters, exactly. Mercy would not wish to be married to any of her brothers-in-law, current or future. They were each of them perfect for her sisters in their own ways. But being the oldest and watching them marry and set up homes of their own was bittersweet. Mercy’s happiness for her sisters fought for precedence over the very subtle envy wrapped around her heart.

Now more than ever before. Perhaps it was Grace’s pout after Mr. Raybourne had left

that had done her in. Or it was the small dip in her lips when she took Mercy by the hand and exclaimed she would find a husband one day, Grace was certain of it.

Perhaps it was the pitying looks Mama had cast at Mercy when she thought no one was looking.

Either way, she was seven years older than Grace. Mercy was the mature sister. The wise one. She could pass through the reading of the banns and subsequent wedding with equanimity and only cry silently into her pillow at night when no one was around to witness.

In all reality, at six-and-twenty, she was not likely to find a husband, was she? Mercy was resigned to spending the rest of her days doting on her nieces and nephews and assisting her parents with their service in the parish. It was a full, enriching life ahead of her. She would find solace and comfort in other things, if not a family of her own.

Like ginger biscuits.

She had been working on perfecting her cook's recipe and was nearly there. Mercy would eat her fill of ginger biscuits and happily bear her way through December. Then Grace would be out of the house and she could pout at her leisure .

The heavy thud of hoofbeats clopped along the lane, warning Mercy of an oncoming carriage. She moved to the side, picking careful steps on the barren grass and slick mud. The carriage driver didn't seem to notice her, for the horses weren't slowing at all.

Mercy's heartbeat picked up speed as she looked down the steep slope at the edge of the lane. She couldn't trek down it with so little time—the carriage was fast approaching. She sucked in a breath and raised her shoulders to her ears, squeezing her eyes closed.

The carriage whipped past, the wheel splashing through a large puddle and sending a spray of muddy water over the side of Mercy's body. She let out a squeal as the cold liquid splattered her neck and cheek. It soaked through her cloak and into the bodice of her gown.

A shout sounded behind her, and she was faintly aware of the carriage coming to a stop.

That was the outside of enough . She had already been subject to the pitying asides from her family about Grace's engagement, the pious judgment of Mrs. Hoopes—now this? To be splashed with muddy water while on an errand of service?

“Could you not have slowed at all ?” she shouted to the carriage, flicking water from her arm.

The door opened and Colin Birchall poked his head out. “Why the devil have we stopped?”

Of course he, of all the parish gentlemen, was the one responsible. The one man Mercy had carried a slight tendre for over the last decade. She could have laughed if she wasn't afraid it would make her seem mad.

Had the universe decided to play a cruel trick on her? Grace had received a proposal, and all Mercy got was a spray of mud from the most handsome man in Millcombe.

Lucas's head popped up from where he sat in the coachman's seat. “I didn't see you there, Miss Mercy. Are you hurt?”

Her squeal must have alerted him to her presence, making him stop the carriage. She felt a warm blush rise to her cheeks, hoping he hadn't heard her outburst, and gave him a smile. “No, Lucas. Just a bit of mud.”

He cringed.

Colin hopped down from his carriage, a frown marking deep grooves between his dark eyebrows. His clothing was impeccable even as his boots squelched across the wet road. “It was my carriage that did this to you?”

“Do not trouble yourself, Mr. Birchall,” she said, wiping the water from her face with her dirty sleeve. “I have long been hoping for an excuse to scrub this cloak.”

His frown shifted to confusion before his face flattened. “Ah. You are joking.”

“Well, it needed to be done weeks ago. That part was true.”

Colin rested a fist on his hip. “A schedule could help you keep your tasks in order.”

“I would be washing this cloak now even if it had been cleaned the first time I had the thought last month,” she returned quickly.

“True.”

“You cannot plan for everything, despite how well-ordered your schedules are.”

“No, but they certainly help,” he muttered. “Will you allow me to take the cloak home with me? I can have it cleaned and returned to you.”

She stared at the man. “I would much prefer to do it myself and avoid freezing on my walk home. But I thank you for the generous offer.”

He grimaced. “I was not thinking. Why are you walking alongside the road now, anyway? It is about to rain.”

“Mr. Hoopes has taken ill. I think it is only a cold, but Mama made a large pot of soup, and I took him some jelly.”

Colin’s attention snapped to her. “How charitable of you,” he said, his gaze oddly direct.

“Not entirely. If he cannot sing, our choir will be sadly lacking, I fear.”

Colin chuckled lightly. “You cannot fool me.” His mouth dropped, cutting his chuckle silent like a swift blade over a field of wheat. He peered at her. “That was actually rather amusing, Miss Caldwell.”

She did not know whether to apologize or thank him. It sounded like a compliment, but his suspicious look was disconcerting.

He shifted from one foot to the other, raking his gaze over her with clear calculation.

“Are you unwell, Colin?” she asked softly, slipping and using his Christian name. It was an accident that happened from time to time, but could she be blamed? She had known the man her entire life.

He shook his head slightly, rubbing his jaw. “I have just come from London. A premature reading of the will for my great-aunt, actually. It was a strange, uncomfortable affair and has put me out of sorts. I am very sorry for dousing you with my carriage. How might I make it up to you?”

She stared at him. He had always been orderly and precise, but never so charitable or thoughtful. Could he sense the ridiculous dreams she used to harbor that he would fall madly in love with her? They were silly, of course. But when were dreams ever meant to be practical?

“I can take you home.”

“My father would not like it,” she said, looking over her shoulder. She might have been a spinster, but he still would not abide her riding alone with an eligible man. They were standing near the turning lane that led to Colin’s house, and her vicarage was at least a ten minute walk away. “I better be on my way before the rain comes in earnest. Good day, Mr. Birchall.”

Colin looked between her and his estate, the top of which could easily be seen from the lane. “Then I will walk with you.” He turned to Lucas. “Take the carriage home. I will return shortly.”

Lucas stared. Mercy stared. They even exchanged a quick, questioning look before the coachman nodded and turned in his seat to drive home. Something very strange must have happened to Colin during his aunt’s meeting, because he was acting extremely out of the ordinary. Never once had he gone out of his way to walk her anywhere. Yes, they had shared a path on occasion, but only out of convenience.

Colin locked his hands behind his back and fell into step beside her.

“You must have had a shock today,” she said.

“That does not feel adequate to describe my day, Miss Caldwell, but I do not wish to loiter in those feelings. I would like to hear about you.”

She used her dry sleeve to wipe the rest of the mud from her neck and tried to cover her surprise. “I’m afraid I’ve nothing of value to report. You might have heard my sister Hope had her baby. A darling little thing, but he exercises his lungs like they are a new regiment preparing to meet France.”

He chuckled again, and the sound was again cut off abruptly. Colin halted in the road

and faced her. “Have you always been so amusing, Miss Caldwell?”

She stopped, her mouth falling open. “I...do not know.”

Colin stared at her, raking his eyes over her face, as though seeing her for the first time instead of the thousandth.

“You are beginning to worry me,” she said. “What is it? Do I have a leaf on my face? A bit of mud on my nose?”

“You look lovely,” he said, brushing off her concerns.

The words had the opposite effect, making her stomach pool with warmth.

He rubbed a palm over his chin. “I’ve been thinking. I might have a proposition for you.”

This ought to be interesting. Did he want permission to organize a cleaning schedule for her? Set order to her life? She had never known anyone as fastidious as Colin, and she could only imagine how eager he was to structure her hectic days.

He glanced up at the thickening mist. “Though I do not imagine this is the proper time or place for such a conversation.”

“Now you are worrying me in earnest.” Her pulse thudded; the very notion that he needed to speak to her was equally exciting and disconcerting.

“We have known one another for our entire lives,” he said carefully, watching her for a reaction.

“Yes,” she confirmed.

“You are not a stranger to me.”

“No, indeed, I am not. ”

He scrubbed a hand over his face. The mist was thickening, darkening his damp hair, making a lock fall over his forehead. It was a bit roguish until he brushed it back, restoring order to his appearance. “According to my aunt’s will, I can receive a large sum of money if I find a wife before Twelfth Night.”

“Goodness,” she breathed. “That is...a particular requirement.”

“Ridiculous would be far more apt.”

She agreed, though it felt rude to say so aloud.

“My aunt is dying, and I think she would like to see her money distributed on her own terms. Personally.” Colin leveled her with a look. “I’ve resigned myself to a marriage of convenience. Winterbourne is falling to pieces. It needs the funds. I think I can comfortably provide for a wife once the inheritance passes over.”

Strange apprehension balled in her stomach while the cold seeped into the wet places of her gown and made her shiver. The image of Colin flaunting a new bride soured. “It seems a reasonable arrangement, Mr. Birchall.”

“Reasonable,” he repeated. “I cannot help but find comfort in that particular choice of words.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I was hoping you would find the situation logical and not strange.” He took a breath, releasing it in a cloud between them. “Mercy, would you consider agreeing

to this partnership and becoming my wife?”

CHAPTER THREE

After a minute had passed in utter silence, Colin worried he had mistaken the situation entirely. Mercy stood before him, wet strands of copper hair plastered to her temples and specks of mud trailing her jaw and neck, blending with her freckles. Her green eyes were wide and unblinking, trained on him.

“Partnership?” she repeated.

“Yes. It would be an arrangement that benefited and suited both parties. My house is in dire need of repair, but it is warm enough and we could begin restoring it straight away. You would not be far from Grace or your parents, of course, so you could remain close to your family.”

“Grace is engaged,” she said, the words thick.

Oh. He hadn’t known. Had someone told him that bit of news? Colin did not care overly much for town gossip and was likely to forget a tidbit before the speaker had completed their sentence. “I am happy for her. Then I amend. You will remain close to the vicarage and your parents if you come live with me at Winterbourne.”

Her eyes widened again before dropping to the ground. It was impossible to know what she was thinking, and never before had Colin so deeply desired to understand the thoughts of a woman.

“Mercy, if this is a repulsive offer, say so at once and I will cease?—”

“It is not repulsive,” she said, exasperated. “It is shocking.”

“Gads. You aren’t going to swoon, are you?”

She shot him a glare. “Of course not. When have I ever been the type to swoon?”

In truth, her general composure was one of the things he had always liked about her. Why had he not considered her sooner? When he’d made his lists, Mercy had never crossed his mind.

Perhaps because she had never appeared to actively seek a husband before. She hadn’t been courted by anyone, as far as he could recall. Was she uninterested in marriage? In truth, the women who had made up his list were all much younger than her. “You do wish to marry someday, do you not?”

A quiet scoff left her throat. “I would complain you are being too forward, but this needs to be a rather personal conversation, does it not?”

“I do not wish to offend you.”

“There is no offense.” She looked to the sky and shook her head. “It is flattering, to be honest.”

That word. Flattering . It traveled through him with a measure of satisfaction. He liked that he had flattered her, though the devil knew why. “Are you considering my offer?”

Her green eyes met his. “I am.” She shook her head. “Good heavens, but I really am.”

He could not contain the amused laugh that spilled from him. “Shall I give you time

to consider it? I can return?—”

“That is unnecessary.” She brushed a stubborn wet lock of hair from her eyes. “I will marry you, Colin.”

He couldn’t help the grin that slashed across his face. Mercy was utterly perfect. Lady Edith would adore her; everyone in Millcombe certainly did. She was reasonable, level-headed, charitable, patient, exceedingly kind, and—above all—amusing. She had the most ridiculous father in Somerset, his antics sometimes bringing Lady Edith to mind, but that had no bearing on her eligibility. She could not have been more perfect had Lady Edith designed Mercy herself.

Yet, less than a day ago, Colin had no plans to marry at all. It wasn’t as if he disdained the idea of a wife—he merely had not met anyone who had enticed him toward matrimony. Was it madness to accept Lady Edith’s strictures and marry this woman? He would receive twenty thousand pounds, yes, but he would also be forced to make a life with her.

Mercy’s green eyes were vibrant in the growing rain. Her copper hair was dark, her clothing wet, but her expression was open and thoughtful, and she was very pretty. Why had he not noticed such before?

Colin shook away the thought. The truth was, he liked Mercy. He could find a way to care for her, surely. If not love, then something akin to it—something Lady Edith would certainly approve of.

“Truly? You will become my wife, Mercy Caldwell?”

She shook her head, but her answer opposed her action. “Yes,” she said, as if she herself did not believe her answer. “I will. ”

Colin's shoulders relaxed. The hurdle was overcome easily—far more easily than he ever could have imagined. “It would be convenient to begin reading the banns straight away. Unless you would like time?—”

“I do not need time.”

“Then I shall finish walking you home and request to speak to your father.” He said the words with the weight they deserved. Once they took that step, there would be no returning.

Mercy seemed to understand. She turned on the lane toward the vicarage. “He is home.” She looked at her shoulder and the side of her cloak as they walked. “Oh, look at this. I don't suppose I need to wash my cloak after all. The rain is taking care of it for me.”

Despite the very ridiculous nature of her joke, Colin could not help himself. He laughed.

“But you do not like him, do you?” Mama asked, leaning close and whispering to Mercy. “When have you ever shown the least preference for Colin Birchall?”

Grace sat on Mama's other side, her arms crossed above her chest and a dainty pout on her lips. She wore a pale green gown that complemented her dark hair nicely, and her lips and cheeks were flushed becomingly, but the effect was ruined by her ill temper. “You need not go out and marry the first man you see simply because I have found a husband, Mercy.”

“Enough.” Mama's green eyes flashed.

“It is a bit suspicious in timing, do you not think?” Grace pressed. “Mr. Raybourne cannot have the banns read for our marriage until he returns after Christmas, and she

comes home with an engagement the very next day? You ought to wait until you fall in love , Mercy. You will come to regret this hasty decision.”

Mercy looked to the door, the one on the other side of the parlor, where Colin was now ensconced with her father in the study. She hadn't expected such a violent objection from her sister, but she supposed it felt to Grace as though she was stealing the attention.

It was nothing like that. Well, it was only a little like that. Mercy's strong desire to not be the final unmarried Caldwell girl had played a role in her acceptance. All those pitying looks and well-meaning remarks from family and members of their parish had built a mountain of resentment within her she had tried to subdue. Mrs. Hoopes' parting words had stuck with her.

There is no shame in younger sisters being married before the eldest, Mercy. Chin up.

If Mrs. Hoopes did not believe there to be any shame in Mercy's unmarried state after two of her younger sisters were wed and the youngest engaged, she would not have felt the need to provide reassurance. That particular comment had come fresh on the heels of a rumor. Once Mr. Raybourne returned from spending Christmas with his grandfather in Kent and Grace's engagement was announced, the entire parish would be at liberty to provide their additional condolences.

Mercy knew this, because she had lived through it twice before. Each time a sister married, the pity grew.

She had not accepted Colin's offer blindly. She knew his situation well—his personality, the state of his house, the way his mother and sister had fled Winterbourne the moment they could. Yet she had once dreamed of becoming his wife. Despite her initial reservations, she was being offered a chance to escape becoming an old maid, so she took it.

Mercy wasn't blind to the fact that Colin never would have proposed marriage to her had he not been offered a large sum of money in exchange for finding a wife. But he'd chosen her, had he not? It was commonly known that Sophia Fairfax had been doing her best to incite a courtship with him for months.

Colin had still chosen Mercy. That meant he could—at the very least—find a life with her to be generally enjoyable. She was determined to clutch the thread of hope.

"Mercy," Mama said, her voice level, though her green eyes were brimming with concern. "Do you even like him?"

She had always been drawn to him. Evidently she had been skilled at hiding her feelings if even her family had not noted it.

"The marriage was his idea," Mercy said. "But I am glad of it."

Mama raked her gaze over Mercy's face. "Then I will support you."

"Can you not see how strange this?—"

"Grace," Mama snapped. "You may sit here quietly, or you may leave the room."

Sulking lower in her seat, Grace huffed a frustrated groan.

Mercy ignored her, and the door to Papa's study creaked open. Colin preceded Papa from the room, carrying his hat in his hands. He glanced from the crackling fire to the table on the far side of the room, holding various half-finished embroidery and knitting projects. It was organized, though she could imagine how untidy it appeared. The way his attention lingered on it built discomfort in her stomach, but she remained where she was until her mother began to rise.

Papa gave Mama a discreet nod, though the lines around his mouth betrayed his concern. He had been praying for Mercy to find a good, worthy husband since she was young. Colin Birchall was a good neighbor, never missed church, and participated in their parish service for the less fortunate every year. Surely the displeasure Papa was attempting to hide had nothing to do with Colin. He must have one of his headaches.

“This is such a surprise, Mr. Birchall,” Mama said. “I would have prepared a pie had I known we’d have something to celebrate.”

Colin pasted a smile on his face. “Think nothing of it.”

“Will your mother return for the wedding?”

Mrs. Birchall had not lived in Millcombe for at least four years. She had moved to live with Colin’s sister Honora after she’d had her baby and never returned.

His jaw tightened. “It is unlikely. Perhaps next year we will invite everyone to Winterbourne for Christmas.”

Because, according to his plans, by next year the house would be repaired. Mercy hoped he would not elucidate further. She had accepted her fate participating in a convenient marriage arrangement, but Grace didn’t need to hear the particulars.

Mercy would be immensely pleased if no one ever learned the particulars. She needed to be certain he was of the same mind.

“Can I speak to you, Colin?” she asked, forcing the room to go silent.

He blinked at her before his gaze swung to Papa .

Mercy bit back her irritation. If they were to be married, one conversation was beyond acceptable.

Papa put his hands together. “Of course. You must have the room. How silly of us not to have considered that you would wish to speak to one another. Come, Mrs. Caldwell. Grace.” He ushered the women through the parlor door and closed it behind himself, leaving the room in stark silence.

The longcase clock ticked against the wall, punctuating the stillness.

Colin’s hazel eyes tracked Mercy’s face before dipping to her gown. It was an older one, and she’d chosen it today for the warmth it would provide on her walk to the Hoopes’ house. Had she realized she would be accepting a marriage proposal, she would have dressed differently.

Quiet stretched and grew, pushing against her and making her uncomfortable. “My father appeared to approve.”

Colin gave her a nod. The majority of the room remained between them, as if neither of them wanted to take the first step forward. “He will begin reading the banns Sunday.”

Mercy’s heart ticked. “Did you tell him of the arrangement with your aunt?”

“No.” Colin’s brow furrowed before clearing. “The funds? I did not think it was relevant.”

It was entirely relevant, but she was glad he didn’t seem to agree on that point. She dropped her gaze to her mother’s worn sofa, noting where the repaired tear had been covered by a pillow. Each of the Caldwell girls had a dowry, of course, but it was not by any means sufficient for such a match as Colin Birchall and his grand estate. She

lifted her attention to him again. “What did you tell my father? ”

Colin shifted, his fingers marching along his hat brim and spinning it in the process. “That I want to marry you.”

Mercy’s stomach dipped. I want to marry you . The words she had dreamed of hearing over and over again. She forced the feelings into the corner to be considered later. He certainly didn’t mean them the way her heart wanted him to. “But why , Colin? My father is an intelligent man. If you did not inform him of your aunt’s will, how did you convince him to agree to the marriage?”

Colin took a step closer, setting his hat on the edge of the sofa. “I told him the truth. We desire to marry, and we desire his blessing. We would like for it to be soon.” He shifted again. “Your father required no great explanation.”

Mercy’s entire body froze. Was she making a mistake? The more Colin spoke about their arrangement, the more he made it sound like a business transaction. She heard the creaking of a floorboard overhead and closed her eyes. She loved her parents, but she did not wish to be in this house with them forever running to deliver sick baskets or helping with the children during choir or baking pie for the neighbors to help her mama’s parish duties. Mercy wanted a life of her own, freedom to serve on her own terms, a household to run for herself and not in assistance to her mother. She wanted her own life, and Colin could provide it for her. Was she being foolish to accept this plan?

No. She was nearly twenty-seven. She had no other prospects. And Colin was a good man.

“Can we keep your aunt’s inheritance private? I...” She struggled to find a reason that was better than the truth—to cover her pride.

Colin nodded. "I had not intended on admitting anyone else into my confidence on this matter. "

"Too many people will talk," she said.

He seemed to agree.

Silence between them was broken by another creak above. Colin picked up his hat and put it back on his head. He took a step toward her, then clasped his hands behind his back, as though he was uncertain what to say.

"I will see you on Sunday, I suppose," Mercy said.

"Our news will be a great shock to the congregation. Shall I..." Colin looked to the fire, then back at her. "Would you like me to sit with your family? I have not thought through the details of our decision yet."

"You are welcome to sit with us."

He smiled, a dimple popping in his cheek that seemed to apply pressure to her chest. She was certainly attracted to the man, and that relieved dimpled smile was not helping matters.

Colin dipped in a bow and turned to leave. She watched him walk through the door and down the corridor with an ever-increasing heartbeat. It was too late to change anything now, and she wasn't sure she wanted to even if she could.

But Colin was correct. They were about to become the center of Millcombe gossip.

Hopefully she had made the right choice.

CHAPTER FOUR

In the days since Colin had proposed marriage to Mercy Caldwell, he had not seen her once. Instead throwing himself into preparing the house to receive a mistress, he put himself to work alongside Mr. Hubble, tearing out the floor in the bride-to-be's room and replacing it with sturdy planks. All the furniture had been moved out for the purpose.

He'd hired Mr. Hubble to repair the main stairs a few months prior—though, at the time, he could only afford to fix the steps that had broken beyond saving. With Lady Edith's money, he could finish that job and complete every other item on his extensive list. When he approached Hubble with the offer to continue working at Winterbourne Park, the man had only been too happy to accept.

Colin sat on the finished edge of the floor, waiting for Hubble to return with another stack of planks. He breathed heavily, sweat streaking down his temples, and rested his arms on bent legs. He really ought to have started with the roof, but Mercy would need a place to sleep. He didn't want her to regret her choice the moment she stepped into his house.

"Mr. Birchall?" Flint said, waiting in the doorway. The butler was utterly adept at appearing starched and submissive in equal part. His chest was drawn up, his hands hanging at his sides. "You've Miss Mercy Caldwell to see you, sir."

Colin looked over his shoulder, surprise hanging his mouth open.

Flint surveyed his state of dress—the shirtsleeves tucked into pantaloons, disordered,

sweat-dampened hair.

Yes, he looked unacceptable. He could take a few minutes to tidy his clothes, but perhaps it was better to warn Mercy, show her exactly what he would look like for the next year or so. However long it took to bring the house up to scratch.

Only, where would he see her? None of the receiving rooms had been cleaned or contained lit fires. He hadn't had a housekeeper in some weeks to organize a fresh cleaning of the house before Mercy became the mistress.

Colin stood, dusting off his clothes. "Where is she?"

"I've left her at the door, sir."

"Outside?" Colin expostulated.

Flint did not so much as flinch. "No, sir. Inside."

Colin started for the corridor, passing his butler. "I will go to her." He rubbed at his forehead with the back of his sleeve, then ran his fingers through his hair for some semblance of order. He took the corner, hurrying toward the safe side of the split sweeping staircase that ended in the grand entryway, when he noticed Mercy standing at the top of it. She must have wandered up, for she waited at the double doors to the drawing room, looking at the rope tying the doorknobs together.

His boots were muffled by the carpet, so he reached Mercy's side before she noticed him. She still wore her cloak and gloves, her bonnet covering most of her copper hair, which communicated that this was meant to be a quick visit.

"The room is unsafe to enter at present."

She nodded, tearing her gaze from the rope. “Is the floor unstable?”

“The ceiling.”

“Oh, goodness.”

“Yes. We have a number of roof leaks, which led to rotted floors in some places and unstable ceilings beneath them.” He clasped his hands behind his back. “Your chamber is now under repair, so it should be in good working order by the wedding.”

Mercy’s gaze snapped to him. Her green eyes widened imperceptibly, taking in his unkempt state. It made him feel as though garden ants crawled all over him. If only he’d taken time to straighten his cravat, at the very least. What she must think of him!

“My chamber? It sounds quite official.”

“I hope it will be.” He tried to smile at her, but couldn’t hold her gaze for long. “We’ve made a good deal of progress.”

“Lovely. I...can I see it?”

“Your chamber?”

“Yes.”

Colin could think of no reason why he shouldn’t show her. Hubble was likely in there now, so they would not be alone. Anyway, in a few short weeks they would be married .

Married .

Colin cleared his throat and gestured to the corridor on the other side of the staircase. “Right this way.”

Mercy walked by his side, past the spindled banister overlooking the entryway. He led her down the corridor, past his bedchamber and to the open door that led into her room. “This is where you will sleep. Hubble is helping with the repairs on the house.” The man stood, wiping his hands down his brown trousers. “Mr. Hubble, this is Miss Caldwell.”

“We are familiar to one another,” Mercy said, stepping into the room, her hands clasped before her. She glanced around the walls and ceiling before settling her gaze on the half-completed floor. “It looks wonderful.”

Colin rubbed the back of his neck. It wasn’t until this moment, with three adults stuffed into the space, that he considered just how small the room was. It was more fitting as a dressing room than a bedchamber. But it would fit a bed and provide her some privacy.

“We will return the bed before the wedding,” he said, considering the emptiness in the room. Nearly half of the floor was still missing, along with any drapes or paintings. The walls were bare. Colin’s cheeks blazed, but he pressed forward. “And a clothes press. If there is anything else you require, you need only say so.”

“I require very little, Colin.”

“Once the funds have been received and the more important repairs completed, you may decorate as you wish. I am afraid, until that point, we do not have much to spare.”

Mercy nodded, the subtle dip in her straight jaw the only sign she had heard him. She tore her eyes from the half- missing floor and swept her attention over his clothes.

“Are you doing the work yourself?”

“With Hubble’s assistance, of course.” Or was it the other way round? Colin was certainly the novice, only stepping in to make the work shorter.

“Of course,” she mumbled. Shaking her head, she let out a small scoff. “I am impressed.”

Colin’s shoulder’s straightened, her astonishment infusing a rod in his spine. “It is not very difficult.”

She appraised him. “All the same, it is unexpected.”

Unexpected . He liked that. The word took root, growing like a vine within him.

Mercy bade Hubble a farewell and stepped into the corridor. Her attention snagged on the room across the corridor.

“That is the guest chamber. My mother has typically used it when she visits, but it has been a long while since she’s been here.”

Mercy nodded, turning toward the staircase, and Colin followed her.

When they reached the head of the stairs, she looked at him. “My mother sent me to invite you to dine tomorrow following church. If that is agreeable to you, she would like you to eat with us.”

“How kind of her.”

“I was hoping you would reject the invitation.”

Colin coughed. “Gads, whatever for?”

“My sister, Grace. She is determined to understand why I changed from being uninterested in a wedding to becoming engaged so swiftly. Little does she understand I have always been interested in marriage, but she won’t have anything to do with that explanation. If we’d like to avoid a barrage of questions, it is better to wait for a family dinner after we are married.”

“Why? Will she not question us after we are wed?”

“She will not be able to stop the wedding, so there will be no point.”

Colin felt like he’d waded into the River Avon and had water in his ears. “I am afraid I do not follow.”

“If Grace learns of your aunt’s will and our reason for coming to an agreement, the remainder of Millcombe will know by the end of the week. She does not have the skill of retaining confidences. I would appreciate it if she never learns of this, for I shall never hear the end of it.” Mercy looked up at him and cringed. “Oh, I’ve done it now, haven’t I?”

He blinked. “What is it you believe to have done?”

“Ruined your good opinion of me. It is prideful to care so deeply about containing this secret, I know, but when you have lived through two younger sisters’ weddings and received pity from the entire town, you will understand.”

He swallowed his amusement. Fortunately, his only sister was already married, and he’d received no censure at the time. “I am afraid I will never suffer as you have.”

Mercy looked at him sharply, narrowing her gaze. “Colin Birchall, are you laughing

at me?"

Was he? It wasn't typical of him. Now that she had mentioned it, he was far more amused than disturbed by this conversation. "Yes. I suppose I am."

Mercy rolled her eyes and started down the stairs toward the door. "What shall I tell my mother?"

"I have no reason to refuse the invitation, Mercy," he said gently .

"Can you not have a reasonable illness? A headache would suffice."

"And the foresight to know my head will ache tomorrow, but not terribly enough to keep me from the service?"

She frowned. "No. I suppose that will not work."

"I have a better idea. I will accept the invitation and you may keep me busy, so your sister will not have the opportunity to question me extensively."

Her copper eyebrows lifted. "That could work. Do you play cards?"

"Not well." An idea formed, and he tilted his head. "Do you enjoy riddles?"

She chewed on her bottom lip. "It has been a long while since I have had time for such things. I suppose we could try to write them for one another—make a game of it?"

"It would require much concentration." And, though she did not know this, it was a requirement of Lady Edith's.

“Very well, Colin. We shall entertain ourselves. Thank you.” She looked up at him, gratitude shimmering in her eyes.

Mercy was really very pretty.

“Good day, Colin.”

“Good day, Mercy.” He opened the door for her, then moved to the window and watched her walk down the drive to the lane.

She was going to be his wife .

Why did his body feel light and airy at the thought?

Colin sat beside Mercy, Grace, and Mrs. Caldwell on a long, hard pew the following morning during the church service. When Mr. Caldwell stood at the pulpit and read the banns, there were audible gasps around the congregation.

Multiple whispers had begun to circulate. Colin had sensed Mercy grow still beside him. It was only gossip, and the town would soon move on to the next interesting thing, but he disliked how they felt the need to discuss him and his choices. He pressed his knee softly to Mercy’s, keeping his gaze steady on where her father stood at the head of the church.

Mercy didn’t respond in any way, vocally or physically, so Colin reclaimed his leg.

When the service ended, they were inundated with people.

“This is a surprise!”

“Goodness, Miss Caldwell, how fortunate for you.”

“Mr. Birchall has such a grand estate. However will you manage it?”

“Heavens, but this is shocking news. How very good for you, Miss Caldwell.”

Colin, it seemed, had been nearly entirely left out by the congratulating matrons and their exuberance. He followed the flow of people outside, pressing his hat on his head to fight the November wind.

Mr. Fairfax, a local gentleman who had been a friend of his father’s, approached with a pinched expression. “Marriage, eh, son?”

Colin nodded. “It was time.”

Mr. Fairfax glanced back to where Mercy stood beside her mother, wearing matching expressions of politeness, their copper hair similar but for Mrs. Caldwell’s faded color. Grace stood beside them, scowling, her freckled face pinched in annoyance .

Colin fought the urge to remove Mercy from their sides at once and shield her from the town’s matrons and her sister’s irritation. She was a grown woman and it was not yet his place to do anything of the sort. He tore his eyes from her.

“You’ve saddled yourself to a difficult family,” Mr. Fairfax said, shaking his head slightly.

Colin’s stomach clenched with the urge to defend Mercy. “Miss Caldwell is perfectly amiable and extremely well-mannered.”

“She might be, but I wish you all the luck in managing her father.” Mr. Fairfax tossed him a knowing look and pulled his daughter close to his side. “Miss Caldwell has a good deal to learn about managing such a large estate. Sophia will be all too happy to aid in whatever way she can, should Miss Caldwell require assistance.”

Since Sophia had been the only woman in her house for the last decade after her mother had died from scarlet fever, she was very likely qualified for such a thing. The girl was a bit ridiculous and snobbish, but Colin wouldn't refuse Mercy the help should she wish for it. "Thank you. That is very kind. I will keep it in mind."

The rest of the congregation appeared to have more to say to the Caldwells than to Colin. He edged his way closer, watching Mercy answer questions and listen to the matrons with equanimity and poise. She nodded politely, her face a mask of interest. But when her eyes flicked his way, he saw the strain. Should he pull her away? Surely he could ask if she'd like to walk to the vicarage together?

"There is no shame in it, Mercy," Mrs. Brooks said, her eyes round as saucers. "We are all so glad you finally found a husband. Some of us feared it would never happen, but alas, Mr. Birchall has rescued you."

Mercy's face was a work of stone—granite, given her freckles. "Thank you, Mrs. Brooks. That is kind of you to say."

Kind? Was Mercy in earnest? Colin's stomach swirled. Was this how all the women in the parish felt? How everyone spoke to her?

Mrs. Brooks wasn't finished. "You must know it is not too late to be a mother, Mercy. Betty Albright did not have children until she was thirty, and she managed to have four."

Colin stepped into the woman's line of sight, setting his eyes on Mercy. "I was hoping to walk you home, Miss Caldwell, if it is agreeable to you."

"That would be lovely." She smiled kindly at the red-faced matron. "Good day, Mrs. Brooks."

Colin took her hand and rested it on his arm before pulling her away from the gaggle of women waiting to speak to her. “Are they always such vultures?”

“Count yourself fortunate you have not earned their exuberant felicitations.”

“I do,” he said emphatically. “It almost makes me wish we’d gone the route of a special license and bypassed including Millcombe in the ordeal at all.”

They reached the door to the vicarage and paused on the front step. “Only two more Sundays and we can be married,” she said.

Colin glanced down at her weary face and felt it was more of a trial than he had imagined. “It is not too late to abolish the agreement.”

Her eyes widened. “Do you wish to? ”

“I wish to continue as planned, but if this arrangement has caused you undue stress?—”

“Worry not for my health, Colin. I am perfectly capable of managing the Millcombe matrons.”

He hoped it was not wrong to take her at her word. “Very well. Shall we write ourselves some riddles?”

“Indeed.” Mercy opened the door and led him inside.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mercy smoothed the blue silk gown down her legs, arranging the overdress until it lined up where it was meant to. Her fingers trembled while she worked the silk-covered buttons until halfway up her back, where she could no longer reach. Within a few hours, she would be married. Married to Colin Birchall. It had felt like a whirlwind, so quickly had the weeks passed since the day his carriage had splashed her and he'd proposed. It was now December. They were only a few weeks away from Christmas and, by the end of the day, Mercy would be a married woman.

She picked up the riddle she'd written for him last night. They had taken to passing each other riddles occasionally since the night he had come to dine at her house, and she thought he might appreciate the one that came to her mind yesterday.

My hands are ever-moving, but I cannot clap. I have a face, but I cannot speak. I hang at the ready. What am I?

Mercy folded the strip of paper and put it in her pocket.

Mama knocked on the door before pushing it open and peeking inside. Her smile was bright, her cheeks rosy, likely from sitting before the fire in her room.

Mercy turned her back to the door. "Will you help me with these buttons?"

"Of course, darling." Mama closed the door behind her and hurried over, making quick work of the silk buttons. "Are you nervous? Do you feel prepared?"

Her stomach balled with tension, but she wasn't frightened, and she felt confident in her choice. She'd dreamed of this day with this man for so long, it hardly felt real. "Not nervous, though I'm not certain I'm prepared, either."

Mama's hands paused. "It is not too late to change your mind, Mercy. You would have a home with us."

"I am not changing my mind," she said through her teeth. "You sound like Grace."

"Grace is in love," Mama said. "She worries for you."

The implication that they did not believe Mercy to be in love stung. Had she not told them she liked Colin? Must she have been explicit? The comparisons to her sisters never seemed to cease, and today, of all days, she wanted to feel like she was making the right decision and had support in it, not censure and concern.

"Colin Birchall is a good man," she said, an edge of defense to her tone.

"Of course he is." Mama fastened the final button and pressed her hands to Mercy's back.

She closed her eyes. "And I love him."

Mama's hands went still. She removed them, stepping around the gown to face Mercy. "If you say so, then I am happy for you."

Why did that sound forced? Mercy took a step away, forcing a smile. "I do say so, Mama. "

"Shall we leave now? Papa is already at the church with Grace."

Her wedding day and her sister could not wait for her so they might walk over together. Mercy bit back the bile climbing her throat and inhaled. She was finally getting everything she wanted—a husband, a house of her own to manage, freedom. Today would be a good day. She would make it so.

Despite the fact that Mercy's wedding was bookended by two congregation-wide agitations, the ceremony itself was lovely. It had been slightly postponed when a grey striped cat managed to sneak into the church and spent nearly a quarter of an hour hissing at the pulpit until little Fanny Watkins was able to lure it outside. Then, after the ceremony had been completed, Mr. Hoopes partook of a coughing fit so long and loud he was asked to leave by someone sitting on his pew. He and his wife did so, trailing coughs and cross frowns the entire way.

Mama did not look pleased. "She will certainly take great offense to that."

Mercy sat while her father finished the service, grateful that for the first time in much too long, she would not be called upon to deliver the treats Mama would make to soothe Mrs. Hoopes's hurt feelings.

She turned her head just enough to see her new husband, and a smile curved over her lips.

He glanced down, his hazel eyes tracking over her face. They locked on hers.

Husband .

A shiver ran over her arms.

Colin's eyebrow lifted in a silent question.

Mercy smiled softly and looked at where her father stood at the head of the church.

“Is there any chance you might be persuaded to skip the wedding breakfast?” Colin asked.

“The one my parents have put together in our honor?”

“That very one,” Colin whispered. “I have a blazing fire and a hot pot of tea at home waiting for us.”

Us .

Mercy scooted just a little closer. “You underestimate my appreciation for good ginger biscuits. I am afraid you shall have to do better than that if you want me to skip the breakfast I’ve been looking forward to for years.”

He looked at her with some surprise. “My cook can make ginger biscuits.”

“But does she have them ready to eat now?”

“No.” An uncertain smile played on his lips. “I have a feeling she will try to impress you with dinner this evening. You will not believe the lengths my servants have gone to in order to welcome you to our crumbling estate.”

“Crumbling?” She sat back. She knew it was not in the best order, had seen the evidence of that with her own eyes, but she had hoped that was a grave exaggeration. Fishing in her pocket, she pulled out the riddle and pinched the creases of the folded paper. Mercy reached for Colin’s hand, put the paper in his palm, and closed his fingers again. “This is to keep you busy during the breakfast when you find it to be a dead bore.”

Interest flashed in his eyes. “Mercy Birchall, have you written me a love note?”

Her stomach swooped at the use of her new surname. She was no longer Mercy Caldwell, spinster daughter of the vicar and reliable old maid. She was a wife, and she glowed. “It’s a riddle.”

“Not about love, then?” he asked.

The man was teasing her.

“I will not give you any hints.”

The congregation began to move around her, and Mercy glanced up to see that it was time to leave. She stood. Colin slipped the paper into his waistcoat pocket and offered his arm.

Mercy walked out at Colin’s side to a light dusting of snow everywhere. It looked like Christmas.

Her heart filled with warmth as they started walking toward their wedding breakfast at the vicarage. This was a lovely beginning.

By the time Mercy and Colin had left their wedding breakfast, they were fatigued from conversations and smiling. The ride to Winterbourne from the vicarage was slow and silent, due to the fresh powdery snow.

They pulled in front of the estate. Colin stepped out of the carriage first and turned around to help her down. When she put her hand into his, her heart started beating wildly.

He led her into the house. “Welcome to Winterbourne, Mrs. Birchall.”

A wave of warmth spread through her. So far, marriage was the best thing that had

ever happened to her.

Mr. Flint stood at the door, ready to take their coats. Colin helped Mercy from her pelisse before slipping out of his greatcoat .

“It has been quite an eventful day,” Colin said. “Can I show you to your chamber?”

“That would be wonderful.”

He gestured to the staircase, and they walked up side by side. When they reached the door he had shown her the other day, Colin continued walking. He passed her bedroom and opened the door across the corridor, then waited beside it. Had he not told her that was the guest room? The one his mother stayed in when she visited?

Colin shifted. “I thought this chamber might be more to your liking. It is larger and more comfortably appointed.” He stepped back, gesturing to the large four-poster bed in the center of the mid-sized room. The coverlet was a pale blue that matched the drapes framing the tall window.

Mercy stepped inside, her gaze trailing the walls. It was very lovely, and certainly much larger than the initial room he showed her, but it hardly lent itself to being a wife’s room. There was only one door, from what she could tell. Colin would be forced to cross the corridor if he wanted to visit her.

“Were you unable to finish the floor?”

“It is nearly finished, but I thought...” He paused, looking at her. “You are unhappy with this room?”

“No, of course not. It is beautiful.” She glanced back to the corridor. Confused, not unhappy. “Your room will be?”

“Just across the corridor.”

“And I will sleep here.”

Colin rubbed his chin. He looked at her, his gaze sticking as though he realized the nature of her confusion. “I gave it some thought, and I assumed this would be more comfortable for you. For now, at least.”

She wasn’t entirely certain she understood his meaning. Her cheeks bloomed with heat, her fingers trembling. “Are you not interested in starting a family?”

Colin’s neck turned red. “Last month, I considered you a childhood playmate and the daughter of our vicar. I would have called you a friend, Mercy, had I believed I have any friends. It is with that in mind that I have decided not to apply any pressure to our marriage so soon.”

Mercy was at a loss. She wasn’t offended that he had no intention of sharing a room with her yet—indeed, it was something of a minor relief. But her expectation had been set and her nerves were on high alert accordingly, so this unexpected change forced her to shift her thinking.

This would be good. She wouldn’t be required to act intimately until they knew one another better. Mercy’s viewpoint could pivot. She was good at moving with the flow of life’s unpredictability.

“There is also the matter of the house,” he said, as if he needed more reason. “It is a danger in itself. We ought to wait to add children to the estate until it is safe for them to run about the place.”

She blinked. That was reasonable, she supposed.

Colin cleared his throat. "I will leave you to get settled. I must write to my mother and Lady Edith's solicitor and inform them of my change in status." His smile flickered before disappearing. "Dinner will be served at six."

Mercy stood at the foot of her new bed and stared at her new husband. "What may I do?"

"Anything you'd like." He watched her in a distracted way, his eyes never settling on one thing for long. It swept the length of her gown before rising to her face. "Avoid the other rooms on this floor and be careful if you choose to walk in the garden. There is not much of a garden now, so it is not a desirable way for you to pass the time, perhaps."

"Colin, I would like to help. Is there anything I can do?"

"Help?" His hazel eyes were glued to her. "You are the mistress of Winterbourne. You may sew, embroider, or read, if you'd like. We've a small library, and the books perhaps need dusting, but if you would like to read, I can send someone to start cleaning them straight away."

Sew? Read? She was used to passing her time in service to her parents and the parish, in tasks to the butcher or chandler. Mercy was not made for a frivolous life. Surely Colin had known when he proposed to her that she was not the idle, genteel lady he was framing her to be at present.

But this was not the moment to argue. "Thank you."

He nodded, looking once more from her to the corridor, then let himself from the room, closing the door. Mercy stepped into the center of the bedchamber, turning in a slow circle. For all the time she'd spent thinking about this marriage over the previous three weeks, preparing to move from the vicarage and change her entire life,

she had not considered how it would feel to be married, and what she would do following the ceremony. If Colin wanted to provide them time to better know one another in their marriage before beginning a family, she could respect that, and indeed, it provided her a measure of relief. But if he could not make her a mother, then he ought to at least allow her to take on some responsibility in the house.

Mercy ran her fingers over her eyes and breathed out. This was only their first day. Perhaps he was allowing her a short respite. She had thought she would receive a tour of the house or formally meet the servants, at the very least.

She didn't need Colin for those things. Mercy could change from her gown into a more practical dress and give herself a tour of the house.

It took ten minutes to discover that the gown her mother had made for her wedding would not be coming off without assistance. She had half of the buttons unfastened, her work dress lying on the bed, and no way to remove the silk confection.

She should have known this would be the case when she'd needed assistance to put it on.

Shaking out her hands, Mercy glanced about the room until her gaze landed on the rope pull. She tugged on it and turned to face the door, leaving her back to the window.

A half-hour later, three more tugs, and no response, Mercy started fastening up the buttons again. It seemed she would need to hunt for assistance on her own.

She opened the door and nearly ran directly into Colin. "Oh, forgive me."

"You've nothing to be sorry for." He gave her a brief smile and started walking away again.

“Colin?”

“Yes?”

“I need help.”

He turned back, his eyebrows drawn. “What is it?”

“My gown. The buttons are out of reach. Is it possible?—”

“I can help you.” His gaze darted around her face, as though desperately trying to read her feelings on the suggestion.

“Oh.” She had not expected that. She had imagined he would send for a maid. It was...not uncomfortable , exactly. They were married, after all. “That would be kind.”

Mercy walked into the room and turned her back to Colin .

He stood behind her, the warmth from his body like pressure against her lungs. She heard his intake of breath, felt the presence of his hands hovering at her back. “Perhaps I ought to fetch someone.” He moved to the bell pull and gave it a tug.

Mercy released her held breath. “I attempted that very thing with no reply.”

“It may be broken.” He returned to her side and let out a soft breath. A chill swept over her skin as he started working his way down the line of silk covered buttons.

“Have you solved the riddle?” she asked, desperate for a distraction. She could feel the pressure of his fingers and it was doing strange things to her stomach.

“Not quite, but I feel like I am close.” His fingers brushed her back, his voice low and distracted.

Reaching behind her, she pointed to where she could touch the buttons. “You only need to go this far.”

Colin cleared his throat. In a few short moments, it was done. Her dress flopped open at her shoulder blade, but her shift covered her skin. Despite the modesty, she felt entirely exposed.

He stepped back. “I will see to it your bell is fixed straight away.”

“Thank you,” she said, unable to turn around. Her cheeks blazed, and she was certain her back was just as vibrant.

Colin walked from the room, and Mercy dropped her face into her hands, smothering a groan. All those years ago, when she had sat in the church pew and dreamed of handsome Colin Birchall falling for her, never had she imagined this would be her fate.

For better or for worse, this was her life now.

CHAPTER SIX

Colin hadn't the least idea what he was meant to do with a wife.

Currently, his plan was to hide whenever necessary, and it had been working well for the last few days. Hubble had been at Winterbourne from sunrise to sunset, working through the extensive list of repairs Colin had written. He had hired on two additional men to help speed the work along. With the incoming inheritance, Colin could afford it.

He could also afford—and sorely needed—a housekeeper, maids, footmen, and gardeners, but he hadn't the faintest idea where to find them or how to determine if they were of good stock. Mercy could use a lady's maid as well, or so he imagined. After her request for help unbuttoning her gown that first afternoon, he knew it was a necessity.

No man's heart should be put through that repeatedly when he was refraining from a physical relationship with his wife.

But, again, where would he find a good maid for her?

Colin set the quill directly beside his sheet of paper and rubbed a hand through his hair. He'd written out a list of possible servants and wages, budgeting the precise amount he could spend on each and how many he felt the house needed. He had then written out a list of the servants his parents had employed in his youth and how many were needed to keep Winterbourne running smoothly.

He felt he'd trimmed just enough to make for a reasonable staff.

Rising, Colin stacked the rest of the papers and slid them into his drawer. He replaced the pen in its holder, closed the ink and moved it to the corner. He pushed his chair in until it was perfectly lined up with the center drawer, then stood back and looked over his desk. Once he was content that everything was in its proper place, he picked up the sheet of paper listing servants needed and potential wages and went to find Flint.

Colin flinched when he closed the door to his study, the pounding of a hammer much closer than he expected. He followed the sound toward the grand staircase and peeked up to see Hubble and his men working on the steps. Relief swept through him. He would soon be able to scratch another item from the list of things that needed to be repaired in this devil of a house.

Hubble looked up and noticed him, then wiped his brow with the back of his wrist. "Almost finished here. Then we'll move on to the roof."

"Will the snow be a hindrance?"

Hubble exchanged a glance with one of his men. "We'll do what we can. The sky looked clear this morning."

But the chill that lingered in the air, the one that seeped into the walls and made his bedchamber cold that morning, spoke of incoming snow. His father had always been able to feel when a storm was rolling in. Colin never understood his methods, but the man had often been correct. After his father had died a few years ago, Colin lost the warning of incoming storms.

This morning, he had that feeling, and he wondered if now that he was married and nearly thirty, he had developed the same sense for changes in weather.

“Thank you, Hubble. Keep me apprised.”

“Of course, sir.”

Colin left the men and went in search of his butler. He found Flint in the dining room, inspecting the silver.

“I have a task for you, Flint.”

“Anything, sir.”

He proffered the sheet of paper. “Will you go about seeing these positions are filled? I ran the calculations and these wages seem fair to me. Are you in agreement?”

Flint looked over the paper. “More than generous, sir.”

That was undoubtedly an exaggeration, but Colin took it to mean the figures were reasonable.

“When shall I ask them to begin?” Flint asked.

“The sooner the better.” He went to leave but paused and turned back. “The maid for Mrs. Birchall is of the utmost urgency.”

“Yes, sir. I have a woman in mind for that position.”

Colin’s heart started beating faster, though he had no earthly idea why. “Do you happen to know where I could find Mrs. Birchall at this time?”

“She was in the garden, last I saw.”

“Thank you, Flint.”

Colin strode down the corridor to the door that let him outside. The frigid air bit at his nose when he stepped outside. He wrinkled it, staving off the chill, and wondered why he didn't think to retrieve his greatcoat before leaving the house. None of the snowfalls they'd had in the last few weeks remained for long, but it was cold. Grass crunched beneath his boots, the blades icy from the now-frozen morning dew. With clouds covering the sun, they'd never had the chance to thaw.

The garden had been his mother's domain. Her design had been fairly simple, but when he was unable to continue paying his gardener last year, it had fallen into ruin, the flowers overgrowing and spreading over each strip of lawn in a wild array. Now that winter was fast approaching, dead stalks and dry shrubs remained, giving the area the appearance of a wild, unkempt bit of land.

Had his mother been here to see its neglect, she would have been horrified. There was one benefit, at least, to her absence the last few years. She was not subjected to the decay of her home.

Colin swallowed that truth, pushing it away and searching the grounds for his wife.

He was still unused to having her in his home, but he would readily admit how nice it had been to have someone to share dinner with the last few nights. Her conversation was never dull.

It had been at least four years since he'd had regular company at dinner. Colin's father had died nearly five years ago, directly after his sister Honora was married. Mother only remained at Winterbourne for her mourning period before she left to live with Honora under the pretext of helping Honora with her new babe.

He cringed, considering how Mother might have appreciated being invited to the

wedding. The letter he'd written informing her of the marriage felt paltry and insufficient, but had he invited her with enough time to see her at the wedding, she would have stayed at Winterbourne, and he did not believe she had any interest in seeing the house—not until Colin had fully restored it to its former glory. Mother had left to live with Honora because the rough nature of a crumbling estate had been difficult for someone of her constitution.

Mercy was made of much harder stock. Or so Colin told himself.

A rustling caught his attention on the far side of the garden, and he followed the motion. Surely it was a fox and not his wife, because it was low to the ground.

Besides, it was far too cold to walk out here. The garden was no longer the peaceful respite he'd wished for.

When he stepped around the dry, dead shrubbery, he came to a halt. Mercy was indeed outside, but she was not in the formal garden. She was kneeling in the kitchen garden beyond the short stone wall, burying her hands in the packed mud.

What the devil?

Colin's steps quickened. Mercy looked up from where she knelt. Her cheeks were bright red, making her freckles pop. Her hair was tied back and a bonnet fastened to keep the sun from her eyes—though she did not need it today with clouds covering the sky.

“Good afternoon, Colin,” she said, yanking something from the ground and tossing it into a pile of overgrown green and yellow stalks.

“What are you doing?” he asked, doing his level best to hide his alarm.

“Pulling weeds.”

“Mercy,” he said, staring at her .

She seemed to sense his discomfort and pushed back, sitting on her heels. She only wore one glove, and she fiddled with the edge of it now. “What is it?”

“This is not a task for the mistress of the house.”

She stared at him. “Weeding the garden?”

“Yes, Mercy. Weeding the garden is for the gardeners.”

“But...” She glanced behind him, then her copper eyebrows pulled together. “I inquired with Cook, and she told me there were no gardeners.”

It took a moment for his mind to wrap around her words. “Why were you inquiring with Cook about the state of the gardens?”

“I was helping her with the—with something , and she mentioned the weeds. I have a good deal of free time, so I did not think it would be an issue if I was to help.”

Colin did not have a ready reply.

“I often assisted my mother in our kitchen garden, Colin. It was one of the many things I’ve done, and I am very capable of pulling weeds from the ground so our vegetables have adequate room to grow. If we do not tidy the area, it will be impossible to find our leeks and turnips through winter. It is not offending the servants that I am out here, surely.”

He considered his butler. Flint hadn’t seemed the least concerned with her activities,

and he had known precisely where she was. Was Colin upset for the wrong reasons? No one but the servants would know of her activities. If she had weeded gardens with her mother, then it could not be so terrible to do so here?

He thought of his own mother. She never would have taken such a task upon herself. It simply wasn't done.

He shook his head. Mercy wasn't a vicar's wife; she was the mistress of Winterbourne. "I have instructed Flint to hire the servants we need. Gardeners were among that list."

"That will be immensely helpful." She pulled another weed.

He stared at the clump of roots she had tossed into her pile. "So you needn't do that anymore."

Mercy frowned. "Will they start tomorrow?"

Colin shifted from one foot to the other. "Well, no. I am not certain when he will find them or when they will begin. Soon, I hope."

Mercy reached forward, took another weed at the base, and pulled it free. "Then I suppose I should continue to do this until they begin, or the garden will be overrun and we will not have all the vegetables we need in order to eat."

When she phrased it like that, he felt he was the one being ridiculous for refusing to help her.

Was he? If he returned to the house right now, what would he do?

Probably sit at his desk and organize another plan for the renovation of his estate.

He'd yet to even consider the exterior of the house beyond the roof.

Colin suppressed the inclination to return to his fire-warmed study and instead moved to Mercy's side. "Where have you already weeded?"

She blinked up at him before pointing. "Only that section there."

He moved to the corner she hadn't yet begun and knelt on the cold ground. He grabbed the base of a weed, tugged, and the entire top slid from his hand. He tried again, but only managed to pull off some of the top leaves.

Mercy chuckled.

"The ground is nearly solid. "

"It is not easy," she agreed. "I have been focusing on the space nearest the vegetables."

He tried again, this time digging into the ground and managing to pull the entire weed from the earth, roots and all. Raising the weed in the air, he felt the budding seeds of accomplishment nestle in his chest. He grinned at Mercy.

"Well done," she said, reaching for another weed and expertly pulling it from the hard mud.

Colin reached for a larger weed. He'd honed his muscles in the last year, especially as servants left and he did more to keep his house in order. He might as well put them to use. This particular weed looked to be a wretchedly ugly variety, and he couldn't imagine his wife would be able to free it from the earth on her own. He pulled hard, anticipating the difficulty it would present, and his hand slid smoothly over the rough stalk. Only this time, it hurt . He sucked a quick breath between his teeth and found

red blooming from a cut down the center of his palm.

He squeezed it into a fist.

“Have you hurt yourself?”

“It is minor.”

“You have,” Mercy said, pushing to her feet. She hurried over and reached for his hand. Her nails were dark with dirt, her fingers smudged, but he let her take his hand and turn it over. “Oh, Colin. We must go inside at once and clean this.”

He liked the way she fussed over him, but it felt a little silly to worry over a minor cut—especially one received from a plant. Surely he could rinse the dirt and it would cease bleeding on its own. “It is only a small wound.”

“Which needs to be washed and wrapped. Come, it won’t take long.” She brushed the dirt from her gown and led the way toward the house .

Colin walked at her side. They made their way into the house and down to the kitchen. “The stillroom ought to have what we need,” Mercy said, pushing the door open and yanking the one glove off.

Colin paused before following her into the room. She’d only lived in this house for five days. “You are familiar with the kitchen already?”

She glanced over her shoulder at him. “I introduced myself to Mrs. Johns, and she gave me a tour yesterday. I wanted to thank her for the lovely meals.”

Of course she had. She embodied politeness. Had that been an oversight on his part? Should he have brought her down to the kitchen and introduced her to the cook?

Mercy pulled a bowl from the shelf and took it to the pump in the corner before filling it.

Colin hung back, watching her, unsure if he was impressed by her ability and knowledge of the kitchen area or frustrated he had not thought to provide the tour himself.

It was certainly both.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Mercy carried the bowl to the long counter and set it down, careful not to let the clean water slosh on the floor, before fetching a rag from the cupboard. She wasn't entirely certain if Colin was upset with her for working in the garden. If that was the case, she was not about to inform him she knew the stillroom so well because she had spent the afternoon yesterday organizing its cupboards.

The cook, Mrs. Johns, had been busy making loaves of bread and preparing for dinner, but she took the time to show Mercy the rooms downstairs. When Mercy saw the state of the stillroom and learned the kitchen maid had left more than three months ago, she set to work.

Mrs. Johns had tutted, but she left Mercy to it. After only a few short hours of work, everything was well in order.

Now, Mercy was able to fetch the rag straight away and return to Colin's side. His suspicious gaze tracked her movements but she ignored it, pulling down a second bowl and setting it beside the first. She reached for Colin's hand. He seemed reluctant, but he gave it to her. "It isn't a deep wound."

"No, but we ought to remove the dirt anyway. Your hand is filthy."

He glanced at her hands, and she felt a rising blush spread into her cheeks. She returned to the pump in the corner and splashed her hands beneath it, wiping away the extra mud and grime. Once her skin was scrubbed red and clean, she dried her hands and returned.

“You did not need to do that,” Colin muttered.

Mercy didn’t bother arguing. She took his hand and held it over the empty bowl. His skin was surprisingly warm, given how cold it had been outside. His fingers were long, curling up slightly. She dipped the rag in the bowl of water and squeezed it over his hand. Dirty water ran into the bowl. She repeated it a few times, working the dirt from his palm and his cut, all the while keeping her focus on the wound.

Colin watched her. She could feel his gaze focused on her face while she worked. When she moved to the whisky, he sucked in a breath.

“Is that necessary?” he asked, breathing through his teeth.

“My father believes so. I’ve never questioned it.”

Colin grumbled but allowed her to continue administering to his wound. He sucked in through his teeth, his words strained. “I didn’t realize he was proficient in healing.”

“He is not, but he has ministered to many people and knows quite a lot. I would say he is fairly knowledgeable about most things.”

“Can he help me fill my house with servants again?” he muttered.

She paused, looking at him. “Do you mean it? ”

Colin blinked. “We will have more servants, Mercy. Did you think I meant to keep us without?”

“Not at all.” She dried his hand on a towel and reached for the wrapping. “If you need help finding servants, my father knows most of the people within the parish. He would know those who are in need of positions more than others, or who might be

considered more dependable.”

“I hadn’t considered that. I provided Flint with a list of positions and wages and asked him to manage it.”

She applied her focus to tying his bandage. “You could try to bring back the servants who left.”

“Most of them are employed elsewhere now, I’d imagine.” His words were clipped, and she wondered if he felt a bit of sting at being abandoned.

“You cannot be blamed for not feeling charitable toward those who left in your time of need, Colin,” she said gently, raising her gaze to meet his eyes.

He shook his head, giving her a rueful smile. “I could not fault them for leaving a house that was falling apart. It has been somewhat dangerous to be here.”

“But your aunt’s money will change that, so you needn’t fret any longer.”

He stared at her, his eyes direct, like pools of heat boring into her skin. “Most women would not accept this situation, or this house, with such equanimity.”

She felt heat rise in her chest and turned away, emptying the dirty water into the pump’s drain. “Most women would not weed their own gardens or be intimately familiar with the stillroom, would they?”

He chuckled. “No. But that is my fault as well. I will hire enough servants that you needn’t ever step foot in the kitchen again. ”

“Then how will I ask Mrs. Johns for ginger biscuits?” she asked, hoping to lighten the thickness in the room. She had the feeling Colin wasn’t attempting to keep her from

chores out of a sense of duty, but because he truly did not like her working in that capacity. To never feel the earth in her hands and have a turnip to show for it would be a pity. To never make her mother's shortbread would be a shame. It was not the life she wished to have, and she hadn't imagined Colin would care so deeply about keeping her idle.

No matter. With time, she could show him that it wasn't unbecoming of her to help in small ways.

Mercy finished cleaning her workstation and putting away everything she'd used.

Colin led her through the door. She smiled at Mrs. Johns as they passed. The cook was chopping potatoes while something simmered on the stove behind her. She wore a white cap over curly black hair, and her plump cheeks were rosy. She gave Mercy a slight nod, which buoyed her spirits.

Mercy accepted Colin's arm when they reached the staircase. "If you would like to engage my father's assistance, I am happy to take your list of needed servants to him this afternoon."

Colin didn't respond. Had she done something else he didn't approve of?

When they reached the top of the stairs, he faced her. "Very well. That would be agreeable to me. Flint has the list."

She hesitated. "Surely it is acceptable for me to act in this capacity?"

"To visit your family? Of course."

"To see to the hiring of servants," she corrected. "My mother managed it in our home."

“This is not a vicarage, Mercy.”

What had a vicarage to do with anything?

Flint approached them, his steps certain. “You’ve a letter, sir.”

Colin took the folded paper from the salver and looked at the direction. A line formed between his eyebrows. “It is from my mother.” He glanced at the butler. “Thank you, Flint. Will you provide Mrs. Birchall with the list of servants we need? She is going to employ the vicar’s help to find people in need of positions.”

He dipped a nod. “I will retrieve it straight away. Though I have already sent Lucas to inquire with a local girl. The Turners’ niece.”

“That is more than acceptable,” Mercy said.

Flint left them. Colin opened the letter and flicked his eyes over the page. “She is coming to Bath and would like to see me.” He lowered the letter. “To see us , I suppose, though she might not know of our marriage yet. If she was traveling to Bath, she could have missed my letter informing her of the wedding.”

“If she’s unaware of our wedding, would she prefer you go to Bath alone?”

Colin tucked his chin in surprise. “You are my wife, Mercy. I’m certain she would expect you to be there.”

“Then I will come with you.”

“We will leave...” He looked at the letter again. “In three days. She has invited us to join her at the Upper Rooms for a Christmas ball.”

“Christmas is not for a sennight.”

He looked at the letter again. “She will not see us at Christmas, so she hopes to see us in Bath beforehand.”

She had not seen Colin’s mother in at least four years. Mercy was much changed, she hoped, and she imagined the same for Mrs. Birchall. What would the woman think about Mercy being married to her son?

“I will begin preparations for the journey. We ought to remain in Bath and travel home the next morning. I wouldn’t wish to travel on these roads so late at night.”

Mercy agreed.

Colin raised his hand and looked at the bandage. When he lifted his gaze to Mercy, there was something there she hadn’t seen before. Appreciation, perhaps? Or residual wonderment that she knew the stillroom so intimately. Oh, dear. Was he understanding she might have had a hand in putting the disorderly room to rights?

Or perhaps he had never before gone into it and had no idea it had even been improved.

“Thank you, Mercy,” he said finally.

She sensed there was more he wanted to say, so she waited quietly for him to continue.

“I will see you at dinner. Six o’clock.” He emphasized the six.

“Have I been late?”

He blinked.

Incredulity snaked through Mercy. Her handsome husband suddenly resembled the clock troll her parents had threatened her with in her youth. “Good heavens, Colin. Are you upset by my lack of punctuality?”

“No, not upset.”

“But it is not how things are done?” she guessed.

“We dine at six,” he said simply.

“And that is the time I have entered the dining room each night.”

“Yes, but in order to dine at six, one must be seated prior to that.”

She had no ready response.

He looked uncomfortable. His hazel eyes were looking between Mercy and the floor behind her. If he was not so perfectly attired, she imagined this would be a moment he would run his hands through his hair in agitation, but as it stood, he was nearly impeccable—save for the dirt on his knees—and his motions equally unflappable.

“I understand.” She dipped in a curtsy, eager to end this conversation. “I will see you at dinner.”

“Are you—” He cleared his throat. “I don’t wish for you to grow ill, Mercy. You ought to remain indoors.”

She nodded before turning to leave. Mercy honored his wishes and did not return to the garden, but it only took a half-hour to discover there was nothing to occupy her

time. She found herself exploring various rooms in search of the library with a duster she'd collected from belowstairs. Colin had mentioned it was overly dusty—surely she could dust and still remain the great lady of Winterbourne Park?

She found the library on the first level, tucked behind a cozy music room. The library itself was no larger than her bedchamber, with dark paneled bookcases lining the walls and a large globe in the corner. It smelled of leather and old paper. Mercy ran her fingers over the long turkey feathers of her duster, bundled together at the base with twine. She proceeded to clean the globe, surprised by the disuse evident in the thick layer of dust. She moved on to the bookcase, pulling each book from the shelves and dusting them thoroughly before making a neat stack. She cleaned the shelf before returning the pristine books, then moved to the next level .

It was tedious work, but she didn't mind it. Her hands much preferred having something to occupy them, and it allowed her mind a task so it would not wander overly much toward Colin.

If she was being honest, she hardly thought of anything else. The man was a mystery. He had lived alone at Winterbourne for four years, all the while managing the farmland and the house without support. He wasn't seen much about town except for church on Sundays and the occasional town event, but he was well liked and invited occasionally to different homes for dinner that the Caldwells had also been invited to.

Mercy had often been envious of the life Colin led—his freedom, his beautiful home. Now that she had a close look at what life has looked like for him—the silence, the dust, the servants and his mother abandoning him for better places to live—she felt compassion for his circumstances in lieu of jealousy. She wanted the house to be restored to brilliance that he might once again live in a clean, safe environment. Perhaps he would smile more and worry less.

The door to the library opened and a woman appeared. She was young, her flaxen

hair pulled back and fastened beneath a white cap. She wore a maid's gown, her hands clasped lightly in front of her and her gaze lowered to the carpet at Mercy's feet. She looked to be a few years younger than Mercy, though she was a stranger. In Mercy's position as a daughter to a clergyman, she had the unique fortune of being well known to all the members of their parish, both the genteel and the poor. It wasn't often she didn't know someone in the area.

"May I help you?" Mercy asked .

The woman looked at her. "I'm Dorothy Turner, ma'am. I've been asked to be your new lady's maid."

"Turner. Mr. Flint mentioned he sent Lucas to inquire with your uncle." The Turners lived on the far side of town and didn't attend church often, so she had yet to meet their niece. She looked at the clock, surprised to find four hours had passed in this library, and that this woman had been able to accept the offer of work so quickly. Oh, drat. Was it after five already? Colin was not going to be happy. "Welcome to Winterbourne, Miss Turner."

"Oh, call me Dorothy, madam."

"Very well. I must change for dinner."

"I can help you, madam."

Mercy had never had a lady's maid, and she never—except for her wedding dress—had needed help dressing before. She'd always had her sisters or mother or another maid nearby if she found herself in need of assistance. Since coming to Winterbourne, she had refrained from wearing anything that required another person so she would not have to live through the embarrassment of seeking Colin again. Having Dorothy would make it possible for her to wear her nicer gowns to dinner.

“Shall we hurry?” she asked, putting down the feather duster to mark the place where she would be leaving off. “Mr. Birchall appreciates a punctual household.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Mercy led the way to her bedchamber. This would take a great deal of adjusting, but it would be worth the effort if it meant making Colin happy. If Mercy had learned anything in her five short days of marriage thus far, it was how much her husband desired order. His expectations were clear and, thus far, she had not been living up to them.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Colin stood in the antechamber to the dining room and checked his pocket watch. Five minutes until six o'clock. Had he not been clear about his expectations? It was not as though he was an unreasonable man. Mercy had plenty of time to dress and be at dinner on time.

He had always been of the opinion that those who cared little for being punctual also cared little for other people. It was far more selfish to be consistently late than it was to simply make an effort to be where one was meant to be when one promised to be there.

Colin looked at his watch again. Three minutes until six o'clock now. He snapped it closed and pushed the door open. Dinner would begin on time whether?—

“I am here!” Mercy said, pushing through the other door into the dining room and nearly running into him. She pulled herself up in time to avoid a collision, brushing a loose curl from her temple.

It had been a surprise when Lucas had returned from his errand with the Turners' niece, but if she was willing to accept the position so quickly, he had no qualms with bringing her on. Clearly the new maid had spent an exceptional amount of time on Mercy's hair, because it was put up and curled with far more effort than he'd seen from her before, even on their wedding day.

Colin would be lying if he tried to pretend she did not look equally exceptional then and now. Mercy was beautiful, regardless of what she wore. Tonight, she was

stunning, but he wondered if it had less to do with her coiffure and everything to do with her rosy cheeks and shimmery eyes.

“Forgive me, Colin,” she breathed. Her chest heaved as though she’d run all the way to the dining room. Perhaps she had. “Dorothy had trouble with my hair, and...” Her voice trailed off when she caught his eye. She seemed to shrink to silence, her brightness dimming.

Oh, blast it all. Did he look annoyed? Colin quickly smoothed his countenance into one of vague interest. He had to admit he was touched by her effort. She must have noticed the time and hurried.

Colin gestured to the table. “Shall we sit and you can tell me all about it?”

“I needn’t do that,” she said, following him to the table and letting him push her chair in. She looked up at him, her freckled nose wrinkling slightly. “I am sorry for my tardiness.”

When she looked at him like that, it was impossible to remain irritated. “How did you spend your afternoon?”

She focused on the plate in front of her as Molly brought in the food.

Footmen. Colin needed footmen above all other things. He was certain his housemaid was tired of serving meals. She had been moved to the responsibility last year—she would undoubtedly appreciate resuming her normal duties and nothing more.

“I was in the library,” Mercy finally said. “Tell me, have you solved the riddle?”

Colin noted that his knife was askew and straightened it. His mind had been on other things and he hadn’t, in truth, devoted much time at all to her riddle. “Not yet. My

hands move, but I cannot clap...what is the rest of it?"

"My hands are ever-moving, but I cannot clap," Mercy said. "I have a face, but I cannot speak. I hang at the ready. What am I?"

Many things had faces but did not speak. But hands ever-moving? Fish never ceased to swim, and they seem to hang at the ready for a hook and some bait. "A fish?" he asked.

"Fish don't have hands." She spooned potatoes onto her plate.

He laughed. "I suppose not."

"I would think this is something you'd have guessed straight away," she said absently.

So it was an item he used regularly? Something he liked?

The way Mercy was looking very entertained, he imagined it was extremely obvious.

"It will come to me," he said.

"How is your hand?" she asked, reaching for the plate of ham and taking a piece. She set the serving fork down, leaning it against the plate's edge.

Colin stretched his palm, turning it over to see the little knot she'd tied in his wrapping. "Honestly, it feels sorer than I had anticipated. I expect it to heal quickly, though. It was not a very deep cut." He reached for the serving fork she had set down and moved it so it rested along the plate without the potential of falling .

Mercy eyed him.

He said nothing. It wasn't wrong to save Molly from even more work. The fork had rested precariously on the edge, about to fall and splatter everywhere.

Colin would not be made to feel ridiculous for correcting it. Though he didn't think that was Mercy's intention, he could feel how little she understood his intent.

They finished the meal mostly in silence, the stilted conversation either of them attempted not growing or expanding into comfortable chatter. It was far different from the dinners they'd shared the last few nights. Despite the strangeness between them now, he felt they could return to their comfortable companionship. He needed to try harder.

When his plate was cleared, Colin removed his pocket watch and checked the time. "Shall we—" Wait. He looked at his watch again, at the hands that moved across the face, then lifted his gaze. "The riddle answer. It is a watch?"

"Yes," she said, smiling brightly and rising from her seat. "Well done."

"Thank you." He worked his jaw, rising beside her. He offered his arm. "Would you care to join me in the library? Molly has undoubtedly built the fire up, so I imagine it is warm."

Mercy looked at him for a long beat. "Yes, I would like that very much."

"You can write another riddle for me," he said, glad when she took his arm. He liked the weight of her hand on him, the steady reminder he was no longer alone in this house.

She smiled prettily up at him. His stomach constricted, thinking again of how her delicate and capable hands had felt when she had tended to his wound. "On the contrary, Colin. This time, it is your turn to write a riddle for me."

The following morning, Mercy visited her father and provided him with the list of servants they needed at Winterbourne. He had come through with exceptional speed, as she'd expected him to. Within a day he had sent a housemaid and two footmen to Winterbourne for interviews. Mercy had handled the questioning, alongside Flint, and she found all three servants to be perfectly acceptable. Flint, it seemed, was in agreement.

"Have you heard news of any housekeepers?" she asked when they left the new footmen, Lewis and Duncan, in their rooms to unpack their things.

"Not yet, madam, but I think it will take time to find a capable person for the role. If the vicar does not know of someone, I can place an advertisement."

"That might be best."

Flint's white eyebrows rose. "We could be waiting on an answer from London, if Bath has no reputable women available. A good housekeeper is not easy to come by."

Mercy swallowed her amusement at the gravity in his words. "Winterbourne has managed for this long without one. Between Mrs. Johns and myself, I think we can supervise until the position is filled."

Flint, for all his stateliness, did not seem to love this plan, but he conceded.

"Will you tell me where I might find Mr. Birchall?"

"In his study, madam," Flint said.

"Thank you." She left the butler and went in search of her husband. It was not until she was in the middle of meeting with the maid earlier that morning that the answer to Colin's latest riddle had come to her.

It should have been obvious sooner. He had written it while they were sitting together in the library after dinner, for heaven's sake.

She knocked at his study door and he bade her enter. "Good day, Colin," she said, moving into the room.

He stood, waiting for her to approach. His brown hair was styled perfectly, his brown coat fastened neatly over a bronze waistcoat. Did the man ever look anything less than pristine? It was an admirable feat, particularly now that she knew he didn't have a valet.

It occurred to her that a valet was not on the list of servants she had provided for her father, either. Did Colin not wish to employ one?

"What can I do for you?" he asked pleasantly. His eyes swept over her once before returning to her face.

She faltered. Was she bothering him? She had yet to seek him out like this, and it felt strange. He watched her expectantly, however, so she had no choice but to proceed. "I have the answer to your riddle."

He gestured to the chair across from his desk. "By all means."

"Silent teacher, quiet friend, sharing wisdom without end. What am I?" She recited the riddle while settling in the seat. "Books."

"Well done," he said. "I thought you might have figured that out straight away."

"I should have. We were surrounded by the evidence when you first gave it to me."

"Sometimes I think we search for obscure answers when really it is plainly obvious."

“We make things more difficult than they need to be, certainly.”

Something in his expression quirked, but he was unable to reply as a knock came at the door.

“Enter,” Colin said.

Flint pushed the door open. “You have visitors, sir.”

“Who is it?”

“Miss Fairfax and her companion, Mrs. Kline.”

Not Mercy’s favorite people to chat with. Until their wedding, Miss Fairfax had made no secret of her wish to court Colin. The three of them together would be nothing short of uncomfortable.

“You may inform them that we are not home to visitors,” Colin said.

“Colin, why?” Mercy asked. She did not wish to meet with the ladies either, but she couldn’t fathom his reason for sending them away.

His hazel eyes were dismissive. “I don’t have the time or the patience for mindless chatter.”

“They are likely here for a bride visit. I’ve yet to receive any of those, you know.”

“Probably because you’ve lived in Millcombe your entire life and the matrons know you exceedingly well.”

“It is still the done thing to visit a bride after her marriage,” Mercy argued. “Though I

expect they are waiting until January to provide us with time to settle in.”

“I imagine so,” he agreed. Silence sat between them for a few more beats on the clock before he continued. “Might I send them away, then, or would you like to speak to them? ”

Goodness, the man was obtuse. Mercy could have screamed into a pillow. She could not fathom a reasonable excuse to ignore the visitors, so she looked at Flint. “I will see them. Will you put them in the morning room?” She did not believe there was another place they could visit, truthfully. Not with the drawing room ceiling being a danger.

“Of course, madam.”

“You needn’t do this, you know,” Colin said.

“I will inform Miss Fairfax you are dealing with estate business, but she will be sorely disappointed.”

He looked taken aback by this. “Whatever for?”

“It is you she has come to see. Did you not notice how Flint mentioned you have visitors?”

“He meant both of us.”

“Miss Fairfax certainly didn’t,” she muttered, rising from her seat.

“What do you mean by that?” He stood, coming around the desk to walk her to the door.

“Nothing.” She smiled brightly.

Colin took her hand. “Mercy, what did you mean by that?”

She searched his hazel eyes but only found worry. Was he truly so blind? It would do no one any favors to bring up a past infatuation—something over which they had no control. She moved to walk away.

He held fast. “Is there history here I should be apprised of?”

“It is shocking to me you do not already know.” She could see he didn’t intend to let the matter drop. Sighing, she looked to the ceiling, then back to Colin, unable to ignore his skin on hers where he still held her hand. “Miss Fairfax has spent the last few years making her interest in you widely known. If it escaped your notice, then I cannot credit how.”

His brow drew into confusion. “She has always been friendly.”

“To you, yes,” Mercy said. “It is not me she has come to see.”

“Ah.” His expression cleared. “You are not friends?”

“Perhaps we could be in the future,” she said, though she harbored little hope for that. Miss Fairfax had never made her disdain for the Caldwell family a secret. She and her father were of the faction who did not approve of Mercy’s father.

Mercy pulled her hand free and started walking away when Colin stopped her. “Shall I come with you?”

She glanced at him over her shoulder, noting how handsome he looked, even with the frown marring his forehead. It was no wonder Miss Fairfax had tried to make him

consider her as a potential wife for so long. He was thoughtful, considerate, the owner of a beautiful—if broken—country estate, and he was exceedingly attractive.

Mercy shook her head. “I can see her alone.”

Colin took her at her word, and she went off to find Miss Fairfax and Mrs. Kline. They were waiting on the sofa in the morning room, looking about the place with barely concealed interest. Miss Fairfax’s gaze snapped to Mercy before lingering on the doorway behind her.

The woman had most definitely hoped to see Colin.

“Good day,” Mercy said, shoving her unruly jealousy aside. Miss Fairfax was beautiful, with round blue eyes and clear pale skin—not a freckle in sight. If Colin had been more aware of her interest in him, would he have proposed to her instead?

Mercy put the thought aside. It would do no good to focus on such things now.

“Mr. Birchall is seeing to estate business,” she said by way of explanation when it was clear Miss Fairfax was still anticipating his arrival.

“Pity.”

“How are you settling in, Mrs. Birchall?” Mrs. Kline asked, her wrinkled hands folded primly on her lap. Was it in Mercy’s imagination, or had Miss Fairfax flinched?

“It is an adjustment, to be sure. The servants have been a great help, though. I am very grateful for their guidance.”

“Well, if you need help learning how to manage an estate of this size, I am more than

happy to offer my advice,” Miss Fairfax said. “I have been doing it myself for a number of years now.”

“Yes, that would be very kind.”

Miss Fairfax rose, taking her companion by surprise.

Mercy, however, was not in the least puzzled by this premature departure. Miss Fairfax had come to Winterbourne for one man only, and he was not here.

“I’m afraid we cannot visit for long,” she said with a saccharine smile. “We’ll return another time.”

Mercy rose. “That would be lovely.” She kept her smile in place as she walked her guests to the door, hoping beyond all reason Colin would remain sequestered in his study until they were out of sight. She felt her hold on her relationship with him was still tenuous, and Miss Fairfax did not seem inclined to respect their marital vows—not when she came so intent on seeing him.

Mercy closed the door behind them and sighed. Perhaps next time she would take a page from Colin’s book and refuse to see them.

Only, she knew it wasn’t in her nature to turn people away. She would have to hope Miss Fairfax would give up on her own.

CHAPTER NINE

Though their small village was near Bath, Mercy hadn't had many reasons to travel to the larger town. Each time felt like a treat. She enjoyed the rows of homes and buildings, built from the same creamy honey-colored stone that made up Millcombe and the Abbey, with its towering heights and magnificent architecture. The entire town was charming and lovely, and even better when dusted with clean, white snow.

Their carriage pulled up to a building at the top of a hill. Smoke puffed from the rows of chimneys topping stately townhomes lined up along the street like dignified soldiers. Colin stepped first from the carriage to help her out. She accepted his hand and took careful steps over the slick paving stones to the door, lifting her gown to keep it from brushing in the snow.

"We are meeting my mother here before traveling to the ball together," Colin said, rapping at the knocker on the door.

Mercy's stomach was in knots. She swallowed, but her throat was dry .

Colin glanced down at her with concern.

The door swung open and a man stood there, dressed to go out in a fine coat and starched cravat. His hairline had receded, showing a shiny scalp under thinning brown hair. "Welcome, welcome," he said, jovially ushering them inside. This could not be the butler. "Your mother has been eager for your arrival." He glanced at Mercy, not in the least surprised to find a woman accompanying Colin.

That was mildly concerning.

“Uncle Gooding, this is my wife, Mercy.”

Certainly not the butler then. She liked a man who had no compunction in opening his own door.

“Such a pleasure,” he said, bending over her hand.

“Mercy, this is my Uncle Gooding, my father’s cousin. This is his home.”

“Thank you for welcoming us,” she said. Colin had already prepared her to meet his bachelor uncle, since they would be sleeping in this house tonight, but she hadn’t expected the exuberance. While not a literal uncle of Colin’s, he had no other family of his own and had been a very close friend of Colin’s father, so the title was natural. He had been Colin and Honora’s uncle for their entire lives.

“Of course, of course. Call me uncle. You are family, dear.” He lifted his eyebrows to Colin. “Your mother is waiting in the drawing room.”

He led them up a long set of stairs and directly across the corridor to a drawing room, where Mrs. Birchall sat perched on a sofa. She was not alone. Across from her was Honora Chadwick, Colin’s sister. She had his same brown hair and sharp, hazel eyes. Her posture was straight and her expression altogether curious .

He stopped abruptly in the doorway. “Honora. I did not expect you.”

She stood, her greedy eyes raking over Mercy. “Surprise, brother. I had to see for myself that your letter was speaking the truth. When you told Mother you married Mercy Caldwell, I could hardly credit it.”

Colin looked at his mother, who was also rising from her seat. “You received my letter?”

“Of course. Why do you think we made an immediate venture to Bath? I will never forgive you for not waiting to have me at the wedding,” she said, though her smile belied any ill feelings she had feigned in her words. She crossed the room and embraced her son, then turned to look at Mercy. “You have grown into a lovely young woman, Miss Caldwell.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” she said, dipping in a curtsy.

“Mrs. Birchall,” Colin corrected.

“Of course. It will take some growing used to,” Mrs. Birchall said.

Mercy wasn’t offended. Ought she to be? It seemed an innocent mistake.

Honora hugged her brother before pulling Mercy into an embrace. “It has been much too long.”

“Indeed. You are settled in Devonshire, are you not?”

“We are. The travel was not overly difficult, though I left the children at home with Mr. Chadwick. They do not have the constitutions for long carriage rides.”

“Come, sit,” Uncle Gooding said. “Have you eaten? I will send for something to nourish you.”

“We’ve eaten,” Colin told him. Cook had packed them a basket for the carriage.

“Tell us about your family,” Mrs. Birchall said. “I have not heard much news from

Millcombe in recent years. It is near impossible to glean anything from Colin's letters."

It was on the tip of Mercy's tongue to ask why they did not return to Millcombe for a visit themselves, but she refrained. If Honora's children had difficulty traveling, it made far more sense for Colin to travel to them. What excuse did his mother have for not returning to her son's house, to the place she had raised her family?

"It is much the same," Colin said. "Not much changes in Millcombe."

Mercy waited for him to tell his family of the repairs he was making to the estate, but he didn't. They spoke of various families in the village and Mercy told Honora of her sisters' husbands and children and where each of them had settled.

By the time they needed to leave for the ball, it occurred to Mercy that no one had asked about her relationship with Colin. Not about how they'd decided to get married or when they had known they loved one another. Was it so very obvious that theirs wasn't a love match?

"We should play bullet pudding tonight," Honora said when they climbed into the carriage to go to the ball. Mercy assumed the hills and the snow had called for it, since she knew most people did not bother keeping carriages in Bath.

"That is a children's game," Colin said drily.

"It is a great deal of fun, and we have not done it since we were children." Honora's bright eyes swung to Mercy. "I think it would be a lark."

"You are a mother now," Colin said. "You shouldn't be saying lark."

"Oh, pish." Honora waved off his concerns. "Mercy will play it with me, I wager. "

It was too dark to clearly see, but Mercy imagined Colin rolling his eyes, based on the grumbling breath he released.

The carriage rolled to a stop in front of a large building. Mercy knew it to be the assembly hall, though she'd only attended the assemblies here once before, years ago.

When the family walked on, Colin took her by the hand and pulled slightly, causing a rush of warmth to shoot up her arm. His darkened, shadowed eyes bore down into hers. "I do not understand the purpose of this visit, except that they already knew about you and clearly wish to see us together. I am sorry for any undue stress they are causing."

Mercy gently squeezed his fingers. "They are perfectly lovely, Colin," she said honestly. "Now, please tell me you are not averse to dancing."

He looked at her with some surprise before a soft smile curved his mouth, allowing his dimple to make a short appearance. "For you, Mercy, I will dance."

Colin regretted his promise to dance almost immediately when they were ushered into the larger of the assembly halls and the instruments began tuning for a reel. But the light in Mercy's eyes and her eager nature were beautiful, and he would not be the reason for dimming them once again. Besides, he had a strange inclination that he would very much enjoy dancing with his wife.

He turned to her. "Will you dance with me?"

"I would love to."

He took her hand and they left behind his family to join the set forming in the center of the floor. He stood across from her, waiting for the music to begin in earnest .

She wore a deep burgundy gown with black embroidery that trailed up the skirt and framed her neckline. Candlelight from the chandelier above glowed warmly over her face.

“Your sister has not changed at all,” Mercy said, her green eyes trailing him.

“You mustn’t feel obligated to partake of any of her larks.”

Mercy smiled, and the full force of it knocked into him. “I cannot recall the last time I played bullet pudding. It is nearly Christmas, after all.”

Colin fought a smile. “I will find another way to entertain you so I’m not forced into that.”

“It sounds to me like you must have lost before, Mr. Birchall, and will do anything to avoid covering your face in flour again.”

His stomach gave a weird leap. The music began and they were forced to dance, precluding all opportunity for conversation. He did not suppress his grin as he passed, which she undoubtedly interpreted accurately to mean she was correct, because the last thing he heard when she was dancing the other direction was the jovial sound of belly-deep laughter.

She was correct. He often lost, forced to dig around the flour with his face to find the coin, and he despised the mess it made of both his clothing and the room. It was a ridiculous game and unnecessarily wasteful—to say nothing for the state of his clothing afterward.

The remainder of the night was not quite as enjoyable. Once their dance was finished, Colin gave Mercy his arm and directed her to the wall where his mother, sister, and uncle were all standing. While he enjoyed watching his family speak to—and

accept—his choice in bride, he could not shake the sense that he'd much rather be dancing with her than standing here. But one dance with his wife was enough. Two? What would people think?

Another hour passed in polite conversation, too much warm negus, and dance after dance where Mercy did not leave his side. His sister and mother had left them at the beginning of this set to greet some old friends, but Colin had remained tucked against the wall beside his wife.

The pale green wall, ornamented with white plasterwork, caught his eye, and he admired the way the columns on the far end divided the room, separating the area for the musicians. Ought he to put columns in Winterbourne? They would only add to the grandeur of his drawing room.

“Are you terribly bored?” Mercy asked quietly, her shoulder pressing lightly into his side.

His stomach constricted from the contact. “No, merely admiring the architecture in the room. What do you think of columns?”

She laughed. Then she looked up at him and sobered. “You are in earnest?” She glanced across the room, studying the columns there. “They certainly add grandeur to the room.”

His thoughts precisely.

“But I do not find them a necessary expense,” she continued. “If anything, they seem pretentious.”

Ah. Not his thoughts at all. He nodded, looking around the room again. He agreed they weren't necessary, but now that he had Lady Edith's fortune coming, he could

afford to add embellishments to the house .

He put the thought aside.

“Colin, do you remember Miss Dearden?” Mother asked, approaching them with the woman at her side.

His cheeks were sore from forcing a smile all evening, and now they strained. “Yes, of course. Good evening, Miss Dearden. Allow me to introduce my wife, Mrs. Mercy Birchall.”

Miss Dearden’s eyes snapped to Mother before landing on Mercy again. She provided a polite curtsy. “It was lovely to see you,” she said, then turned and left.

Mother’s gaze followed the woman for a minute before facing him. “I tried to warn her, but she insisted on coming to see you anyway.”

“Warn her?” Mercy asked.

“She had her eye on Colin for many years,” Mrs. Birchall said.

Mercy looked at him, then her gaze dropped to the floor.

He wasn’t sure why, but the entire interaction made his stomach roll. “I think it’s time to leave.”

Mother held his gaze. “I will find Uncle Gooding and send for the carriage.”

Mercy was quiet the entire time they waited, retrieved their wraps, and drove back to Uncle Gooding’s house. When they arrived, Uncle Gooding’s housekeeper showed them upstairs to their room and Colin followed Mercy inside. He closed the door and

waited.

Mercy looked at him, her copper hair shimmering in the light from the fireplace. Her eyes flicked to the bed and back to him.

Warmth flooded his body from his chest down to his toes. The four poster bed was narrow, swathed in heavy blankets and lacking any curtains or ornamentation. He stood motionless, waiting to hear what her reservations were. Clearly she had them.

But she remained silent. The bed was small, yet the idea of sharing it did not bother him. He had tried to respect Mercy and the plan to give them time before being intimate, simply because their engagement had been so short and the product of an arrangement. He imagined she needed time to feel comfortable with him. He didn't want her to think he had changed his mind already.

"I do not think my uncle has any more bedchambers," he said softly, hoping they wouldn't be overheard by anyone passing. She needed to know he hadn't orchestrated this. After the way he had danced with her, he didn't want her to have the wrong idea about his feelings. "If I knew Honora had intended to come with my mother and take the other bedchamber, I would have made arrangements for us to stay at an inn."

"It is no trouble, Colin." By the way she looked at him, he knew it wasn't ideal.

"All the same. I will leave you to prepare for bed and return in a half-hour. Will that provide you enough privacy?"

"It isn't necessary?—"

"I wanted to speak to my uncle," he said, hoping to put her at ease. "He recently purchased a new set of horses and I'd like to hear about them."

She nodded once, her mouth pressed into a line.

Colin turned away before hesitating. They hadn't brought the new lady's maid with them. His eyes trailed the length of her gown, the way it hugged her just right. It didn't appear to be a simple confection. "Are you in need of assistance with your gown? "

She smiled. "No, not this one. I thank you for the consideration of asking."

He nodded briefly before leaving the room, feeling simultaneously disappointed and excited.

CHAPTER TEN

Mercy removed her ballgown and took the pins from her hair with clumsy swiftness. She tripped over her voluminous skirt, lost a few hair pins beneath the bed, and knocked her shin into the corner of the heavy wardrobe. In her effort to be asleep before Colin returned, she had worked her heart into such a state she found herself lying in bed, the fire banked and candles blown out, her breathing as heavy as if she'd run all the way home from the assembly hall.

Deep breaths, Mercy . She coached herself into calming her pulse as much as possible, closing her eyes and breathing through her nose. Even if she was not asleep when Colin returned, she could pretend.

Then she would not be required to address the discomfort of sharing such a narrow bed with a man whom she hadn't yet kissed. Not truly . When he had chastely pressed his lips to hers during the marriage ceremony, it had been over before it even began, the touch so light it felt more like a butterfly landing on a petal than a man who found her attractive .

Unless ...

Mercy's eyes shot open. She had believed Colin's reasons for waiting to have children. It was important to finish the house, replace the roof, and everything it entailed before bringing a babe into the home. To say nothing of the fact that Colin and Mercy's engagement and marriage had been far faster than typical. Even then...it would take nine months for the baby to grow. Nine months to come to know one another and finish the necessary repairs.

Surely there was something else keeping Colin from even so much as kissing her? She rubbed her eyes, remembering the woman they'd seen at the ball that evening, her dainty nose and perfect honey-colored hair. She was round-eyed and petite, much more beautiful than Mercy. Miss Dearden had youth on her side.

Was Colin unattracted to Mercy because of her age? He had chosen her because he'd needed a wife quickly. Had he assumed she would be willing since she had slid entirely onto the spinster shelf and remained there for the last few years?

It had not been her choice to remain unmarried. She'd been so busy helping her parents with the parish and focusing on her sisters' happiness, her own had fallen by the wayside.

The bedroom door creaked open, and Mercy shut her eyes immediately. The faint temptation nipped at her to question Colin about his reasons for waiting to have children, but she found she didn't have the courage. She listened to the thud of his boots hitting the floor and the rustling of his clothes joining them before it was clear, from the sound of him shaking out his things, that he was folding everything neatly. She expected no less from him, but remaining still through his slow process of readying for sleep was a chore.

The feather mattress shifted when Colin climbed onto the other side. He was a tall man and the bed was not much larger than the one Mercy had slept on at the vicarage. She felt his elbow brush her arm before he moved it, then his leg brushed hers.

It was exceedingly difficult to pretend to sleep while being perfectly aware that a man was lying beside her. Mercy hadn't realized she was holding her breath until it became vital to breathe again, causing her to partake in a coughing fit so long, her throat rasped by the time she was through.

She lay on the pillow, perfectly still, and blinked. The quiet was loud with the

absence of her coughing, and both of them were well aware she was not asleep. "I am not becoming ill," she whispered hoarsely. "My throat was dry."

"That is a relief," Colin said, his voice slightly distended in the darkness. Moonlight bled through the window behind the drapes, but Mercy's eyes were still adjusting to the dimness in the room. "Shall I fetch you something to drink?"

"No, I thank you." Her body lined the very edge of the mattress, but even then felt as if she ought to move farther over. Never before in Mercy's life had she been in such close proximity to any man, let alone one she was very attracted to. Her nerves danced with awareness, her heart pounding.

At this rate, it would be hours before she could sleep.

"I feel I owe you an apology for dragging you here," Colin said, his deep voice soft.

Mercy pulled the blanket higher, hoping to ward off the chill in the room. "I have always enjoyed coming to Bath. It is no great sacrifice, Colin. "

He shifted on the bed and she felt him looking at her. "I cannot tell if you are in earnest or merely being polite."

"Earnest. It was frightening to be presented as your wife, but once I understood your mother was not angry at us for being married without her present, the rest of the evening was rather enjoyable."

He seemed to accept this. "I did not know you liked to dance. I cannot recall the last time I saw you at the Millcombe assemblies."

Was it too bold of her to tell him she'd grown weary of their village entertainment? The darkness provided a cloak of comfort, giving her a chance to say things she

would otherwise be too hesitant to speak aloud. “The entire town pitied my spinsterhood, which has ruined certain events for me. I will always support my sisters, but I ceased attending assemblies when my second sister was married and the sympathetic looks grew unbearable.”

“Did you not consider...” He paused for so long, she wondered if he did not intend to continue.

“Consider what, Colin?”

He sighed. “That you might find a husband if you had attended the assemblies?”

“I am regularly embroiled in Millcombe Society. If a new gentleman had opted to join us, I would have heard about his impending attendance from some scheming woman or my own parents. As it stood?—”

“Perhaps we would have danced, Mercy.”

Silence filled their bed and clogged her throat. She swallowed, her voice small. She knew what it felt like to be guided about the room in his arms, to have his full attention. “Perhaps. But I did not feel there was any sense in subjecting myself to the unwanted words of encouragement from well-meaning matrons.”

“Words of encouragement,” he mused. “I heard what Mrs. Brooks said to you after our wedding. You make it sound like the entire village treated you in that same manner.”

“They did.” She tried not to sound as pathetic as she felt. “I do not blame them. These are women who watched me grow from a young girl to a spinster. They watched two of my younger sisters marry before I received so much as an offer of courtship. I couldn’t...” She whispered. “I could not allow all three of them to marry before me,

not if I could help it.”

“I will do my best not to take offense that you only married me to save your pride.”

“Good heavens, Colin. You have stated more often than I that our arrangement is nothing more than a business transaction.”

“It sounds so sterile when you put it like that,” he muttered.

It felt anything but sterile at present, lying beside him in the dark, his deep voice filling the room and her head. Perhaps we would have danced . She drew in a shaky breath. “We each had our reasons for entering into this scheme. I think we will make a good partnership, regardless. I would like for us to be friends.”

“Friends,” he repeated. “I would like that too.”

His arm moved beneath the blanket, the hair on his forearm brushing against her skin and sending a shiver over her body like a wave.

“Are you cold?” Colin asked .

“No—well, yes. A little. This blanket will warm me soon.”

“My mother used to call me her little fireplace as a child. I would crawl into her bed when I had an unhappy dream and heat her far too much. She told me it felt like putting a fire in her bed.”

“I am often far too cold for comfort, so I would welcome it.”

“Hopefully you do not come to regret that,” he muttered. “I suppose you could shove me from the bed if it grows unbearable.”

Mercy laughed. “I would do no such thing.”

“Give me your hand.”

What ? Mercy swallowed, her heart thumping. “Why?”

“So I can show you. It will only take a moment.”

“What of your wound?”

“It is mostly healed.”

Mercy unclenched her fist and slid her hand onto the cool mattress between them. Colin picked it up, wrapping his fingers around hers, his skin warm. She recalled it feeling much the same when she’d wrapped his cut palm, despite having been out in the frigid air for a good length of time.

“Do you see what I mean?” he asked, his tone rough.

Mercy nodded, then recalled he likely couldn’t see her. “Yes.”

“Your hand is freezing,” he said.

“I did tell you I was cold.”

Silence sat between them, thick and heavy. Mercy wondered if Colin could hear her heart beating or feel it through the mattress. She had long been attracted to him—his hazel eyes that seemed to change with the weather, his curious gaze and well-defined jawline. He was tall, broad, and had the muscular physique of a man who helped install a new floor in his own house—as she’d seen him do.

She wanted him to kiss her, but the way he held her hand now was even sweeter and she didn't want it to end. He wasn't releasing her fingers, and it was heady, puffing her with warmth and quickening her pulse. It planted a seed of hope in her chest, small and cracked, sprouting the tiniest stalk. If she could feel this way about him, was it possible he felt the same? That he was lying inches from her enjoying the feeling of her hand wrapped within his?

"Colin," she breathed, turning her head on the pillow to find him looking at her. She couldn't make out his expression, only the glint in his eyes.

"Yes?"

She swallowed, her chest erupting. "My hand isn't cold anymore."

He cracked a smile, his teeth visible against the darkness. "I am happy to help."

Still he did not release her hand. His thumb rubbed the back of it absently, making her breath catch.

"You've surprised me, Mercy." He spoke as though bewildered by his own words, discovering them as they were released into the darkness. "I did not expect when I took a wife that I would find a friend. It is a refreshing turn of events."

Her thoughts were clouded by the touch of his skin against hers, and she found it impossible to speak.

Colin's fingers tightened. She leaned closer, feeling the heat radiating from his body beneath the blanket. Their heads were only inches apart. Could she close the distance? Show him how she was beginning to feel about him? Ignite the fire that burned in her ?

Mercy strained in the darkness to see his face, to read his eyes. Her confidence flagged. He was a man lying beside his wife. If he wanted to kiss her, he would have already. No, there must have been another reason keeping him from her. Lack of interest or attraction, perhaps. She hoped there was not another woman in his mind, but the reality was that Colin had his pick of women. He had chosen her above all of them for a reason, but until she understood what that reason was, she didn't know if she was brave enough to act without proper encouragement.

She would be mortified if she tried to kiss him and he rejected her. Especially on the heels of his proclamation that he was not ready to start a family.

Mercy closed her eyes and let out a soft breath. "Good night, Colin."

He released her hand, his voice rough. "Good night, Mercy."

It took her ages to fall asleep, lying in the dark and listening to the sound of Colin's deep, steady breathing.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The following morning, when they gathered in the entryway in preparation to go to the shops with Honora, Mother, and Uncle Gooding, Colin was still reeling from the way he'd felt last night lying beside Mercy. Her dainty, cold hand, slowly warming until it became soft and pliable, had been a perfect fit. He had seen the evidence of her hand's strength, softness, and the gentle calluses that lined her palm. Her hands were a testament to her hard work, determination, and sweetness all at once. His eyes darted down her arm where it hung by her side. He wanted to remove the supple leather glove, if for no other reason than to see if she was still warm from his ministrations.

Logic told him that was impossible, but it did not keep him from wondering anyway.

"Are we all here?" Uncle Gooding asked jovially, counting heads before giving a nod to his butler to open the door. "Very good. Very good."

They filed down the front steps and onto the paving stones. Honora took Mercy by the arm and led with her before Colin could offer his arm. He walked behind them, scowling, toward the center of Bath.

"You're frowning," Mother said.

He arranged his face into a passive expression, embarrassed his mother had been walking at his side without his knowledge.

She gave him an assessing look. "You were staring so hard at the back of Mercy's

head, I wondered if you'd quarreled this morning. But I can see it is nothing like that."

He glanced at her with suspicion. "How can you see anything of the sort?"

"Because you look more confused than angry, Colin."

His neck heated, and he was grateful his cravat covered the skin.

They reached Milsom Street and stepped around a wagon bearing vegetables for sale, smelling of green stalks and earth. Evergreen wreaths garnished the shop doors, and red ribbons were tied around lamp posts. Bath had dressed up for the holiday.

Honora entered a milliner's shop, elaborate hats and bonnets lining the window to draw in customers.

"I am going to pop ahead there," Uncle Gooding said, pointing toward a store boasting tobacco. "We will meet for tea at the Pump Room?"

"Indeed," Mother said.

They followed the women into the millinery, where Honora was admiring an overbearing poke bonnet with far too many pink roses. Mercy stood beside her, eyeing a simple confection with a wreath of greenery, snowdrops, and small red roses. It was perfect against the copper of her hair. For the first time in his life, Colin found a bonnet to be interesting, especially in regard to how it would look on his wife .

He left his mother's side to approach Mercy. "You ought to try it on," he said.

She laughed, shaking her head. "On my red hair? I would be a walking Christmas

decoration.”

“You would look lovely,” he argued, then paused. “Though I understand what you mean. All the same, if you’d like it, I will happily purchase it for you.”

Mercy looked up, her green eyes darting over his face. “I could not stomach the expense, Colin.”

He lowered his voice. “We can certainly afford it.”

She shook her head. “That is not the point. I will never be one for unnecessary extravagance.” Mercy glanced at the bonnet again. “It is beautiful. I thank you, truly, but I am not interested.”

Colin felt like he had been rejected, though he had no notion why. As a general rule, he was a careful man. He budgeted thoughtfully and did not give himself to whims he could ill afford. It was how he’d been able to keep Winterbourne as long as he had. But Lady Edith’s inheritance had changed his circumstances. He hadn’t offered to buy every bonnet in the shop, but rather one small thing as a token of his growing appreciation for her.

He turned for the door, determined to wait outside for his family, when he caught his mother’s knowing, watchful eye. Blast. She had seen the entire interaction.

“I think you have a good wife, Colin,” she said with a measure of determination, watching Mercy move about the shop with Honora. “When I learned you had married one of Mr. Caldwell’s daughters, I will admit I was worried. He has always been too ridiculous by half. It appears Mercy has not inherited the unacceptable traits of her father.”

Discomfort slid down Colin’s spine, settling uncomfortably in his belly. While he had

entertained similar thoughts periodically, he did not like hearing them from another—particularly not his mother.

“Mr. Caldwell is a good man who gives excellent sermons,” he said quietly, aware Mercy stood not very far away.

“Perhaps, but that is not what I recall of him. His attitude is not becoming of a vicar, Colin. It is detestable to make light of everything as he does, and I worried you had been left alone for far too long when I received your letter. But as I said, I have found myself relieved. I am glad you brought Mercy to Bath.”

He moved to leave again, but her words tugged on his mind, highlighting a point of confusion. “If you knew I was married when you wrote to me, why did you invite only me to meet you in Bath and not my wife as well?”

Mother blinked, then patted her dark hair and fiddled with her bonnet ribbons.

Colin shifted to his other foot, growing more aware by the second he was not going to like the answer she was attempting to form.

“Mother,” he said, more sharply than he intended.

Her eyes snapped to him, the lines fanning from them wrinkling in suspicion. “I only invited you because I had hoped to speak to you alone. It is no secret I dislike Mr. Caldwell’s methods. I have always thought Mercy to be a good girl, but I couldn’t know if she had grown into a good woman or not. I needed to ascertain your feelings.”

He stiffened, hurt she and Honora had only come to Bath to satisfy their concerns and not for any interest in seeing him or formally meeting Mercy.

“Why didn’t you come to Winterbourne if your sole purpose was to see me?” he asked, doing his best to remain neutral and not betray the hurt edging into his body.

“Do you not like Bath?” she asked, smiling. A diversion in the topic, he assumed. “I thought it would be nice to enjoy the assemblies here together.”

He had the sense his mother wasn’t being entirely honest. He straightened, smiling to soften his words. “Winterbourne is nice this time of year, as well. There is snow dusting the garden.”

Mother’s face went tight. “I’m certain it is lovely.”

Honora approached them with a hat box in her arms, Mercy at her side.

“You’ve chosen one?” Mother asked.

Honora grinned. “Mr. Chadwick will love it.”

Colin was certain his brother-in-law would not notice the difference in this bonnet from any other Honora wore, but he kept that to himself. His sister was likely being facetious.

“I’m famished,” Honora said. “Shall we adjourn to the Pump Room?”

Colin looked at Mercy, wanting to reiterate his sentiments about the bonnet, but she was avoiding his eye.

Strange.

“Uncle Gooding intends to meet us there soon. We should be on our way.” Mother stepped outside, holding the door for Honora and Mercy before Colin regained his

wits and hurried to catch up. Whatever had happened, Mercy didn't seem pleased.

The longer their outing lasted, the more confident he felt that something had most definitely upset his wife. She was only speaking when spoken to—which wasn't often with Honora nearby—and had hardly touched her tea in the thirty minutes it had been sitting before her. She was certain not to drink it now that the cup was likely as cold as the weather outside.

Colin attempted to garner her attention, but failed. She refused to look at him. When Mother asked after the state of Mercy's sisters, she gave a bland reply and returned her attention to her cold tea, which she still did not drink.

Something was most certainly wrong.

"Mercy?" he asked. "Would you care to take a turn about the room?"

"Oh yes!" Honora agreed, including herself in the invitation. "Shall we promenade?"

"That would be agreeable." Mercy took her proffered arm.

Colin frowned. That had gotten out of hand.

"I will remain here," Mother said. "You can join them."

Uncle Gooding sipped at his third cup of tea, looking very much like he had no inclination to promenade.

Colin joined his wife and sister, clasping his hands behind his back and doing his best to appear nonchalant, though he could not stop thinking about Mercy's soft hands or what the devil could have possibly upset her. She hadn't heard his mother speaking in the milliner's shop, surely. They had been whispering and Mercy had been distracted

by Honora's chatter.

"Oh, there's that dreadful Miss Dearden," Honora whispered to Mercy. "Mama tried to warn her last night that Colin is married now, but she wouldn't hear it. Insisted on speaking to him."

"We know," Colin said dryly. "She briefly spoke to us as well."

"She hardly greeted you," Mercy said, then turned back to Honora. "The woman was upset to find him married. It was quite uncomfortable."

Colin peered at her. "Why should it bother you?"

"Because I'm the wretch who made you ineligible."

Oh. So no sense of jealousy plagued her. That was not the comfort he felt it ought to be.

"Shall we walk the other direction?" Honora asked, her eyes bright. She had always loved good gossip.

Mercy shook her head. "Whatever you'd like."

"I'd like to return to Uncle Gooding's house and play bullet pudding, but Colin refuses to allow me any fun."

He refrained from rolling his eyes, but only just. "You have two children, Honora. Play it with them."

"It's far less fun to watch them root around a pile of flour than it is you, Colin. My children hardly mind at all if they dirty their clothes. In fact, they make a regular

sport of it. You, on the other hand, abhor it.”

“I do,” he agreed.

“Which is what makes it so entertaining.”

“You are being ridiculous,” he muttered, but he couldn’t help noticing that Mercy watched him with interest. “Do you wish to play?” he asked his wife.

She was unable to reply to this query as they were immediately approached by Miss Dearden, who was holding the arm of a tall gentleman with golden curls and red, wind-burned cheeks. “Good morning, Mr. Birchall. Mrs. Chadwick.”

She ignored Mercy, a slight Colin could not tolerate.

“You’ve met my wife, Mrs. Birchall,” he emphasized as Miss Dearden turned to continue walking.

She stopped, tugged on the arm by the blond gentleman. “Of course. Forgive me, Mrs. Birchall. In this light, you did not appear the same as you had at the ball. Different.” She lingered on the word like she meant to cut with it.

Mercy appeared stunned by this maneuver, but quickly drew a plain mask over her expression. She smiled, picking at her skirt. “I will agree a ballgown is much more becoming than this drab thing. You cannot be blamed for the confusion.”

She could be blamed. Very much so. The more Mercy attempted to brush the slight under a rug, the worse Colin’s temper became. Miss Dearden had no claim on him and no subsequent right to this irritation at finding him married. He’d hardly come to Bath in recent months, and the few times he’d danced with her were no declaration. He had danced equally with other young ladies.

Miss Dearden returned a smile that did not meet her eyes.

Colin reached around his sister for Mercy's hand and tugged it, pulling her close to his side. She came willingly, if not with confusion. He curved her hand around his arm, resting his atop it. "If you'll excuse us, it is high time we were heading home." He glanced down at his wife. "If that is agreeable to you, my love."

Mercy flinched, but the motion was so subtle he nearly missed it. Blackness bubbled in his chest, falling lower until he felt ill.

"Yes, of course," she said, her voice small. There was no triumph in it.

He rallied, tugging on Mercy's arm. He offered Miss Dearden and her companion the barest of nods before turning toward the door. "Tell Mother we have gone home to ready our carriage. I've grown tired of Bath. "

"But Colin," Honora whined. "What of our game of bullet pudding?"

He had participated in nothing but games since he had set out for Bath. His very presence here was a result of machinations and deceit in order to obtain information and set him to rights, was it not? Mother could have avoided introducing Mercy to Miss Dearden had she truly wanted to—only a few short words would have kept the girl away. He knew this because the moment she had learned he was married, she'd run away.

Honora was no better. The worst of it was that neither his mother nor his sister could stomach returning to Winterbourne, which was why they had forced him to travel to Bath. It wasn't so great a distance, but it was enough to put him out.

Christmas was only a week away. Colin ought to be home, ensuring the house was improving and the servants Mr. Caldwell hired were acceptable, not gallivanting

about ridiculous shops and the Pump Room, chatting with an old flame and trying to prove his marriage had been properly thought out.

He hadn't even mentioned Lady Edith or her will, but he would take those details to his grave. Honora was unlikely to look kindly upon the situation when she was just as much Edith's niece as Colin was her nephew.

Colin was tired—he hadn't slept well knowing Mercy was inches away the entire night—and weary.

He looked his sister squarely in the face, pulled Mercy closer to his side, and said, "I've had enough of games. We are going home."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Mercy remained quiet for much of the journey back to Winterbourne Park. She had given Colin's mother, sister, and uncle each a hug when they had departed, but all the while her stomach had been in knots, only growing more tangled the longer she remained in Colin's company. She watched through the window as the carriage climbed the hills out of Bath and made its way along the snowy road toward Millcombe.

The carriage wasn't overly large by any means, so she could easily smell Colin's cologne and hear his breathing. They bumped along, shaking with the movement of the conveyance, Mercy's eyes glued to the passing frosted countryside.

For some odd reason, she felt on the verge of tears. Her body reacted to her husband, though her mind constantly reminded her it wasn't wise. He did not love her. Their marriage was a transaction. When he'd called her my love, he had only been trying to wedge them beneath Miss Dearden's nerves. When he had held her hand last night, he'd only been trying to warm her chilled skin. When he told her he didn't want to start a family, it was with the express intention of not being intimate.

He did not love her.

But she wanted him to, and that was the painful component. Mercy might have fooled herself into believing she could enter this marriage with the willpower to find contentment in the arrangement, but now that she was fully embroiled in it, she realized how impossible that was.

Colin did not love her; he liked her friendship.

He had not come to her father's defense when his mother had said hurtful things about him in the shop—things Mercy had heard over and over throughout her life, and was now painfully overhearing from her new family. She had waited, paying no mind to what Honora was chattering on about, and hoped Colin would say something in favor of Papa's character. He had praised her father's sermons, but that was all. It hardly felt like enough.

Even the people who disliked Papa could admit he delivered a sermon well.

Mercy could manage a life married to a man who wasn't attracted to her, who only wanted friendship, but she needed time to heal from the pain of disappointment and adjust to this new future.

They edged into Millcombe, passing the vicarage and the church, their wheels bumping along the cobbled lane.

"Did you enjoy your time in Bath?" Colin asked, breaking the silence like a pickaxe to a block of ice.

Mercy breathed in before settling a pleasant expression on her face and turning away from the window. "It is a lovely town. The River Avon is always a favorite of mine."

"It is beautiful," he agreed, but the way he watched her now was laced with doubt. He could see through her. "You ought to have purchased the bonnet. It would have been just the thing to wear to your father's Christmas service."

"I do not need a new bonnet, Colin. I have one that is perfectly acceptable."

He watched her with a look of confusion she wanted to wipe from his handsome face.

He did not understand her. That was perfectly clear.

“Besides, if I desired a Christmas bonnet, I could trim one myself. It would certainly smell better than silk flowers.”

“That it would,” he muttered.

“My sisters and I used to make kissing boughs each year—heaven knows why, as my father never would have allowed us to use them in earnest—and we would use the remaining greenery to trim bonnets for the Christmas service.”

His hazel eyes did not move from her face. “What other Christmas traditions do you have, Mercy?”

“Most of them are wrapped in the church. The choir practices, knitting circle, the goose dinner. My mother makes the most delicious shortbread. Of course, we would also play snapdragon or bullet pudding, as well, but my mother hated the waste of the flour.”

Their carriage turned onto Winterbourne’s lane and pulled to a stop in front of the door.

“I will play either of those games with you, if you’d like,” Colin said, opening the door and turning to help her out.

“Were they part of your Christmas traditions as well?”

“We didn’t have many traditions.” He walked at her side up to the house. “We’d cut a Yule log and burn it until Epiphany, eat a large goose dinner on Christmas, but that was the extent of it. ”

“Your mother didn’t decorate?”

“No. Should she have?”

Mercy paused on the front step, looking at the large house dusted with snow and surrounded by a clean white world. “I would think Winterbourne was made to be dressed up for Christmas.”

The front door opened to Flint, standing there with widened eyes and a harassed expression.

“What is it?” Colin asked at once, a gravity to his tone.

“Lady Edith arrived last night, sir. I told her you had gone to Bath to see your mother, but she insisted on remaining until you returned.”

“She traveled here? But the woman is ill,” he said, exasperated.

“Indeed, sir.”

“Where is she now?” Colin asked, his words clipped.

“Resting in the library. She found the parlor to be too drafty and the morning room dusty.”

“The morning room dusty?” he repeated. “The library is the worst of the lot.”

Mercy cleared her throat. “I had been working on rectifying that before we left for Bath. The library should be in mostly good order now, though the books are not yet finished.”

Colin stared at her. “Promise me you will not clean the house while my Great-aunt Edith is here.”

The words stung, but she nodded.

“Inform Lady Edith we will be with her directly,” Colin said, then looked at his clothing. “We must change first.”

“Of course, sir.” Flint took their coats and wraps, then hesitated. “Lady Edith insisted on the guest room she always uses. ”

Colin blinked. “Did you inform the lady that Mrs. Birchall now resides in that room?”

“I made a valiant attempt, sir.” Flint’s cheeks went pink.

Which meant the lady had certainly required Mercy’s bedchamber anyway.

“She is particular about where she sleeps,” Flint said.

Colin groaned. “I remember. She is particular about many things. Where did you move Mercy’s belongings?”

“Your room, sir. The floor in the adjoining room has yet to be completed, if you’ll recall.”

“Very good. Thank you, Flint. We will sort it out between us.” Colin started toward the stairs, but Mercy remained behind, entirely lost in the conversation that had just flown by her.

She stared after her husband, wondering exactly why she had been booted from her bed and how neither of the men seemed to find this troubling. Though she supposed

Lady Edith was permitted to do that sort of thing. She was dying, after all, wasn't she? It had been weeks since Colin first told Mercy about Lady Edith's solicitor meeting, but she recalled he had mentioned something about her poor health.

Colin was halfway up the curved staircase before he turned back to find her waiting at the bottom. "Are you not going to change?"

"It is not yet dinner."

"Lady Edith has come," he said, as though the gravity of those words ought to mean something.

"I thought that would make you happy," she challenged, slowly mounting the steps toward him. "She's brought your inheritance, has she not? What other reason would she have for being here? "

He gripped the railing, his teeth clenching. "It is more than that, Mercy."

"She has come to judge your wife, as well?" she guessed. He had seemed overly concerned with the state of her gown and the behavior she might potentially exhibit. Both of those things raked at her. She wondered briefly if it would have been better to remain the town spinster and accept condolences for the next few months—or years, depending on how long her sisters chose to parade their husbands and babies about town—than to live in a house with a man who was not attracted to her and cared more for how she appeared than how she felt.

"Yes," he said. "She has."

Mercy stopped a few stairs below him.

Colin's steps came down hard, concern flashing in his eyes as he lowered himself to

stand on the same level as her, towering over her. “The fortune she promised is conditional upon my marrying before Twelfth Night.”

“Yes, I know.”

“That is not all.” His hazel eyes tracked her face. “It was also mentioned that my wife must be a kind woman who is charitable and...” He hesitated. “And makes me laugh.”

Mercy’s throat went dry. She felt far too near Colin now with the truth of their situation hanging over them. She took a step up to be nearer the same level as his eyes. “Now I must prove to your great-aunt I am all of those things?”

He tried to smile. “It would help immensely if you could provide a riddle.”

She felt lost, floating in a pond without a paddle to bring her back to shore. “How am I meant to prove these things to a woman I do not know? Be kind and charitable and make her laugh? Colin, I am no court jester. ”

He closed his eyes and ran a hand over his face, all attempts at levity gone. “By being you, Mercy. I chose you because you naturally have all these qualifications. Please, by all that is holy, do not give Lady Edith any reason to doubt you—to doubt us .”

A cool chill raked over her arms, carrying with it a wave of shivers. Quiet foreboding nestled in her chest. “Why should she not be given any reason to doubt us , Colin?”

He held her eyes sturdily, as though he was determined to see this through, regardless of the outcome. “Because Lady Edith must believe we are in love or she will revoke her fortune.”

A fortune Colin had already begun spending in earnest. The new roof and bedroom

floors and staircase only a few of the things he had already started work on. To say nothing for the servants he had hired and the large food order he had permitted Mrs. Johns to put in. His creditors would be his doom if Lady Edith's money was not provided, and Mercy was the variable who could alter the tide of their situation.

She squared her shoulders and held his gaze. Regardless of the hurt limning her mood, she would not abandon Colin to the fear of failure. "I will do what I can to help." Mercy turned to start up the stairs.

"Wait," Colin breathed. "Mercy—please do not misunderstand. I did not set out to deceive you or my aunt."

"I did not imagine that to be the case," she said simply. He could not have believed Lady Edith would arrive so soon to ensure herself that he had followed her rules exactly. If anything, she imagined Colin believed his aunt would never ascertain that he had obeyed her every wish. The way he had immediately begun to spend the money after their wedding, he must have thoroughly imagined he had done what he needed to.

Which meant she could play her role and secure the fortune on their behalf.

"Please understand I had no intention of hurting you," he said.

"You haven't."

He looked at her with such intent in his greenish-brown eyes, it was clear he could see through her.

Mercy's cheeks flushed. "We cannot change the past, Colin. Let us work together to provide for our future." That was where they were at now. She had been embroiled in the situation, and her future was every bit dependent on proving their affection to

Lady Edith as Colin's was.

He was still watching her with concern.

Mercy fixed a smile on her face, shoved down the hurt and surprise that lurked in the tips of her limbs, and squared her shoulders. "Come, Colin. Our acquaintance is far too long-standing for us to be worried now. Surely we can prove to one old woman that we care for one another."

"Not just care, Mercy," he said, stepping up until he was level with her again, trapping her gaze. "Love. We must prove we are in love."

Her throat grew dry, her heart pounding. "That cannot be too difficult."

"Not for me, certainly."

"Grand," she said brightly, not allowing herself to think too deeply on the way he was looking at her now or what he had said. "We can prove our love."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Colin took his clothing into the adjoining room and laid it on the bed, pushing aside a plank of wood that hadn't yet gone into the floor. Once he had decided to give Mercy the larger guest room, he'd put the renovation of the bride's chamber on hold to tend to more important matters, like the left-hand side of the grand split staircase.

Now he realized this room needed to be completed before a new unsuspecting maid injured themselves on the broken floor. Another thing to add to his ever-growing list.

But there were more important things to worry about at the moment—like the guest awaiting them in the library.

He closed the adjoining door, giving Mercy and her new maid privacy to change out of her traveling clothes. Mercy's frustration was valid. He had been mostly honest with her from the start, but how did one tell a woman with whom he was making a marital arrangement that he believed she was someone he had the potential to fall in love with one day? The sheer depth of pressure that would have applied to their relationship could have been insurmountable .

No, he had been correct in keeping that bit to himself.

He changed quickly, giving special attention to the knot of his cravat until he felt presentable.

Flint had accepted a new gardener that morning while they were gone, so the staff at Winterbourne was steadily growing. By the end of the year, he hoped to have every

position filled and the funds to pay them, too. Things were improving, little by little.

Mercy opened the door to his room and stood there, her hair having been combed and put up high on the crown of her head, a gown he hadn't seen of deep green muslin falling over her gentle curves. The sleeves were long, reaching her wrists, and he wondered if she was warm enough.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"I am not certain I will ever be. Your aunt seems a formidable creature."

"She gives that perception, certainly, but her heart is soft. Do not fear her."

"I do not fear her," Mercy corrected, looking up at him. "I fear ruining your inheritance."

He should not have told her the depth of his concerns.

She chewed on her lip. "What will we do if she ascertains the truth about us?"

"What truth is that?" he asked, his pulse rising to a steady thrum.

"That we are not in love," Mercy said simply. Her words sliced through him like a sharp knife, the cut so clean the pain did not arrive straight away. Her straightforward speech made him question his own feelings. He'd imagined he was beginning to care for her on a deeper level. He had certainly felt desire for her, appreciation for how she had managed his mother and sister and faced their disagreements with level-headed grace.

Colin hid those feelings. He did not want to force Mercy into anything else she was uncomfortable with, and this situation was already bad enough. "I think we can show

Lady Edith that we care for one another and the truth will speak for itself. I care for you, Mercy. Is that feeling not mutual?"

"Of course it is," she breathed.

"Then we do not have to worry," he said, though he felt very much the opposite. "Come. We should not keep her waiting. She has undoubtedly been informed that we have arrived home by now."

Mercy took his arm and followed him from the room. He glanced back at his bed, the four posters holding up heavy drapes that would undoubtedly keep her warm at night. Winterbourne did not boast any other finished chambers than his own and the guest room Lady Edith had taken from Mercy, but there were other beds. Colin could give his bedroom to Mercy and find somewhere else to sleep tonight.

His idea to wait to start a family had begun with good intent. He had come upon Mercy like a sudden storm, pulling her into a marriage arrangement with little notice. Waiting to start a family until they knew one another better had seemed the right thing to do. He had quickly regretted stating it the way he had, however. Now that he'd set the precedent and given her control, he could not so much as kiss her. There had been multiple opportunities for such a kiss. Nothing terribly intimate, mind, but he was her husband, after all.

More than that, he wanted to kiss her. Something about her lips had become unreasonably interesting these last few days .

Her hand tightened imperceptibly on his arm, reminding him of her nearness. He inhaled, smelling the soap she had used to wash up.

Mercy paused outside the library door. "Is there anything else I need to know about the arrangement?"

“Aunt Edith is my great aunt—my grandmother’s sister.”

“On your mother’s or father’s side?”

“My mother’s. Lady Edith’s father was an earl, so she comes by her pride naturally. But she married a merchant for love and has never wanted for a thing in her life. She is cantankerous, opinionated, and possessed of a wild sense of humor.”

“You are beginning to frighten me a little.”

“I shall be at your side,” Colin said. He looked at her worried eyes, a lock of hair falling over her brow, and brushed it back. Her copper hair was so striking, her pale skin littered with freckles. She was so beautiful. Why had he not noticed it before? Of course, he had always thought she was pretty, but in the last few weeks, the longer they’d spent together, the more beautiful she had become.

A shiver wracked her shoulders.

“Are you cold?” he asked. Blast, this woman was like an icehouse. “I can fetch you a shawl.”

“The fire must be lit in the library. We can sit near it.” She raised her eyebrows, an unspoken way of asking if he would like to go into the library now.

He should open the door. It was his aunt after all. His hesitancy wasn’t born from a need to stay away from his aunt, but rather from the desire to stretch this time with Mercy. When he was with her, he never wanted to leave her side. She was becoming the one person he always wanted to be near .

Maybe he’d been starved for company the last few years and now that he had a steady companion, he was growing to rely on her. Or maybe it was just her .

He rather thought it was the latter.

Reaching for the door, Colin turned the handle and pushed it open. Lady Edith sat on a high-backed settee near the fireplace, her gray hair piled beneath a white lace cap, her walking stick leaning against the armrest. Heat emanated from the crackling fire, making the small room feel intimate and warm.

“There you are,” she said, her beady eyes tracking their entrance. “Kept me waiting all day, you did. Why did you feel now was a good time to gallivant across the countryside? Christmas is only days away.”

“There was no gallivanting, Aunt,” he said, leaning forward to kiss her wrinkled cheek. For a woman on the brink of death, she was still possessed of a lively spirit. But he could see a pallor to her skin she hadn’t had before, the rosiness absent from her cheeks. “We merely went to Bath, which you know isn’t above eight miles from here. May I introduce my wife? Mercy Caldwell, our local vicar’s daughter.”

Mercy stepped forward, coming to his side, and curtsied. “Pleased to meet you, Lady Edith.”

“Aunt Edith,” she snapped. “Won’t be having Colin’s wife practicing formalities. Come sit by me, Mercy. I want to hear about you.”

Mercy shot him a glance, but he couldn’t read her eyes. He should have warned her better, prepared her more. If she found the matrons of Millcombe to be a trial, Lady Edith would be far worse. She had all their same attributes, of course, but with the cantankerous pride that accompanied a life of money and title.

He waited for Mercy to take a seat on the sofa opposite Lady Edith, then sat beside her. He was closer than was strictly necessary, but they were trying to prove their love, were they not?

“You’ve known one another long, then, I assume?”

“Nearly our whole lives,” Mercy said. “Colin and I used to play together as children near the local stream—most of the children in Millcombe did, so we were not particularly close.”

“Yet you did not marry until now. Colin needed proper encouragement, I assume.”

“You provided it in spades,” he muttered. “Can I fetch you a blanket? Add a log to the fire?”

Lady Edith’s eyes twinkled. “Stop your fussing and get this old woman a drink.”

“Of course, madam.” Colin rose and rang the bell. “Tea?”

“Only if it has brandy in it.”

“In your health?” he asked dubiously. “Has the doctor approved your drinking?”

This set her back up. “Add a nip of brandy or I shall haunt you once I’m dead, Colin Birchall.”

Flint opened the door and Colin crossed the room and requested a tray of tea. “Better add brandy to the tray, too.”

“Brandy, sir?”

“If I do not add it to Lady Edith’s tea, she’s liable to do it herself. You can imagine which among the two of us are likely to be more liberal in our pouring.”

Flint nodded in understanding. “Very good, sir.”

When Colin returned to Mercy's side, she was telling Lady Edith about her sisters and their children. "And my youngest sister, Grace, is recently engaged."

"The younger sisters married before the eldest. Your mother could not have liked that."

Mercy's mouth flattened. "Not an ideal situation, no, but it could not be helped."

The light of interest flashed in Lady Edith's eye. "I hope to meet these sisters while I am here."

"My parents would be happy for the introduction, and my youngest sister, of course. The other two are not in Millcombe any longer."

"Hmm," Lady Edith said, eyeing her.

Colin settled on the sofa again, close to Mercy's side. He liked being near his wife.

"How many brats does Honora have now?" Lady Edith asked.

"Only William and little Sarah," he said. "She did not bring the children to Bath. Honora and my mother came alone."

"They met with you in Bath, you say?" Lady Edith narrowed her gaze like a cat studying its prey. "That was why you made the wretched journey? It is not the time to travel, my boy. Far too much snow on the roads."

"Does that mean we have the pleasure of your company until the roads clear?" he asked.

She gave him a narrowed-eyed glare. "I'm off to see your cousin Richard in

Derbyshire, so I cannot stay long, but you shall have me for a few days, Colin.” Her gaze slid predatorily to Mercy. “My solicitor informed me of your wedding, and I decided I must see this paragon for myself. I told you so in my letter, did I not?”

“You might have mentioned it.” Colin regretted sending the letter to her solicitor once he and Mercy had married. He imagined it would put the money in his pocket faster, the quicker he’d acted. Now he wondered if extra time would have been a benefit to them now that they were forced to prove their affection.

Why could she not simply appreciate that he had chosen a kind, charitable, humorous woman and leave it at that?

“I did.” Lady Edith settled back in her chair, her hand gripping the top of her walking stick. “I cannot very well hand over an entire fortune without being assured you’ve followed my specifications exactly.”

He bit back the urge to take Mercy’s hand, instead fisting his on his lap. “Do I ever do anything without precision?”

“Not usually, but one never can predict matters having to do with the heart.” She looked at the fire, then the door. “Where is my brandy?”

“Your tea is on the way.”

“I would like to rest before dinner.”

Given her pale skin and wrinkled brow, she very much needed to rest. A dying woman should not be kept from her bed. All this travel couldn’t be wise. But no one had ever been able to tell Lady Edith what to do. She did as she pleased, regardless of what others expected.

It was a bit of a sting to realize she had orchestrated Colin's life to the point of forcing him to choose a wife, as well. But Mercy was a joy to see around the house. His prime companion prior to their wedding had been Flint, so Mercy was a marked improvement. She was both remarkably prettier and a much better conversationalist.

No, he supposed he could not fault the old biddy for that particular machination after all, could he?

A knock sounded on the door, preceding Flint carrying the tea tray, his staid mouth pressed into a grim line. Again, Colin marked how the general atmosphere in Winterbourne had improved with Mercy's smiling addition.

It would be a good thing for all of them when enough servants were contracted to work at Winterbourne, though. Flint's pride had not been so great a barrier that he wouldn't do menial tasks, but Colin was well aware it was below his status to bring them their tea. He ought to have sent one of the new footmen up with the tray, though, or pulled Molly from whatever task she was doing and used her for the job.

Flint set the tray down and pulled a folded sheet from his pocket. "This just arrived for Mrs. Birchall." He set the note on the platter.

"It's from my mother," Mercy said, reaching for it. She glanced at Colin, ostensibly for permission to leave and read it in privacy.

He nodded.

Mercy rose, surprising him by crossing to the window and unfolding the letter there in the library. He wanted to tear his eyes from her, but it was nearly impossible. She was so beautiful. Not in an overt way, her gown plain and hair simply coiffed, but the subtle curve of her lips and the concentration on her brow were arresting. He wondered, not for the hundredth time, how he had overlooked her for so many years.

Would he have continued to overlook her had his great-aunt not pressed him to make a matrimonial decision?

Without marriage forced into his mind that day, would he have merely apologized for splashing her on the road and gone on his merry way? He might not have noted her subtle humor or the way she made him laugh, had it not been pressed upon his mind to watch for it .

Had Mercy always been able to draw a chuckle from him? He thought back on their years of general friendship and drew a blank—the odd dinner party they both attended or the abbreviated conversation following church came to mind, but not how he'd felt. He very well could have gone on forever without noting exactly the type of woman Mercy was.

That was moot now that she was his wife. He returned his attention to Lady Edith to find her watching him with interest. She had, apparently, poured her own tea and was sipping it now. "I would not mind seeing the list you made that led to choosing Mercy for your wife."

Stubbornness built the slightest wall around him. "There was no list."

Her gray eyebrows shot up. "You expect me to believe that? From you , Colin, who could not attend the local midsummer's fair without checking over your list and comparing it to the contents packed in your parents' carriage?"

Very well. There had been many lists, but none of them ended with Mercy Caldwell's name circled or underlined. None had contained her name at all, and Colin did not wish to say that now.

Instead, he sighed, feigning long suffering. "I was hardly above ten at the time."

“My point precisely. When have you ever done anything without extensive planning?”

“I haven’t. A prepared man is a confident one.”

“He is also a dull man,” she muttered, draining the rest of her cup. She set it on the saucer with a thunk and stood with the help of her cane. “I will see you at dinner tonight.”

“May I help you upstairs? ”

She grunted. “No. Make use of this time and romance your wife, Colin. I need to see love if I’m to leave you that fortune.” Her eyes raked the room with added judgment. “Perhaps this place is not worth saving.”

Colin’s gut squirmed with unease as he watched her leave. He could not think about the amount of money he had already spent in anticipation of Lady Edith’s twenty thousand pounds. If she revoked the inheritance, he would be ruined.

No, not only him. He glanced across the room where Mercy stood at the window, reading her mother’s letter. They would both be ruined.

He could not do that to his wife. Whatever happened, he would spend the next few days proving to Lady Edith that he could see himself falling in love with Mercy.

Because the truth was, he could . He was on his way there already.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Mercy's mother was very clearly overwhelmed. She'd not sent an outright request for help, but Mercy could easily read between the lines on her written plea. She wanted Mercy to make shortbread and help her deliver it to various parish neighbors in the name of the Caldells.

But Mercy was no longer only a Caldwell—she was a Birchall now, too. There were things at Winterbourne that needed her attention as well. She lowered the letter and looked through the window to the snow-dusted trees lining Colin's property. The fire roared in the hearth, making the library exceptionally warm. Despite the dust and broken plasterwork Mercy had come across in most of the rooms, the house was in good order—or it would be soon—and she could see it becoming magical with proper Christmas dressing.

Since the moment Colin had revealed that his mother never decorated for Christmas, Mercy had felt the urge to show him precisely why it was an important part of the season. Now that she had developed the plan, she was eager to begin.

"Lady Edith has gone to rest," Colin said, rising from the sofa when she left the window. He met her in the center of the large Aubusson carpet, his hazel eyes tracking her face. "I think we can expect to see her at dinner, but not before."

"That works well for me. I have other things I need to do."

He raised a singular eyebrow. "If dusting the rest of these books is one of those things, you may strike it from your list."

She feigned innocence. “Of course not.”

Colin’s mouth drew into a grim line. “I can see the duster waiting on the shelf, Mercy.”

She rested her hands on her hips. “And why shouldn’t I dust? It is not as though I am hammering boards into the floor or taking a shovel to the garden.”

His eyes narrowed. “Strike both of those from your list, as well. In fact, where is this list? I would like to see it.”

“You cannot.” She straightened.

“Why not?” he asked, taking a step closer and peering down at her.

She could smell his cologne again. “It is in my head.”

“Why have you not put it to paper?” He leaned forward, the lapels of his coat brushing her, his hazel eyes alive. “You are bound to forget something that way.”

Mercy’s pulse thrummed. “Never mind that. You are eating up my valuable time.”

“So long as you are not cleaning, I will remove myself from your vicinity.”

“Someone ought to clean another room in this house, or we will be forced into a repeat of last night.” Her cheeks grew warm at the reminder of how it had felt to share the narrow bed with him, but she pretended to be unaffected. “You do own additional sheets and bedding, do you not?”

Colin’s eyes dipped to her lips. Was he thinking about their proximity in the dark, too? His thumb brushing over the delicate skin on her palm?

A throat cleared in the doorway, and the tension snapped. They turned as one to find Flint waiting there.

“Another visitor?” Colin asked hoarsely, seemingly put out by the interruption.

“A set of sisters are here to see you sir. Said they were sent by the vicar for a pair of maid positions.”

Colin looked at Mercy. “I had better question them. Would you care to join me, or does that put a damper in your cleaning schedule?”

She glared playfully. “I would love to join you, Colin.”

He held her gaze for a beat longer than necessary before nodding.

The sisters were from the outskirts of Millcombe and not well known to Mercy, but she had heard her parents mention the family before. Polly and Lydia Phillips, nearly identical but for the longer slope to Polly’s nose and Lydia’s rounder head. They were both dark-haired and slender, with cloudy blue eyes.

“Lydia has a fancy to help in the kitchen,” Polly said, clearly the older of the two. “I am a hard worker and can do nearly anything. I hoped to take the maid’s position Mr. Caldwell told us about.”

Colin sent Mercy a slight dip of his head, as though he was passing the responsibility on to her. She smiled at the sisters. “We would be happy to take you on. When can you start?”

“Oh, straight away, ma’am,” Polly said, trying to control her grin.

“Why don’t you return home to pack your things? We will expect you in the

morning.”

The sisters nodded, rising. “Very good, ma’am. Thank you.” They dipped curtsies to both Colin and Mercy before taking their leave.

“That was rather simple,” Colin said, staring at the kitchen door they’d retreated through.

“An endorsement from my father certainly helps move things along faster.” Mercy glanced up, considering the best way to train the new maids. “Dorothy and Molly can show them what to do tomorrow. Until we have a housekeeper, they can all answer to Mrs. Johns.”

Colin watched her, not saying anything. His hazel eyes tripped over her face like he was searching for something.

She grew restless beneath his attention. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” he said softly. “I was only considering how much you accomplish without lists. If you began to use them, you would be unstoppable.”

Mercy barked an unladylike laugh. “You are obsessed with organization, Colin. I would think you should have been a secretary.”

“I would certainly make a good one. Or a solicitor, I think.”

He mentioned the occupation so quickly, she wondered if it had once been an ambition of his. “Have you ever desired to have an occupation?”

“No. Not above the management of this estate, of course.”

“You have always wanted Winterbourne to be your life? ”

He seemed to consider the question before answering, something she appreciated about him. It made Mercy feel as though he cared enough about her queries to give them proper, considerate answers. “I have always expected it to be. It was known from a young age that I would inherit.”

“When the house fell into disrepair, did you not consider a separate avenue?”

“Perhaps I would have if I had not sunk all my time, energy, and resources into saving the estate.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “It was the only thing I had left of my father, and he raised me to be a man who didn’t easily give up.”

Which was why Lady Edith’s windfall had been the blessing Colin had needed. Mercy could see how hard he had worked. He had lost his father, was abandoned by his mother and sister, yet still he remained at Winterbourne, ever vigilant, doing what he could to ensure the legacy did not end with him. He was resilient, a hard worker, and deserved to have someone care for him.

Mercy intended to do just that. “Are the stairs fully repaired?”

“They are. Hubble and his men have moved on to the roof. I’m afraid we cannot touch the ceilings until the roof has been fully repaired.”

“Understandable.” She could see he wasn’t going to leave any time soon, and she needed privacy if she was going to achieve a surprise. “In that case, I will see you at dinner, Colin.”

“Oh, yes. Of course.” He stood there, blustering a bit. “No gardening, mind.”

“No gardening,” she agreed. What she had in mind was not gardening—not exactly .

Once Colin left, Mercy went in search of her cloak, gloves, and boots. She would need to hurry if she was going to gather enough greenery to dress the entire railing on the split staircase, frame the doorways, and create kissing boughs and wreaths all before Christmas Eve. There were days ahead of her to work on her project, but if she intended to keep it from Colin, she would need to be artful about how she slipped away to accomplish those tasks. She was in a hurry to find her way outside and nearly collided with Dorothy, her lady's maid, in the corridor.

"Forgive me," Mercy said. "I was walking much too fast."

"Never mind that, madam." Dorothy smiled.

Mercy had an idea. "I know this is outside the purview of your responsibilities, but what do you think about helping me gather greenery?"

"I would be happy to."

"And create kissing boughs with it?" Mercy continued, hoping Dorothy wasn't thinking of the two new footmen, Lewis and Duncan.

Dorothy's eyes lit up, proving that the handsome young men were precisely who had come to her mind when presented with the idea of kissing boughs. "Let me fetch my cloak."

As it turned out, gathering greenery was the least difficult component of assembling the decorations. The tricky thing had been keeping it from Colin. He appeared everywhere, watching Mercy with suspicion and asking far too many questions about her objectives.

It made surprising him rather difficult, but she had done what she could for today. With Dorothy and the new gardener's help, they were able to collect enough boughs,

evergreen, holly, and ivy to assemble multiple kissing boughs and wreaths.

She'd brought them into the drawing room. Parts of the ceiling were missing, clearly having warped and fallen, but they sat in the corner of the room away from the debris at a round card table. Mercy had yet to see so much as a particle of dust fall from the ceiling, so she deemed it safe enough for her purposes.

"Shall we put them up tonight?" Dorothy asked, using twine to tie more holly to her wreath.

"Not until Christmas Eve," Mercy said, working a knot on her kissing bough. "It is bad luck to do so beforehand, you know."

Dorothy wrinkled her nose, clearly without any fear of luck—good or bad.

"We only have a few days left to finish these," Mercy said, fiddling with the twine. "Can you sneak away tomorrow as well?"

"Of course, ma'am." Dorothy gave her an impish grin. "Won't want to be ruining the surprise."

Mercy was glad she'd chosen to take her maid into her confidence. Now if they could finish cleaning the house with the help of the two new maids, the footmen could assist her in putting up the decorations, and Colin could see his home transformed.

She really ought to bake shortbread and put a pot of wassail on too, if she truly wanted Christmas Eve to feel magical. Better add those to her list.

"Goodness. You brought the entire forest inside," a shrill voice said from the doorway .

Mercy found Lady Edith standing there, leaning on her cane. Some of the color had been restored to her cheeks, likely due to her rest. The travel seemed to take much out of her, and with her illness being what it was, she really ought to remain in bed. Mercy rose. “What can I do for you, Aunt?”

“Help me sit.”

Mercy only hesitated briefly before she went to Lady Edith’s side and guided her toward a soft ladder-back chair at the table. Colin wouldn’t be happy to find his aunt in this room, so Mercy needed to be certain he didn’t. She caught Dorothy’s wide eyes, watching the maid sink lower in her chair, her attention on her wreath.

Settling a pleasant expression on her face, Mercy picked up a sprig of mistletoe. “We are putting together kissing boughs and wreaths. Surely it isn’t of any interest?—”

“You’re mistaken, young lady. I am very much interested in this.” Lady Edith adjusted her position on the creaky chair and observed the mess on the table. Shooing Mercy away, she rested both hands on the top of her cane. “Keep at it. Don’t let me stop you.”

“Very well.” Mercy regained her seat and continued working on her kissing bough. Dorothy had gone red, her head bowed and focused on her task.

“What is all this for?” the matron asked.

“They are Christmas decorations.”

Lady Edith gave her a shrewd look. “I know that. I mean, why are you hiding away with them?”

Should Mercy be honest? She had been perturbed with Colin’s mother, who also

happened to be Lady Edith's niece. She wasn't likely to appreciate Mercy's frustrations.

"Spit it out, girl," Lady Edith said, reading through her hesitation .

Oh, very well . "Colin has never seen Winterbourne decorated for Christmas. He informed me that the most his mother permitted was a Yule log and a goose dinner. I want—well, I want to give him the Christmas he never had."

Lady Edith's shrewd look turned curious. She tilted her head to the side, still resting both hands atop her cane. "What else have you planned?"

"I'd like for Colin to keep his traditions, so I intend to help him find a Yule log on Christmas Eve. I want to go to our butcher in Millcombe and see about a goose for Christmas dinner. But I'd also like..." She hesitated slightly before continuing. "I bake very delicious shortbread, and I want to make him some."

Lady Edith straightened. " You bake it, dear?"

Mercy's heart hammered. Was this going to make her seem unacceptable? She should have remained quiet about this, but it was very much part of her family's traditions. "Yes. I do. It is really a good recipe. It goes back in my family for generations."

"Shortbread is my very favorite thing. We had it often, my Mr. Walker and I. His family recipe is renowned in his part of the country, you know."

"I did not." Mercy could feel herself softening, her concerns slipping away. Lady Edith was no ogre. Despite her snappish way of talking and general plain speaking, she had a soft heart toward her great-nephew, that was for certain.

"Do not wait for Christmas, dear. I would like to enjoy it with you, and I must leave

soon if I am to make it to Derbyshire in time to see Richard by Christmas.”

“Do you intend to visit all of Colin’s cousins?”

“No, of course not. Only the ones I like.” She gave a smile that proved she didn’t entirely mean it. “Colin is not the only one included in my will, you know.”

Mercy’s hands stilled on the twine. She hastily continued to arrange the holly, hoping Lady Edith hadn’t caught her slip. “It seems an interesting time to force marriage upon your progeny. Christmastide is a busy time for most.”

“One cannot control when one dies,” Lady Edith said. “Which is why I expect you to start some tea and provide more brandy for me than Colin did. Then you will take me down to the kitchen to make shortbread.”

“It will be time for dinner soon,” Mercy said, finding she liked this woman excessively, despite her brash attitude.

“Colin runs a tight ship, does he not? Never knew a boy to be more punctual than him. I believe he took it as a personal affront when I caused us to be late to church, the last time I visited.”

Mercy chuckled, moving her greenery aside. “He has given me cause to believe that very much.”

Lady Edith’s eyes narrowed. “Do not allow him to run roughshod over you, girl. You seem the sort to show him exactly when punctuality is important and when he can loosen his cravat a tad. I do believe it is so tightly wrapped it might be cutting off the blood supply to his head on occasion.”

Mercy did not grant this a reply, doing her level best to keep from laughing. “He is

very well put together,” she finally said, when she could trust her voice to remain steady.

“Precisely.” Lady Edith hit her cane on the floor once, a twinkle in her eyes. “Now, shall we go prepare for dinner? The shortbread can wait until tomorrow. We do not want Colin to turn into a wretch of nerves if his dinner cannot be served on time. ”

It appeared Lady Edith knew her great-nephew exceedingly well. Had she the same regard for his mother? She hadn’t seemed offended by Mercy’s desire to give Colin a better Christmastide than he’d had in the past. If anything, the entire concept seemed to intrigue her.

“Yes, tomorrow.” Mercy rose and helped Lady Edith to stand. “I will make some shortbread for you, and you can tell me how it compares to your husband’s family recipe.”

“ You will make it?” Lady Edith stopped walking, drawing back to peer at Mercy with raised eyebrows. “No, my dear. We will be making it together.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Colin had searched the entire estate, but he could not find his wife or Lady Edith. His fingers tapped against his leg to the beat of a trifling fear that they were together somewhere, plotting against him. Plotting what, he did not know, but it was just the sort of thing his aunt would do.

He stopped before the drawing room doors, closed with a rope lying over the handle to remind the servants—and Mercy—not to enter it. She would not have taken Lady Edith inside, would she? He reached for the door before hesitating. No, of course not. Mercy wouldn't subject an aging, dying woman to the falling debris from the ceiling. She was wiser than that.

Then where were they? Colin had gone so far as to look at the kitchen garden and trudged through the snow toward the stables, but no luck. The women were gone.

Unless...

He had not checked the kitchen itself. But surely Mercy would not drag Lady Edith down there.

Colin made his way down the servants' staircase into the kitchen, the sound of laughter and chatter confirming his suspicions. He descended into an overly warm room that smelled of crackling fire and rich, warm biscuits. Colin clenched his teeth when he left the stairwell and found Lady Edith sitting at the long servants' table. Mercy stood at the work counter with Mrs. Johns and the new kitchen maid, flour spotting her gown.

What the devil was going on here? Everyone seemed to look up at him at the same time.

Blast. Had he spoken aloud?

“Your wife and I are having a bit of a competition,” Lady Edith said, her beady eyes narrowing slightly. “Do tell me you haven’t come with the intention of spoiling our fun.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” Colin looked from the bowl Lady Edith was mixing to the pan Mercy was pressing her dough into. Both spaces were covered in a dusting of flour, as were both women. “What is the nature of your competition? To see who can create a bigger mess?”

Mercy’s face hardened slightly, her cheeks growing red. “Some mess is required when baking, Colin. I would like to see a pan of shortbread made without one.”

“So would I,” he muttered.

“I would not,” Lady Edith said. “If you set unrealistic expectations, Nephew, you will consistently be disappointed.” She pushed to her feet and used her cane to point at Mrs. Johns. “I need a pan, young lady. My shortbread needs to be baked.”

Colin nearly choked on his cough. Only the esteemed Lady Edith could refer to his white-haired cook as young lady without anyone batting an eye. Mrs. Johns fetched a pan and carried it to Edith, but was swatted away when she tried to help press the dough into the pan .

Colin stood there, feeling a little lost. The women were all busy with tasks, none of them seeming to pay him any mind. Should he disappear? Sulk back the way he’d come? Incite a riddle competition to go along with their baking so he could remain

and be of some use?

No, that would be too obvious. Besides, it was Mercy's turn to provide a riddle, and she had yet to give him one.

"If you insist on remaining, you might as well make yourself useful," Lady Edith said, pushing her pan toward Colin.

He went to her side immediately and lifted the cold pan.

"Take it to Mercy," she said. "She knows what to do."

Colin did as he was told. Mercy took the pan from him and carried it to the oven, pushing it inside. She noted the time on the clock and returned to Lady Edith at the table. He quickly realized she was cleaning the space. Her eyes avoided him, as did those of Mrs. Johns and the new maid—blast, what was her name?—but he was used to that from his servants.

Not from his wife.

Mercy cleaned his aunt's workstation, then her own, before removing a pan of ginger biscuits from the oven with a cloth and setting them down. Her gaze rose to his, a sense of challenge in them. Her cheeks were rosy, her mouth firm. Gads, how her eyes sparkled. Who knew defiance could provide such a rich expression?

"Those smell delightful," Lady Edith said, closing her eyes and inhaling the rich, buttery scent of warm ginger. "Mr. Walker would have eaten the entire batch were he with us today."

"Your husband?" Mercy asked, moving to the table and sitting beside his aunt. "I thought he loved shortbread."

Colin did not know what to do, only that he had lost the desire to flee. He wanted to join them, so he pulled out the chair beside Mercy and sat in it, waiting for her to smile encouragingly at him.

She did not.

In fact, she did not bother to look his way at all.

“Yes, he did.” Lady Edith fidgeted with the top of her cane. Her color looked better, the pink in her cheeks doing much to fight the pallor she’d claimed last night. “He was very fond of all sweets. Some of my favorite memories are fighting over the last piece of pie or cake after dinner. It was never much of an argument, mind. We were good at sharing.”

“He sounds like the best sort of man,” Mercy said warmly.

“Any man who will always give you the last bite of pie is the best sort,” Lady Edith said with a crisp nod. “My Mr. Walker was that way.” She gave Colin a narrowed-eyed glance. “What of you?”

“We have not yet been presented with that situation,” he said, feeling for all the world like the women in this house were joining forces against him, much as he’d feared. Whatever had he done to earn their ire?

Mercy still avoided his gaze. “Colin would likely slice the final piece of pie in half with exactness. He is nothing if not meticulous.”

Lady Edith grinned. “Very true, dear. I’m afraid he comes by that honestly. His mother is a staunch supporter of order and cleanliness.”

“Is she?” Mercy asked, tipping her head to the side. “I did not realize that.”

Lady Edith looked at Colin expectantly. If that was her attempt to draw him into the conversation, it was artfully done. Mercy, it seemed, had forgotten their primary objective was to prove to Lady Edith how much they cared for one another. This cold dismissal was the opposite of that.

“Very much so,” he said, unwilling to lose this road into the conversation. “In fact, I am nearly certain it was why she left Winterbourne. She claims Honora needed her once she began having children, but it was difficult for my mother to reside in a house that was veritably falling apart around her.”

Mercy glanced at him then, and he held her gaze. “Did your father not mind the disorder?”

“He did not have to face it, not really. His answer to Winterbourne’s problems was to drive us into debt and worry about the consequences later.” Colin realized how many ears were listening to the sordid details of his troubled finances but pressed on anyway. “I have managed to put us back on solid footing, but the house suffered in the interlude.”

It had taken great care and meticulous budgeting to pay off his father’s creditors and put Winterbourne back into a position to make an income again. He would do well in the future, but he couldn’t fix the entire estate on such a small budget, not when the current income needed to be recycled back into the land so he could keep producing. He had only contrived a way to cease falling further into debt.

Lady Edith broke through his thoughts. “Now that Colin has joined us, we have a judge.”

Mercy wrinkled her freckled nose. “You think that wise? I was hoping Mrs. Johns could provide that service.”

“Mrs. Johns would choose me in order to avoid offending her guest,” Lady Edith said without pause. “We can trust Colin to be truthful. He is too precise to lie. ”

Mrs. Johns sliced into a block of meat on the counter, likely beginning her preparations for dinner. “It is true,” she said without malice.

“Shall we set the judging to be for after dinner?” Lady Edith asked. “I am tired. I think I will retire until then.”

Mercy stood immediately. “Shall I walk you upstairs?”

“You needn’t bother. I can manage. Perhaps you two ought to go riding. The sun was out this morning.”

They both stood, smiling at her until she disappeared up the stairs. When she was gone, the sound of her retreat fully absent, Colin faced his wife. “That was the opposite of what we are trying to accomplish.”

“Oh? So you think I should have refused when your aunt asked me to match my shortbread recipe against hers?”

“It was her idea?”

Mercy made an exasperated sound. “I did not set out to drag Lady Edith to the kitchen and cover her in flour.”

“No, of course not.” When she stated it like that, it did sound ridiculous.

“What would you have had me do?” Mercy asked, folding her arms over her chest.

“Nothing differently from what you’ve done.” It was then Colin realized he owed her

an apology. He glanced toward the oven and found Mrs. Johns and the new kitchen maid watching them with interest. Both women's eyes darted away, but he had not been fooled. He reached for Mercy's hand, untangling her ire. "Will you come with me?"

"Yes," she said. There was a hint of questioning in her voice. She seemed hesitant but was evidently interested enough to follow him.

He tugged her down the corridor and into the stillroom, closing the door behind them. Memories of when they were last in that room together flashed through his mind. Was it really only a week ago he had found Mercy in the garden, cutting his palm in a pathetic attempt to join her in her task? At the time, he hadn't been entirely sure why he'd done it, only that he wanted to help. If his wife was intent on doing something so ridiculous as weeding the kitchen garden, he was not going to let her do it alone.

Madness. That's what it was.

Or a growing fondness for his wife, despite how he had disagreed with her choices.

He flexed his hand, glad the cut had healed. Only a thin scab remained.

"What is this about?" she asked, eyeing him warily.

Colin cleared his throat, shoving away the thought of her gently holding his hand and ministering to his cut. Their future was very much on the line here. "We must make more of a concerted effort to prove our affection for one another in front of Lady Edith."

She seemed to deflate a little, as though disappointed. Had she thought he'd brought her into this room for another reason? "We were only bickering, Colin. Most married couples do that on occasion, do they not? My father is forever teasing my mother.

She is constantly telling him to cease, despite how anyone can see that she enjoys it.”

He gave a faint laugh, noting a smudge of flour on her chin. He could not help but stare at it. “I am nothing like your father.”

Mercy’s eyes flashed. “Indeed,” she said, the word cutting through the room.

He could sense she had taken offense, but it was the truth. He was not the teasing sort, and he felt sudden umbrage at being compared to someone of that ilk, of something he could never become. “If you had wanted to be married to a ridiculous man, you should not have agreed to our arrangement.”

Mercy huffed a snort. “Good grief, Colin. Anyone would think you mean to say you are not ridiculous.”

His back straightened of its own accord. “You imply I am?”

“There is no implication. I will say it outright. Not everything needs to be perfectly organized. Some ventures find success without employing a list. And if your knife and fork are not exactly straight on either side of your plate, dinner will still go on!”

He wanted to gasp in outrage, but that felt a little dramatic. Instead, he reached forward, pushing through his hesitation, and gently wiped the smudge of flour from her chin. “You had something there.”

“I imagine I have a great deal of somethings on my face,” she said petulantly. “I was baking.”

Something about the way he’d touched her took the ire out of him, and it had seemed to do the same for Mercy, if the way her shoulders had fallen away from her ears was any indication. They stared at one another, their breathing audible, filling the room

with sound. Tension seeped from the room.

Colin held her gaze. “I knew my aunt had a fondness for shortbread, but it was beyond my knowledge that she made the stuff herself.”

“She told me it was her husband’s family recipe.”

A tendril of guilt swept through his gut. “She must miss him fiercely.”

“I believe that is the truth.” Mercy seemed to deflate further. She crossed her arm over her chest, holding her opposite elbow, and worried her lip. “I wanted to do something for her, something kind. I do not like that she is so ill, and I find it a little sad how determined she is to visit all her family despite this. Did you know she intends to visit York and Scotland as well? She told me of her plans while we were in the kitchen.”

Scotland was unexpected, but Colin imagined she was checking on each of his cousins—the three who had been in the solicitor’s office with him last month. “I cannot say I am surprised. Lady Edith does what she wishes, despite what any doctor or family member might feel.”

Mercy continued. “I’d hoped agreeing to our little competition might bring her some joy.”

“Thank you for doing that.” Their baking suddenly felt less gauche and significantly more charitable—not only because of Lady Edith’s feelings, but also because she knew how much Colin wanted to prove themselves to the woman. Mercy was intelligent. She understood the depth of their situation and how important it was to make certain Lady Edith did not revoke the fortune. Even still, he had the firm sense Mercy had done what she could for his aunt simply out of the goodness of her heart.

Colin had chosen a wife who embodied charity and kindness in their purest forms. He owed her his gratitude, though he didn't quite know how to phrase it.

"If that is all, I have more baking that needs to be done," she said.

"More? Whatever for?"

"My mother sent around a note requesting my help with some Christmas parcels. We often deliver them over Christmastide and, though she did not say as much, I fear she is overwhelmed trying to manage them all without my assistance this year. If it is agreeable to you, I planned to bring biscuits and shortbread to her home tomorrow and help her assemble the parcels after Lady Edith leaves."

"I have no objections."

She gave a faint nod of understanding. "Thank you. I do not imagine it will require much from your stores, but—"

"That is of little concern to me, Mercy. Help me prove our affection to my aunt, and you can provide biscuits and shortbread to the entire county for all I care."

She gave him a tight smile. He did not miss the disappointment that briefly washed over her face. "I will do my best. Did you know she intends to leave in the morning?"

"That makes success more imperative. It is our last night to make an impression and gain her approval."

Mercy moved toward the door, then paused and looked back. "Do you have a plan to prove this affection?"

The simplest way would be for Lady Edith to find them kissing, but Colin wasn't

certain he could broach that idea quite yet. His body flushed warm with the images it conjured, and he found he wanted to propose that option. But Mercy blinked at him, and he thought of how he'd told her he would give her time before their relationship needed to become physical. "Perhaps we can both consider the situation and bring our ideas to dinner. We can meet in the antechamber a quarter of an hour before six and discuss it."

Mercy nodded. "That is agreeable to me."

She moved toward the door, and Colin's hand reached toward her of its own accord—an impulse he did not fully understand. He snapped it back to his side, but the motion had garnered her attention.

"Do you need help?" he asked, for lack of anything else to say .

She gave him what he imagined to be the first real smile he had received from her that day. "And dirty your finely pressed coat? I wouldn't dream of asking that of you."

Colin remained in the stillroom for a few minutes after she had gone, unable to wipe the rueful grimace from his face.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Mercy took extra care to dress for dinner, using Dorothy's help to put up her hair and select the best necklace to match her emerald gown. She dressed early so Colin would have the room to himself. Then, while he was occupied, she snuck into the drawing room to continue assembling her kissing boughs and wreaths before it was time to meet Colin. She curled vines and leaves around twigs, using twine to tie them in place, then curled more vines around them to thicken the boughs. The room smelled rich and earthy, the sharp tang of pine filling the room. She was only in want of a roaring fire and a glass of wassail to feel like Christmas.

Mercy watched the clock, and when it grew too close to wait any longer, she put her things aside and crept toward the door. She pulled it open, listening for anyone who might be walking by. When she was satisfied she remained alone in the vicinity, she quietly stepped from the room, closing the door and laying the rope across the handle again to keep the maids away .

It seemed overcautious. In all honesty, not a speck of plaster had fallen during her time in that room. She imagined the work Hubble and his men were doing on the roof during the day was working to help stem the decay indoors.

"What were you doing in there?" a deep voice asked behind her.

Mercy squealed and spun to face the sound. She hit her back on the door, righting herself swiftly only to face Colin. His arms were crossed over his chest, his narrowed eyes fixed on her.

“Nothing,” she said.

“Nothing?” His voice was thick with doubt. “It crossed my mind briefly that you believed we were meant to meet in the drawing room instead of the dining room’s antechamber, except for the way you snuck out.”

She sucked in a breath. “I did not sneak .”

“Oh?” His eyebrows raised. “What do you call it then?”

Drat, he had caught her. Perhaps redirection was a better course of action. “Shall we go through together?” She started toward the dining room like he had not just caught her coming from a forbidden room. But really , she had been perfectly safe. And it was the best place to hide her greenery while she assembled the wreaths and garlands.

Colin dropped his arms. “You cannot truly believe I am so easily distracted. Mercy, what were you doing in there?”

“Nothing,” she insisted, resting her hand on the bare railing overlooking the entryway.

“If you will not tell me, I will see for myself.” He started for the drawing room door.

“No!” Mercy hurried toward him, putting herself between him and the drawing room.

“Can you not leave it be? I told you it was nothing. ”

“You are hiding something.”

She couldn’t fault him for that. It was the truth. “But it is not a bad thing,” she insisted. “It is only something I do not wish for you to see yet.”

His eyes narrowed again. He moved as though he would pass her, but she put her hands up, pressing against his chest to stop him.

“Trust me.”

Colin seemed to hold his breath. She could feel the steady thrum of his heart beating, the swift pounding matching her own. It took a bit longer than she would’ve liked for him to give her a nod. “Very well, but I don’t like the idea of you being in there.”

“I’ve yet to have any plaster fall on my head, if that is a comfort.”

“Shockingly, it isn’t. You know, it only takes once for you to be hurt.”

To his credit, the idea of this genuinely seemed to concern him.

It wasn’t until Colin glanced down at her hands that she realized she was still pressing against his chest. She dropped her arms to her sides. “Shall we go to dinner?”

“We ought to come up with a plan now,” he said, turning for the stairs down to the dining room.

Mercy fell in step beside him. “Lady Edith and I chatted for a good length of time today about our families while we were in the kitchen. She wondered about our relationship the last few years and how long we’ve been friends.”

“That is all good, but we must prove we could possibly fall in love in the future.”

“To that end, I think I have done more for us than you give me credit for.”

“Yet when I joined you in the kitchen, your stare could have frozen me, it was so full

of ice.”

“Perhaps you should be less concerned with a little mess and more concerned with the state of...” She trailed off and shook her head. She could not change Colin, nor did she want to. Earlier in the kitchen, when he had irritated her, it was merely because of his seeming embarrassment to find her baking with his aunt. It irked her, his staunch refusal to acknowledge that she was no less than anyone else simply because she was not afraid to dirty her hands. Perhaps it was not entirely natural for the mistress of a grand estate, but she enjoyed baking and being in the garden and chatting with the servants—most of whom she knew fairly well merely from living in the same village. Becoming the mistress of Winterbourne did not make her so lofty she must immediately disregard many of the people she had pleasantly chatted with before becoming Colin’s wife.

But how to make him see this?

“What is troubling you?” he asked again, stopping in the corridor just outside the antechamber. “Are you keeping something else from me?”

This time a fissure of misgiving shot through her. “It’s no great secret. I am very much not cut out to be a fine mistress of such a grand estate. I far prefer maintaining comfortable relationships with my servants and making my own shortbread at Christmas.”

He seemed to struggle with how to respond.

She shook her head, dislodging the uneasiness and putting it aside. “We should go in. Your aunt will be with us soon.”

“Mercy,” he said, quietly reaching for her hand. His fingers were gentle when they came around her palm, gripping her so lightly she wanted to step closer to him, to

incite a firmer hold. “I suppose my mother has filled my head with an idea of what the mistress of Winterbourne ought to be. I don’t know any differently. I do not mean to control the way you choose to run this house.”

She felt tears spring to her eyes unaccountably, but was prevented from responding when the door to the antechamber swung open.

Lady Edith stood there, her eyes sliding down to their hands. Her presence made it impossible to reply to Colin, so Mercy squeezed his fingers, a promise the conversation could continue when they were alone again. He gave her a soft smile, and she looked for the dimple in his cheek, but it did not show.

“Shall we go in to dinner?” Lady Edith asked. “Or shall we skip the meal entirely and enjoy the shortbread straightaway? I have a feeling I know why you are being so sweet, Mercy. Trying to warm our judge in your favor, are you?”

Mercy grinned. “I suppose if you didn’t want a biased judge, you should not have chosen my husband.”

Lady Edith cackled, her cane hitting the rug with muted thuds as she crossed the room. Colin hurried to her side to offer his arm, and Mercy watched him move with grace, despite his long limbs and wide shoulders. He was very handsome, even with his fastidious hair pomaded just so and his immaculate coat. She would be hard-pressed to find a single smudge on his entire ensemble.

When compared to the perfection he often displayed, she could see why her unkempt, flour-dusted chin had left something to be desired.

Yet she could not find it in herself to be embarrassed.

Colin helped each of the women into their chairs before taking his seat at the head of

the table. Mercy caught his eye as she pulled off her gloves and laid them in her lap. They never had discussed a plan to prove their affection for one another. She hoped being caught holding hands when they were speaking privately worked in their favor. The truth was her heart still raced from that interaction.

She faced Lady Edith. “Did you enjoy your rest?”

“There are more lumps in the mattress than I recall, but I made do. Next time I visit, I expect to see much more of the house opened. A bedchamber on the north side of the house would suit me well.”

Colin seemed uneasy. He reached for the stem of his glass, turning it slightly until the pattern matched up just so. He reached down and shifted his knife before his hand stilled. He was clearly unsettled, and she imagined it was from not knowing whether Lady Edith intended to leave him the money to finish work on the house.

Mercy thought a change of subject was best. “I’m glad to hear you would like to return. We would love to see you again.”

“Have you seen a doctor recently?” Colin asked, concerned. Did he fear she wouldn’t be well enough for a return visit?

Lady Edith lifted her wine glass and drank, refusing to respond. “Let’s speak of more pleasant things, shall we?”

Mercy exchanged a glance with Colin. They had no choice but to comply.

When dinner was through, one of the new footmen, Lewis, brought out a tray bearing two plates of shortbread. Colin sat at the head of the table, sandwiched between his wife and his aunt, and stared at the tray. It was impossible to tell them apart, and nothing about the plates indicated which woman had baked which shortbread.

Blast it all, he was going to choose the wrong one. He knew it.

“Mrs. Johns told me which shortbread belongs to which lady,” Lewis said.

Colin selected a piece and took a bite before setting it down on his own plate. Well, that was the winner. It had to be. It was utterly delicious, buttery and crumbly. He sipped his wine to clear his mouth, then ate a piece from the other plate. His chewing slowed to nearly a stop. They tasted the same. Equally buttery, equally crumbly, melting in his mouth.

He looked up at each of the women before settling his gaze on Lewis. “Are you certain these aren’t from the same pan?”

Lewis shook his head. “I watched Mrs. Johns put them on the plates, I did.”

Colin took a second bite from each plate. He could not detect a difference. To him, they still tasted the same. The women watched him with interest until he put his shoulders up. “I’m not sure what you expect from me. There isn’t a better shortbread. They are identical.”

He thought he could detect a hint of relief in Mercy’s relaxed posture.

“Give it here,” Lady Edith said, reaching for the tray.

Colin slid the tray closer to her, and she pinched a bite from shortbread on each plate, chewing thoughtfully. Her gaze snapped to Mercy. “As loath as I am to admit this, I have to agree. ”

“Let me try,” Mercy said. She repeated the process and chuckled. “We ought to compare our recipes.”

“I would, if it did not make me fear an angry visit from my mother-in-law,” Lady Edith said, reaching for another piece of shortbread and nibbling on the edge.

“Did she not die years ago?” Colin asked.

“Precisely. The last thing I want for Christmas is a visit from an angry ghost.”

Colin chuckled at her ridiculousness. He caught Mercy’s eye, her amused smile radiant. “Shall we adjourn to the library?” he asked.

They agreed. The women walked together from the room, Colin following close behind.

“We give shortbread to many of our neighbors at Christmas each year,” Mercy said to Lady Edith. “I’ve had a good deal of practice.”

“What fortunate neighbors you must have.”

“I suppose I’ve used that word liberally. We often deliver them all over the parish, so it is not necessarily the same families who receive baked goods each year. We try to choose people who might need an extra measure of love.”

“Your father must be privy to personal situations among his parishioners.”

Mercy nodded. “He tends to know who is in need.”

The women disappeared into the library, but Colin remained in the corridor, her words having caught him by surprise. He wanted to follow them but found his feet wouldn’t move.

Did Mercy know she was talking about him ?

A few years ago, he had experienced an exceptionally trying season. It was not that he had been unhappy precisely; he had merely been lonely. To make matters worse, he had opted not to join his sister's family for Christmas because the roads were overladen with early snow, and he deemed it unsafe to venture clear to Devonshire.

On a particularly trying day just before Christmas, when his house had been silent, Mrs. Johns had presented him with a small, brown paper-wrapped package of shortbread. She had told him it was from a friend in the village. She would not reveal who, and at the time he did not press, but it had lifted his spirits to know someone had thought of him.

Knowing that person was Mercy and her family filled him with a strange bubbling warmth he couldn't quite push away.

Mercy appeared in the doorway, pulling him from his memories. "Is everything all right?"

"Shortbread," he said, as though it had just occurred to him she had made some. "You make shortbread."

She peered at him with uncertainty. "We have discussed this at length already." There was a hint of defensiveness in her tone, and he imagined she thought he was going to rebuke her further for her baking.

He shook his head a little, still reeling from the discovery. "A few years ago, at Christmas, you brought me shortbread."

She froze, her green eyes snapping to his.

"It was you," he repeated quietly. The reality settled in his stomach like a warm cup of tea on a cold day, soothing his tired body and making him relax.

“Do not abandon me in here,” Lady Edith called, snapping them from the moment. “I’ll be gone tomorrow and you shall have all the time in the world to be romantic together then.”

He held Mercy’s gaze for another minute, neither of them saying anything, before gesturing to the library. She let out a breath and went inside. He swallowed, following her. Despite telling himself it hadn’t meant anything in particular, he could not shake the feeling that his wife had long since meant more to him than he had realized.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The group had stayed awake far too late into the night talking in the library. By the time they retired for the evening, Colin gave his room to Mercy and slept on the sofa in his study. He had nearly been asleep before his head hit the pillow, but he did not remain that way. It was inordinately uncomfortable, and he tossed and turned all night.

That was preferable to sharing a bed with Mercy. He didn't want to make her uncomfortable or give her the impression he wanted more than to sleep.

Light streamed through the study window and woke him far later than he typically would have slept. He stood and stretched, his neck creaking and back stiff. Sorry as he would be to see Lady Edith leave this morning, he welcomed returning to a mattress that evening, however lumpy it might be.

To his surprise, when Colin went to find breakfast, Lady Edith was already standing at the door speaking to Mercy, their voices low.

"I ought to wake Colin before you leave," Mercy said, before noticing him on the stairs. "Oh, good. I will give you a minute together. Mrs. Johns has a basket for you, Aunt. I will go down and fetch it."

"I would tell you not to trouble yourself, but instead I will request you add more shortbread to the basket while you're in the kitchen. I have a mind to determine exactly where our recipes differ, which will require a good deal from each pan."

Mercy's eyes lit in amusement. "I will be certain you have plenty for your scientific research."

"Good girl," Lady Edith said, patting Mercy warmly on the cheek. It was not condescending, but rather filled with affection. Colin had himself been subjected to the same pat many times over the years. He had the sudden and definite impression that Lady Edith approved of Mercy. Did that mean she also approved of their relationship?

He could not be certain until he asked.

Mercy passed him, sending him a hesitant smile that he returned. He waited for her to disappear down the servants' stairs entirely.

"Where is Flint?" he asked.

"Good morning, Nephew," Lady Edith said. "I believe your butler is seeing that my carriage is properly warmed."

He found this oddly amusing. "Flint is seeing to your warming bricks?"

"He is seeing that someone is seeing to them," she corrected.

"Ah." That made far more sense.

Lady Edith adjusted her shawl over her shoulders. "You have a very lovely wife, Colin."

"I do," he agreed. His body trembled in fear and anticipation. It had been on his mind to tell Hubble to cease with the construction until he could be satisfied he had the money to pay him, but at this point, the man ought to complete the roof at the very

least. Colin would see to it Hubble was appropriately compensated, regardless of the outcome of this conversation.

He hoped he had done enough.

Her gaze was direct, considering. “You may wipe that anxious look from your face. I have not come with the intent of holding back any money from you.”

A rush of relief sluiced through his body, coolly washing through him. “When you arrived, you had mentioned?—”

She swatted his words away. “When I arrived, I had not yet met Mercy. Not really. It seems you took the direction from my letter entirely when you set out to secure a wife.”

“Was I not meant to?” he asked.

She peered at him. “I meant every word I wrote. What I had not expected was for you to find someone so quickly. It should not have come as any great surprise, though. You are nothing if not methodical and thoughtful.”

“And if I had not found a woman?”

Her smile was small, her eyes running over his face. “There was never any doubt of that, my dear.”

He wanted to ask why she had done it to begin with, but the question died on his tongue. While eccentric, it was no secret Lady Edith loved her family deeply, and he did not think he was the exception. She’d been a bit high-handed, perhaps, but despite her methods, he could not help but believe she had good motives for her requirements.

Either way, Colin had been given a choice. He was not forced into marriage, merely supplied with an opportunity.

“Mercy is a lovely addition to Winterbourne,” she said. “I am extraordinarily glad she has joined you. I never approved of you being left here in this manner, but I cannot control your mother.”

“So you thought to control me?” he asked dryly.

Lady Edith shook her head, and he noted how weary she looked. The circles evident beneath her eyes gave him a vague sense of uneasiness. Would this be the final time he saw his aunt? She had spoken of returning to see them, but with her health in such a decline, no one could know if it was altogether possible

“My methods might have been high-handed, but my motives were pure.” She looked at him with such focus, he imagined she intended to push her meaning into him by sheer force of will. “I thought to help diminish your loneliness. I had hoped your lack of marriage was due to the fact that you cannot seem to remove your head from your figures and lists long enough to notice the people around you, and I believe I was correct.”

Had that been the case? Had Colin been so concerned with himself, his house, his ever-present list of things that needed to be done, that he hadn’t noticed the woman who had been right in front of his nose for years? It was true he’d offered for Mercy because he felt she had all the qualities in Lady Edith’s letter, yes. But he had also found her beautiful, sweet, and thought that if he was ever going to fall in love, it would likely be with someone like her.

He hoped it would be with her.

It wasn’t until he allowed himself that thought that he realized how hard his heart was

pounding.

“May I offer you some advice?” Lady Edith asked.

“Can I refuse you?” he joked, though in earnest he was hungry to hear what more she had to say. She could be enlightening and wise when she was not being ridiculous .

“Mercy has not been raised the way you have. I know what a trial it can be to merge two different upbringings. My Mr. Walker was a merchant, you know, and his life was much different than what I was used to, having been raised in an earl’s house. While it presented some difficulties for us in the beginning, it was not until I learned to let go of what I thought was right that we were able to find our own sense of normalcy.”

He’d forgotten the disparity between Lady Edith and Mr. Walker, but it wasn’t much different from what he and Mercy had. Lady Edith had the bearing and regality of a woman brought up as an earl’s daughter, but still she could be found baking shortbread in the kitchen. One could have both. One could be both.

If nothing else, Lady Edith had shown Colin how he ought to relax his strictures.

“Allow yourself to be a little messy, Colin. You will not regret it. Mercy, I think, will love it.”

Messy? Him ? The idea of willfully ruining a coat made him want to shudder. But the chance that Mercy would like it gave him the urge to do exactly that. Should he offer to bake with her? Weed the garden? Roll in the snow?

“What shall I love?” Mercy asked, joining them with a basket over her arm. Her cheeks were flushed from hurrying down to the kitchen and back. Her green eyes were bright, skipping between him and his great-aunt.

“Come and give me a kiss,” Lady Edith said, ignoring the question. “I must be on my way if I am to reach Richard before Christmas.”

Mercy obediently went to her side. Their embrace lasted longer than Colin expected, and he found himself rooted in place, watching his wife. She had shown such affection for his aunt in so short a time; her capacity to love was clearly great.

They walked outside to help Lady Edith into the carriage, their shoes crunching over snow-covered gravel. The footmen carried warming bricks, steam rising from them, before placing them inside.

Cold, biting air nipped at Colin’s face and penetrated his thin coat. When Lady Edith was settled, she leaned forward, holding his gaze. She lowered her voice, making him lean in further. “Make sacrifices, Colin. That is the way to show her you care.”

He nodded. Make sacrifices.

“My solicitor will see to it you have the money before Twelfth Night. Perhaps put some of it toward new mattresses, hmm?” With a twinkle in her smile, she leaned back and allowed him to close the door.

He stood at Mercy’s side and waved until the carriage was out of sight.

“Have you eaten breakfast?” he asked.

She looked at him. “I did earlier. You slept so late I nearly came for you.”

“I spent so much of the night tossing and turning, I fear by the time I truly fell asleep, it was nearly dawn. The sofa in my study is far less comfortable than our lumpy mattresses.” And that had been his second night enduring such torture.

“Could you not have found another bed?”

He had tried. They all needed to be taken out and beaten clean. Perhaps if he had been a little more like Mercy, he could have cleaned a bedchamber himself instead of waiting for his overburdened maids to find the time for it. “The dust was unacceptable.”

She nodded, turning toward the house, and he followed suit. “You could have...that is, I am sorry for taking your bed for the duration of Lady Edith’s visit. It would have not been...” She cleared her throat, her cheeks stained scarlet. “We are married, Colin. It would not have been the first time we’d shared a bed.”

“I did not want you to be uncomfortable.”

She stopped walking as her foot hit the first step, and she faced him. “It is your bedchamber, Colin.”

“I had the sense you were uneasy when we were faced with the same scenario in Bath. I did not wish to lead you to believe I expected more from you than you were comfortable giving.”

She stared at him. “If we are to be happily married, perhaps we should work on communicating better.”

That was certainly a start.

“Did your aunt mention the inheritance?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said at once. “She heartily approves of you, Mercy. The money will be ours before Twelfth Night, as promised.”

Relief passed over her face. “I am so happy for you, Colin. I greatly feared losing the money—then where would you have been? Stuck with a useless wife and no funds.”

Colin nearly choked on his surprise. “Useless? Gads, Mercy. What have I done to give you that impression?”

“Perhaps that is not the correct word. I only meant that you wouldn’t be able to marry a better dowry?—”

“Mercy,” he said sharply. “I did not marry a dowry. I married you.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “In a partnership to receive an inheritance. Is it really very different?”

Was it? He wanted to heartily disagree with her, but how could he do so without admitting he was growing to care for her? It was a frightening prospect to make such an admission without confidence that she returned his feelings. If she was to argue they had nothing beyond friendship and a mutual partnership, it would crush him. But the way she looked at him—the way her hand felt in his—he could not deny the pull between them.

What if she did not feel the same? He needed to show her in other ways, first. He considered Lady Edith’s directive to make sacrifices for Mercy. “Are you still planning to assist your mother with deliveries today?”

“Yes, but first we need to compile the shortbread. We usually wrap?—”

“You wrap it in brown paper and tie it with twine,” he said. “I know.”

The look in her eyes was hesitant.

“May I come with you?” he asked. “I would like to help.”

He had surprised her—that much was clear. He didn’t know if he liked that she was stunned by his willingness to help.

“It isn’t necessary, Colin.”

“Perhaps not, but I would like to all the same. Will your family be opposed my presence?”

“No, of course not. They would be happy for it, I think.”

He gave a nod, warming to the idea. “Then I would like to join you. May I eat something first?”

She nodded, chewing on her lip.

“I will do that straight away.” He paused, watching hesitation flit over her face. “What is it you are nervous to say?”

Her eyes widened nearly imperceptibly before a somewhat embarrassed expression fell over her features. “On the morning of our wedding, I might possibly have mentioned to my mother that we were a love match. ”

“Oh?” he asked, doing his best to feign nonchalance. Was this a declaration? His heart increased in speed.

“Don’t be cross with me,” she gently pleaded. “My mother was telling me I needn’t go through with the wedding if I did not want to. She was concerned I felt a need to marry only to beat Grace to the altar.”

Swift disappointment fell through him, but he did his best to remain placid. “You thought to allay her concerns.”

“I’m not sure what I hoped to achieve. At the time, it was certainly not altruistic. Grace had slithered into my head, and I’m afraid my pride got the better of me.”

“Understandable.” He hadn’t had that sort of relationship with his sister, of course, but he knew what Mercy had faced when they became engaged. A small part of him was glad she had said it, if for no other reason than the opportunity it presented to him now. “I suppose we ought to do what we can to reinforce that perception.”

“You mean to pretend you love me?” she asked, and he detected a faint sound of hope in her words.

“I mean to give them no room to imagine that either of us feel otherwise.” He smiled at her. “I will be in the morning room. Fetch me when you are ready to leave.”

They mounted the rest of the steps to the front door and Flint opened it for them to step through.

Mercy followed him inside. Colin went off to find breakfast, eager for the outing—eager to spend time with his wife.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Mercy sat at the vicarage's kitchen table while her mother bustled around the room, gathering supplies and piling stacks of shortbread on trays. Grace was nowhere to be seen, and the faint smell of rich, savory meat mixed with the aroma of hot tea, making the room cozy. She sipped at her cup of tea, eyeing the door to the sitting room. Papa had intercepted Colin and taken him away under the guise of gaining his opinion on the new violin he had recently acquired.

Colin was no aficionado of music. Or was he? Mercy did not know. He had usually participated in their Christmas choirs, it was true, but she had not seen him play a single instrument before.

"You may begin," Mama said, setting a plate of shortbread in front of Mercy.

She had brought a basket full as well. It was increasingly difficult for her mother to narrow down the list of recipients each year, and the note she'd sent a few days ago proved just how true this still was .

"Grace walked down to Sophia Fairfax's house. Her father has taken ill, so she brought them some jelly and a pot of Cook's stew."

That explained the savory odor. A loaf of bread sat on the work counter against the wall. "I hope he is feeling well before Christmas."

"Can you imagine spending the holiday alone? That will be Sophia's fate if her father is forced to remain abed, poor dear."

Mercy could imagine it. She'd spent time in Winterbourne imagining that very thing. The year they had taken shortbread to Colin, they had known the roads were impassable and he was to remain in his drafty house alone. He had received invitations to join different families for dinner—Mercy had overheard them at church—but turned them down.

Whatever the reason, Colin had spent much of his life alone, hadn't he?

Mercy bit back the bitter taste that left in her mouth and set her focus on wrapping the shortbread into small parcels and tying them with twine. With as many years as her parents had been distributing this treat among their parishioners at Christmas, it was plain no one was left unaware of the givers. Yet they insisted on keeping it anonymous when they could.

Mama sat beside her, and together they wrapped shortbread for a half-hour before the sitting room door opened. Colin stepped through alone, his eyes moving to Mama before settling on Mercy. His gaze had a heaviness she could not identify, but she could feel it to her toes.

"Would you care to join us, Mr. Birchall?" Mama asked, breaking the taut line of connection between them .

"Put me to work, Mrs. Caldwell."

Mama's smile was genuine. "If you insist." She moved to the other side of the table. "Come. I'm sure you'd rather sit beside Mercy."

Colin claimed the chair at her side, pulling it closer until it was near enough for his leg to brush hers. "I would never refuse such a treat."

It was this comment that seemed to register differently for Mercy. Her body went still

while her smile froze. He was not in earnest. He was only trying to prove their affection to her mother.

Mama popped up from her seat. “We need more twine. I’m certain I have some, somewhere...” Her words trailed off as she bustled from the kitchen, leaving them alone.

“Laying it on rather thick, aren’t you?” Mercy hissed, leaning close.

Colin pressed his arm against hers. “I think my behavior is perfectly acceptable.”

“If we were two ridiculous young people in the throes of a devotion.”

“We are plenty young,” he argued.

“But in no way violently devoted. It is not in either of our natures.”

He reached for some shortbread and put it in the center of the brown paper, then looked at her sidelong. “Perhaps we could be.”

She followed his lead, adding shortbread to her own square of paper and beginning to fold it, if for no other reason than to have an excuse to move her eyes from his searching gaze. The man was flirting with her, and she could not discern if it was part of his act or not. There was no one with them now, but he was being a little theatrical .

It occurred to Mercy in that moment how very much she wanted it to be real.

“Good heavens, but it is positively frigid outside,” Grace said, stepping through the kitchen door and stomping her feet at the threshold. She glanced up and her expression grew still when she noticed them at the table. Her nose and cheeks were

tinged pink, her hair darkened from the falling snow. “Oh, you’re here.”

“We are,” Mercy said. “How is Mr. Fairfax?”

“Not well, I’m afraid. Sophia will likely not be at church. We ought to take them some shortbread.”

“Oh, dear. It’s as bad as that?” Mama said, bustling back into the kitchen. She put the twine on the table and went to help Grace remove her bonnet and gloves.

“Mrs. Bradford was outside when I passed her cottage, and she told me she intends to take dinner to them tomorrow. I think they will be well cared for.”

Mama nodded to herself, nibbling on a piece of shortbread while she sat at the table and started to wrap another bundle. Papa joined them, and soon they were all working together.

“Mr. Birchall has agreed to join our men in the choir.” He beamed.

Mercy snuck a look at Colin, whose smile became more of a grimace. “I will do my best, though I’ve not practiced.”

“Mercy can help you,” Papa said, disregarding this concern. “She knows the song well.” He lifted his eyebrows to her. ““Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.””

“Oh, yes,” she said, turning to speak to Colin. “I know—” She choked on her words, startled by his nearness and the watchful look on his face. Her cheeks heated, but he didn’t remove his attention .

“I know it well,” she finished weakly. It grew warm, and she was suddenly very thirsty. She turned back toward her dwindling pile of shortbread and put the last of it

on a square of paper, folding and tying it closed with fumbling fingers. Colin had disturbed her greatly. She had spent the last few days with his aunt, undaunted by the need to prove their love to her, but now it felt different. Colin was acting differently.

“We need to begin delivering so we might finish before it grows dark,” Mama said, hurrying through her final package. “Dress warmly,” she reminded them before disappearing, ostensibly to fetch her own warm clothing.

Grace moved to the door and started putting her bonnet and gloves back on.

Mercy stood and pushed her chair back to the table.

“May I help you?” Colin asked, rising.

“With what?” she asked.

“Your warm things.”

She would have laughed had she not been trying to make a point to Grace. He was being too courteous.

He glanced at her sister and back to her. Mercy detected a glint of amusement in his eyes. Was this a game to him? She knew it to be a farce, of course, but she wanted it to be reasonable. Instead, she felt constantly on the verge of laughter, her smile unwilling to be subdued.

“That would be kind of you, Colin,” she said, moving toward the door. Grace watched them with interest, her eyebrows slightly raised. “Come this way.”

He followed her from the room, his hand resting on her back in a protective gesture she found she liked very much. When they made it to the front door and she opened

the closet where their things were likely stored, he dropped his hand.

“I think it is working,” Colin whispered. “Did you see your sister’s expression?”

“Sister? I was thinking of my mother,” she said, pulling his coat and muffler from the closet. “She is giddy.”

“I noticed.” He grinned widely, then lowered his head so she might slip the muffler around his neck.

Mercy arranged it to cover his skin and handed him his hat. “Turn, and I will help you with your coat.”

“Thank you.” He did so and she slipped it up his arms and over his wide shoulders. Colin turned his neck to speak to her over his shoulder. “Was I not meant to help you, though?”

“You may.”

He took his gloves and put them in his pocket before reaching for her winter clothes and helping her put them on, layer by layer. They grew very quiet while Colin placed her bonnet over her hair and tied the ribbon, then reached for her cloak. He wrapped it around her shoulders, all levity gone from his expression. He focused on fastening it at her neck, his eyes glued to that place while she burned from the contact of his knuckles brushing her skin.

Mercy found her pulse thudding, enjoying the feeling of his ministrations.

He reached for her gloves, and she lifted her hand so he could slide it over her fingers. When he had finished with the second hand, he tightened the glove, then did not release her. Swallowing hard, he met her gaze.

“Thank you,” she said, the words scratchy and dry.

He nodded, his attention steady. “I did not realize how much I might enjoy fastening a cloak. ”

She had nothing to say. Enjoyment was a vast understatement for how she felt about the situation.

Colin took a step closer, reaching up to brush a strand of hair from her face. His thumb drifted along her cheekbone. “Mercy,” he breathed.

“Oh, there you are! We wondered where you had gone off to,” Mama said, coming around the corner. She looked between them, her eyebrows raised.

Colin stepped back, clearing his throat. “We are ready.”

“Shall we?” Papa asked, joining them. He looked between Mercy and Colin like he suspected they were sharing a secret, then smiled. Whatever reservations Papa had felt before her wedding were evidently put to rest.

“We shall.” Mercy returned to the kitchen to carry a basket of shortbread parcels, and the family left to deliver them to friends and neighbors alike.

She caught Colin’s gaze as they climbed into Papa’s small wagon. Despite all logic, she thought maybe she detected a hint of true warmth there.

Or perhaps that was only wishful thinking. She nestled close to his side on the bench—under the guise of proving their love, of course—and he put his arm around her.

Mercy’s joy could not be dimmed. When she hazarded a glance up at Colin’s face,

she noticed his smile was wide, his dimple popping.

Her stomach dipped pleasantly, and she leaned into him. She was fairly certain he tightened his hold on her as well.

Delivering shortbread took the remainder of the daylight. When Colin and Mercy returned to Winterbourne, they were tired, yet there were still a few hours before dinner would be served. They stood together in the entryway, removing their winter clothes—muffler, hat, gloves, cloak, bonnet.

“I think your father has terrible aim.”

“He meant to hit the ground between our legs, Colin,” she said. Papa had made a snowball and thrown it their way as they’d walked between some of the cottages. “He would not wish to hurt you.”

She was only glad he’d not scoffed and called her father childish during the interaction. Papa had merely been enjoying time with his family.

“It would have been more fun to throw the snowballs at each other.”

She looked up. “You are not upset about his antics?”

“No,” he said, looking down at her in surprise. “It did not bother me. But I hold with my initial opinion: he has terrible aim.”

“You seemed to rub along nicely tonight,” she said carefully. The last time they’d spoken about her father, Colin had not been so charitably minded.

“Yes,” he said, distracted. “We did. Mercy, I must see to Hubble and his progress. I will see you at dinner?”

“Yes, of course,” she said.

He left in a hurry, the particular warmth they had shared over the previous few hours noticeably absent. Did that mean it had all been an act, and she had believed it? She had known he was thickening his behavior for the purpose of proving themselves, but something within her had believed that a tendril of his actions at least was authentic. It felt like a sudden blow, returning to the way they had been before .

Mercy drew herself up. There was garland in the drawing room that needed her attention. Perhaps what Colin needed now was a push in the right direction—something to show him exactly how she felt.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Christmas Eve was sunny and clear, the blue skies dotted with clouds, the air crisp and cold. Mercy had completed her wreaths, kissing boughs, and garland, but she needed to concoct a way to drive Colin from the house for a few hours so she could transform Winterbourne.

Sitting at the breakfast table, she spread jam over her toast and considered her options. Mrs. Johns had the goose dinner well in hand, and Mercy had promised to come down directly after breakfast to put the wassail on. If she could contrive to make Colin leave the house soon, she would be able to finish her decorating and have wassail waiting when he returned.

Colin stepped into the breakfast room, a soft smile falling over his face when he noticed her. “Good morning, Mercy.”

“Good morning,” she said brightly. “Have you any plans today?”

“I hoped to see to the attic repairs and make an inventory of what needs to be done in the servants’ rooms.” He frowned, looking at the window. “That blue sky bodes well, though. Perhaps I ought to join Hubble on the roof.”

“You could,” she agreed, wondering how that was any different from her joining Mrs. Johns in the kitchen. She swallowed the uncharitable thought. She wanted him distracted and absent—which would be achieved by him being on the roof. Away from the house entirely would be far better. “It is a good day for a ride.”

“Perhaps, but that is not such a good use of my time when our roof is leaking. Once that is taken care of, the repairs will feel less urgent.”

“True. It’s hard to know when we will have another sunny day like this.”

He rubbed his chin and took the seat beside her. “The roof it is.”

Well, on top of Winterbourne was better than inside the house, at least. She took a bite of her toast and reached for her tea.

“Do you have anything planned for today?” he asked.

She did, but she was not about to clue him in to her scheme. Or perhaps it would be less suspicious if she told him a little of her plan. “Mrs. Johns is permitting me use of the stove for a bit this morning so I can make my mother’s wassail recipe.”

She ate another bite of her toast and watched him absorb her words. Would he take issue with it?

To Colin’s credit, he took it in stride. “That is very kind of her to allow you use of the stove in your own kitchen.”

Mercy laughed. “That kitchen is very much Mrs. John’s domain.”

He shot her a playful smile. “I suppose I cannot argue that.” Colin held her gaze for a beat longer than proper formality called for, and it made her heart pound. Goodness, it was only a look. Why did she feel so breathless all of a sudden?

“Are you fond of wassail?” she asked, desperate for a distraction.

“I cannot recall the last time I drank any.”

She stood, pushing away from the table. “Then I will bring you some when you are finished with Hubble.”

“Thank you,” he said.

Mercy curtsied and hurried toward the door.

“Mercy?”

She paused at the threshold and looked over her shoulder. Colin was handsome in his blue coat, his cravat tied neatly and his hair combed. His smile was far more relaxed than his clothing, and she felt a surge of attraction for him when he looked at her in that way. “Yes?”

“Would you like to go with me to find a Yule log today?”

“That would be agreeable.” She immediately thought how lovely it would be to sit in the drawing room with the kissing boughs and garland on the mantle, a large fire burning in the hearth and a cup of warm wassail in her hands.

When he said nothing more, she made her escape, hurrying down to the kitchen to set the wassail to a simmer so she could gather the servants and begin instructing them on the decorations. It took all of a quarter-hour to put the wassail together amidst Mrs. Johns’ cooking mess. She and Lydia, the new kitchen maid, seemed to be working well together preparing for tomorrow’s Christmas dinner.

“Will you take it from the stove in an hour if I do not return?” Mercy asked, reaching behind herself to untie her apron .

“Of course, madam.”

She left them and the warm scent of citrus and cinnamon behind, going in search of Flint. She found Lewis coming down the stairs and chose to speak to him, instead.

“Do you know where Mr. Birchall is?”

“Outside, I believe, ma’am. He went up to assist Mr. Hubble.”

“Perfect.” Her smile grew, her body anxious with delicious anticipation. “How would you like to help me orchestrate a surprise for Mr. Birchall?”

Lewis nodded gravely. “It would be my honor, ma’am.”

“Very good. Find whatever servants can be spared and meet me in the drawing room, please.” She started to turn away when she noticed the look of hesitation in his eyes.

“Will Mr. Birchall approve?—”

“You leave Mr. Birchall to me, Lewis.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

He left, but she could tell he was uneasy. She brushed off the concern and made her way toward the drawing room. She had a house to decorate and very little time to see it done.

As it turned out, Colin must have greatly impressed his desire for no one to enter the drawing room into each of his servants, for it took a good deal of persuasion to convince them to join Mercy inside. She explained her objective, and they immediately set to work, applying garland to both sides of the railing lining the grand split staircase. They hung wreaths over the doors, kissing boughs through some of the corridors, and lined the mantle in the drawing room with greenery. Everything was

dotted with red holly berries or white mistletoe berries, and the sharp earthy scent of evergreen and sweet aroma of holly filled the house.

Wassail simmered in the kitchen, making the sharp tang of cinnamon, apple, and orange waft through the halls.

It was, simply put, magical. All they needed was a Yule log burning in the hearth.

Mercy walked around the house, adjusting things here or there to ensure perfection. She wanted everything to be just right. She let herself down the corridor and into the drawing room. The harsh sounds of banging overhead proved the men were still working on the roof, and she was grateful they were willing to continue, even on the eve of Christmas.

Powder rained down from the molding on the ceiling and Mercy stepped out of the way. She looked at the mess on her shoulder and brushed it off. In all her time in the drawing room, she had yet to experience anything like that. The attic and servants' rooms were nestled between the drawing room and the roof, so she didn't understand how the roof repairs would affect the ruined plaster in this particular space.

Mercy stepped back further and admired the hearth, her hands clasped in front of her and a wide smile spreading over her lips. It looked positively perf?—

“What is the meaning of this?” Colin said behind her, pulling her from warm thoughts of surprising him. His carefully modulated tone made the hair stand up on the back of her neck. “Mercy?”

She turned to face him slowly. He looked thunderous, standing in the doorway. “I decorated,” she said, stating the obvious. “It is Christmas Eve, Colin.”

“I am perfectly aware of the date. What I do not understand is why you expressly

ignored my wishes when you were fully aware of the danger of being in this room.”

Unease slithered down her spine. “I know you dislike the falling plaster, but thus far, no one has been injured. Until today, nothing has even fallen loose from the ceiling.”

“Until today?”

She closed her mouth. She was not going to admit that moments ago she had been rained on. It was only dust, after all.

He crossed the room, coming to stop on the other end of the rug from her. His brow was stern, folded into irritation.

This was nothing like she had imagined in the days she had planned, prepared, and executed her surprise. She felt flat, her stomach dropping with chagrin, but then a sense of umbrage stole over her. She’d not been injured, and she had worked hard to turn their home into a veritable Christmas haven. “You are being overly cautious, and I did not do anything reckless.”

He scoffed. “It is not reckless to subject your servants to the possibility of plasterwork or pieces of the ceiling falling on their heads?”

“Goodness, Colin. You speak as though I do not care for their safety. I spent a good deal of time in here alone before I trusted it enough to invite?—”

“You should not have done so at all,” he snapped. “I told you it was unwise.”

“Yes, but how could I have managed to surprise you otherwise? This is the only room you do not enter.”

He looked taken aback by this revelation and glanced about the room as though

seeing the greenery for the first time. Had he not noticed the stair railing? The kissing boughs or wreaths on the doors in the entryway? She had worked tirelessly when she could steal pockets of time over the last few days to do this for him. Was he truly so blind to what really mattered?

Mercy had never felt smaller. “I cannot be the wife you want me to be, Colin. I can only be who I am.”

He tucked his chin, leaning back. “I have never requested you be anything different.”

“Have you not? It seems, since I arrived, I have done nothing befitting the mistress of Winterbourne. If you had wanted obedience, Colin, you ought to have married a hound.”

His face hardened. “You are being unfair.”

The pounding above them intensified and more plaster rained down from the ceiling between them, like freshly falling snow.

Colin’s eyebrows shot up. “I told you it was unsafe. We need to leave before another chunk falls.”

She folded her arms over her chest, being obstinate. “I would prefer we talked first. We cannot maintain a marriage where we disagree so heartily on proper behavior. You tell me I am not to weed the garden or help Mrs. Johns, yet you assist Mr. Hubble with the floors and the roof? I am not meant to be idle, Colin. I cannot sit about all day and sew. It is not in my nature, and it is not what my parents raised me to be. Had you wanted an idle wife, Sophia Fairfax would have been a better choice.”

His face shifted into confusion. “What has Sophia to do with anything?”

“Do not play coy with me. She is biddable and beautiful. In any matter, it isn’t relevant now.”

“I think it is exceedingly relevant. If you are miserable here, Mercy, I would like to know. ”

“Miserable?” She scoffed. “Colin, I love it here. What I do not love is feeling as though I will never be quite up to scratch. I cannot be the wife you want.”

He stared at her, his jaw working. His eyes were hard, assessing.

Mercy was overcome with a wash of fatigue. She didn’t have the heart for this conversation any longer, especially not on the heels of such disappointment.

She moved toward the door. “I will see this is cleaned up.”

“We need to talk about this,” he said.

She stopped walking and looked at him. “Perhaps when this?—”

The pounding sounded louder than before and the ceiling shook, raining down powdery debris on Mercy’s head. She blinked, her eyes stinging from the grit, when another loud bang preceded a cracking sound.

Mercy was aware of her name being shouted as something hard hit her on the head. Everything went black.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Colin's body turned to ice as he watched Mercy hit the ground, her body slumping onto the wooden floor just beside the rug. Time was sluggish and his ears rang. He blinked, immediately rushing to kneel at her side.

"Mercy," he said, his heart pounding in his ears. He wiped the white dust from her cheeks and eyes. Even her copper lashes were dusted white. He didn't know if her face was pale from the plaster or the fall, but her freckles were covered, so he hoped it was the former.

"Wake up," he repeated, pleading.

She stirred, the line forming between her eyebrows giving him great relief. If she was to wake so quickly, the injury could not be too dire.

"Colin?" she asked, blinking.

"Do not speak. I am going to carry you from the room so you do not sustain further injuries. Will that be all right?"

She moved to nod but stopped herself, her scowl deepening.

Colin slipped a hand beneath her back and the other under her knees. It took a bit of maneuvering to rise from his kneeling position with her in his arms, all the while doing his best not to jostle her too greatly. He felt relief when he made it through the open doorway and away from further danger. Where to take her? It would be better if

he did not need to move her again.

To a bedchamber, then. Colin mounted the stairs and turned down the corridor, Mercy's head resting in the hollow of his collarbone. Her forehead pressed against his neck, the touch of her skin warm against his.

He passed Dorothy, who sucked in a quiet gasp.

"Send for the doctor immediately. Mrs. Birchall has been hit on the head." His tone betrayed the depth of his concern.

"Right away, sir," she said, hurrying away.

"You are going to give the servants leave to think I'm terribly injured," Mercy mumbled, her voice lacking all venom.

His stomach clenched, and his hands tightened around her. "We do not know the extent of the damage yet. You were unconscious, Mercy."

"Not for long, I hope."

It had only been a minute, perhaps less than that, but it had felt like an eternity. Hopefully that boded well for her. "Not long at all," he promised. "Though you might be able to understand why the situation is no less frightening for the brief duration of your unconsciousness, Mercy. You fainted."

The image of her falling lifeless to the floor replayed in his mind as he made his way down the corridor. He skipped her door and nudged his open, then crossed to the bed. He was gentle, but it was not easy to pull back the blanket without jostling her a little before he could lay her down on the mattress .

“My shoes,” she complained, her voice quiet. “They will dirty the linens.”

He moved to the foot of the bed immediately, bending to unfasten her shoes and slipping them from her feet. He tucked them on the floor beneath the bed and moved to her head again. “Does it hurt?”

“The room is spinning, but I do not believe I am in danger of fainting again, if that is what worries you.”

“I am relieved to hear it,” he said.

She opened her eyes, rubbing more of the dust from them, before settling her gaze on him again. “I am sorry, Colin. I spent a good deal of time in that room this week and nothing of this sort happened. Not even a little dust.”

“You needn’t speak of it now.”

“But I was wrong. You were right.”

There was no sense of justice or reward in her admission. He hadn’t wanted to be right. He would have been much happier had nothing occurred.

“The servants’ rooms are above the drawing room, so I did not think the roof repairs would have any bearing?—”

“They are not repairing the roof any longer,” he said. “They were replacing waterlogged boards from a leak in one of the old servants’ rooms. The same leak that caused all the damage in the drawing room.”

She blinked, seeming to understand what he was saying.

“You had not experienced the decay of the drawing room’s ceiling all week because they had not yet reached that servant’s room. Not until today.”

Mercy closed her eyes. “I feel so foolish, Colin.”

He sat on the edge of the bed and leaned over her. “Headstrong, perhaps. You are anything but foolish.”

“Are you trying to make a joke? ”

He realized how she could take it. Headstrong.

“You sound like my father,” she muttered, fluttering her eyes open and sparkling up at him in amusement.

He could not help but smile at that. She was so beautiful. “There are worse things than sounding like the esteemed Mr. Caldwell.”

Her expression dropped. “Most people would disagree with you.”

Colin reached up and brushed more plaster powder from her forehead, revealing more of her freckles. “Your father is a good man who loves you very much. I have misjudged him, I think.”

“Most people do.”

“I hope to correct that in the future.”

Joy lit her face. “You mean it?”

“Of course. I thought to invite your family for Christmas dinner, but I’m unsure if

Mrs. Johns has enough?—”

“She has plenty. We’ve planned a whole goose dinner. Even if we use it to feed the servants as well, there will be more than enough.”

Of course she had. His Mercy thought of everything.

There was a knock at the door and Colin rose to find Flint standing there, his worried gaze dropping to Mercy. “Dr. Vance has come.”

“See him in,” Colin said.

Flint stepped aside and Dr. Vance approached, a leather bag hanging from his hand. His white hair was combed neatly and his spectacles clear. He was a man of order, and Colin trusted him implicitly.

“Good evening, Mr. Birchall, Mrs. Birchall. Now, who would like to tell me what has happened?”

The doctor only remained for a half-hour, long enough to examine Mercy and determine that she would not sustain lasting injuries. Her head was bound to ache for a day or two, and she ought to spend the remainder of the day resting to avoid dizziness, but all told, it was not a great injury.

Colin disagreed with the last bit. Watching his wife fall to the floor had been a great injury to both his feelings and her head, but he understood—in the grand scheme of the situation—he should be grateful it was not worse. He sent word to Mrs. Johns to prepare broth for dinner, as Dr. Vance had explained Mercy might feel nausea for the next few hours, then settled himself on a chair he had dragged close to the bed.

Mercy laid in bed, her back propped against stacked pillows. She brushed her copper

hair away from her face, her coloring somewhat restored. “You needn’t remain here, Colin.”

He very much disagreed. He didn’t want to leave her sight. Their argument felt so trite now, so ridiculous. Both of them had been correct, if he was being honest with himself. Because of that, he knew he owed her an apology—he had for some time now.

“What is it?” she asked, pushing to sit up, her eyebrows pulling together.

Colin laid his hand over where hers rested on the mattress. “Do not trouble yourself. It is nothing.”

She didn’t believe him. “You look upset.”

“I am, but not at you. I feel like a fool for caring so greatly for things of little consequence. I am sorry, Mercy.” He squeezed her fingers, pleasantly surprised when they curled around his own. “You were right. I was holding you to a standard set by my mother and not giving you any allowance to be different. She was the only mistress of Winterbourne I knew. I have been in this house alone for four years, so it was what I expected things to return to.”

“That is understandable.”

He felt a surge of affection for her sensible frame of mind. “Perhaps, but I should have seen my errors much sooner. You had pointed them out well.”

Mercy blushed. “Your mother and I do not always handle things the same way, but I do not believe either of us to be wrong, Colin. Merely different.”

“I came to the same conclusion. You are smart and practical. I ought to be grateful

you see what needs to be done and take action. It is admirable, Mercy.” He held her gaze until she dropped her eyes. He feared that perhaps he should have waited to foist this conversation upon her until she was recovered and her headache gone. Pushing from his chair, he shot her a smile. “I will leave you to rest. Is there anything I can fetch for you?”

“You can help me to my room, Colin,” she said, her cheeks growing pink.

He looked down at her, the implications of his actions taking full root in his mind. He hadn’t brought her to his bedchamber for any other reason than because he did not want to be separated from her—both while she was being seen by the doctor and for the remainder of the night. He needn’t search his mind too heavily for an explanation. It was clear he cared for her.

No one had thought of him so deeply in as long as he could remember. His family was gone, his father dead, his friends—well, he didn’t have many of those, did he? Keeping his estate from utter ruin had consumed him for years, and he was tired. Mounting the stairs in search of Mercy earlier and finding the railing swathed in greenery, holly berries, and Christmas cheer had initially filled him with an overwhelming sense of joy—until he’d found her in the drawing room and concern had smothered all other feelings.

Mercy was a paragon, as Lady Edith was apt to say. The act of considering others was a simple gift but among the most powerful. Mercy’s charitable mind was not limited to sick baskets and lending assistance; it was richly embroiled in the way she carried herself and thought of others. She had consistently proven this, caring for people regardless of their status—servants and husbands alike. Which gave Colin pause, because he could not assume her kindness meant she felt anything out of the ordinary for him.

But he knew what he felt for her. He loved his woman. He would do anything for her.

And that meant explaining himself without frightening or overwhelming her with his bursting feelings. “I hoped to keep watch over you this evening,” he said gently. “If that makes you uncomfortable, I will help you across the corridor.”

She peered at him, searching his face as though attempting to read his thoughts. “I am not uncomfortable with you, Colin.”

His heart felt as though it had lifted, as though his entire body had filled with a cloud. He moved closer, lowering himself to perch on the edge of her bed. Laying his hand over hers, he held her green-eyed gaze. “I have not been an understanding man, but I promise to do better.”

She let out a soft breath. “I have not taken your warnings to heart, and I will do better as well. We both could have listened better to the other person, I think.”

“That we could.” His gaze dropped to her lips, so pink and full. He wanted to kiss her, the urge to lean forward and close the gap pressing into his heart. But he could not be the one to make the first step, not when he had given her that power shortly after their wedding. It wasn’t right to take advantage of her freshly on the heels of her distress and injury.

With great restraint, Colin tore his gaze from her lips and leaned back, offering his best version of a smile. “Rest well, Mercy.”

She seemed to sigh and nestled back against the pillows. “Thank you, Colin.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Mercy slept for most of the afternoon, only waking when Dorothy brought her a tray of tea and broth with a roll. “Mrs. Johns says you might have some bread, madam, but first you need to have the broth. Doctor’s orders.”

Her stomach had roiled since she’d awakened, so she was in agreement with this plan. “Thank you, Dorothy.”

Mercy sat up in bed, pushing the pillows behind her until she found a semblance of comfort, then let the tray rest over her legs. The room was dim—only a small fire graced the hearth, the sunlight disappearing quickly behind the hills. She sipped at the broth and tea for a good while before nibbling on the bread, feeling better as her stomach filled with warm food.

Dorothy tidied the room before slipping away without building up the fire, leaving Mercy in the quiet. She found it strange, but the bed was plenty warm, so she did not call Dorothy to return. Her headache had abated somewhat, the broth and rest both going a long way to make her feel better .

When a light knock came at the door, she wiped her mouth, then lowered her napkin to her lap. “Enter.”

Colin appeared, standing in the doorway. “Are you feeling better?”

“A little, yes. It’s only this wretched headache, but I believe it will go away soon. It is already much improved.” She lifted her tea and took a sip.

He opened the door fully and nodded to whoever stood behind him in the corridor.

Lewis and Duncan entered the room, carrying a large cut log between the two of them.

Mercy put down her teacup. “What is all this?”

“Our Yule log,” Colin said simply. “I did not think it wise for you to leave the room this evening, so I decided we ought to bring it here. We can enjoy it together.”

She was at a loss for words. The caring and thoughtful gesture was too much. “Oh, Colin.”

He looked at her shrewdly, crossing to stand at the head of the bed. The footmen situated the log in the hearth and left the room, closing the door behind themselves. “It does not upset you, does it? I asked Mrs. Johns to send wassail up, and Dorothy managed to bring in some garland while you were asleep, but if it is too much?—”

“It is perfect,” she said, her throat clogging. It was then Mercy looked at the fireplace mantle and noticed garland gathered on it, punctuated by brass candle holders with tall, white tapers. Bright green holly, dotted with red berries, was woven into the pine boughs. Now that she was aware of it, she could faintly smell the sharp woodsy aroma. It looked familiar—likely because she had made it. “Is this from the drawing room?”

“I removed everything you put in the drawing room and brought it here. Until the ceiling is fixed, I would feel better if we stayed out of that room. Next Christmas will be different.”

Mercy’s cheeks warmed. She knew she had made a mistake and underestimated the extent of the danger in the drawing room. That Colin had been thoughtful enough to

retrieve her decorations and bring them to her made her entire body flush with warmth. “You’ve done this for me?”

He looked sheepish. “I should have shown greater appreciation for the work you did to make Winterbourne look so lovely for Christmastide. It’s beautiful.”

“Thank you, Colin.”

“Would you like to remain there while I light it?” he asked, looking at her with an edge of concern.

“I will join you.” She set the tray to the side. “We ought to take some holly from the garland.”

Colin came to her side, reaching for her hand to help her stand. She waited a moment for her head to clear, holding tightly to him. She had remained in the same gown she was wearing when the plaster fell, which meant she didn’t need to fetch a dressing gown. There was a slight chill in the air, but they would soon be sitting before a roaring fire.

He kept hold of her hand, leading her to the foot of the bed. “I will fetch a chair?”

“You needn’t bother,” she said. “I do not mind sitting on the rug.”

He looked uncertain, so Mercy drew her hand from his and smoothed her skirt before sitting comfortably before the hearth.

Colin didn’t argue. He set to work, pulling a few sprigs of holly and pine from the garland and laying them over the Yule log .

“Shall we sing?” she asked.

“If you’d like.” Colin pulled out a lighting box and looked down at her. There was a peaceful expression on his face and his gaze was direct. “Do you have a song in mind?”

“Perhaps ‘The First Noel’ would be appropriate.”

His lips quirked up on one side, flashing the dimple she loved so much. “You may lead us.” He crouched and lit the kindling while Mercy started singing.

The song filled the room, Colin joining his deep voice with Mercy’s soprano as the fire grew. Once he was certain the fire had caught, he moved to join Mercy on the rug. They finished their song as the log caught fire, the holly and the pine burning quickly after four days of drying out.

Fire crackled when the song was over, the only sound in the room the popping of the log.

“Merry Christmas, Mercy,” he said quietly, his gaze drawing away from the fire and landing on her. “You mentioned earlier I ought to have chosen a different wife—that Sophia is biddable and beautiful.”

Her stomach constricted, and she felt an anxious pattering in her chest at this shift in the conversation. During their contentious arguing, she’d felt a steady thrum of fear, wondering if he would agree with her. They had not consummated their marriage after all, which meant it was possible—difficult and unlikely, but possible—to obtain an absolution of their marriage. She had grown to care for Colin over the span of their short marriage thus far. She had admired him for so many years, but her feelings had grown with the simple steps he’d taken over the previous weeks to show her he cared enough to try. Weeding in the garden with her, taking her to Bath, their dance at the assemblies .

She did not want for him to find any reason to leave her—physically or emotionally. Even so, she could not pretend to be anything other than who she was. “I am many things, Colin, but biddable is not one of them. I can heed instruction?—”

“Can you?” he asked, eyebrows raised.

“Well, reasonable instruction, yes. I will admit that our communication could be greatly improved. If we had only spoken more, discussed our reasons, perhaps we would have understood one another far sooner.”

“We are in agreement there.” He turned to face her better, his face glowing from the flames’ light. “In an effort to communicate better and avoid further misconceptions, it is important to note that I never desired a biddable wife, nor did I expect you to be such. My preconceived notions of what the mistress of Winterbourne ought to be did not mean I expected you to do everything I asked, Mercy. It was merely an expectation of how you would step into that role, not how obedient you would be.”

The distinction was important, and she appreciated it.

Colin reached for her hand, holding it in both of his. His thumbs brushed against her knuckles, his eyes glued to them. “You are perfect, Mercy, just as you are. You are kind, you are charitable, you make me laugh—all important things according to Lady Edith and, if I am being honest, important to me. My aunt must have known precisely what I both needed and wanted when she wrote that letter.” He lifted his gaze. “Above that, you are very beautiful. If I have given you reason to suspect I believe otherwise, it was unconsciously done. It has been a trial these last few weeks not to kiss you, but with how quickly we were married, I had hoped to allow you time to find your place here and become comfortable.” His cheeks appeared flushed. “I was attempting to be a gentleman.”

Her heart raced. Beautiful? So he had not put her off because he could not stomach

the thought of kissing her? She blinked away the emotion clouding her eyes and hoped he could not feel the pounding of her pulse in her hand. “I did not know.”

“We have not had the smoothest of beginnings, Mercy. I do hope we can learn from our mistakes and find a way to make this marriage richer and better in the future.”

Given the way they had both improved already since their disagreement in the drawing room, she believed it was very likely they would find their way to an exceedingly happy and communicative marriage. If Colin had only been waiting for her to feel comfortable in order to kiss him, then Mercy believed she ought to show him exactly how comfortable she had become.

She turned her hand in his and tugged lightly, pulling him closer. He leaned in, as though he understood the directive, and she reached up to cup his strong jaw, her fingers gently laying against the skin of his cheek. He looked at her lips, and she knew at once she had not imagined the same earlier. “I have wanted to kiss you for years, Colin.”

He froze, his eyes meeting hers. “Years?”

“Yes. I’ve long had feelings for you, but I thought myself destined to remain a spinster. You seemed to have eyes for no one but your house.”

“It needed much of my attention,” he murmured, as though he was distracted.

Her heart panged, thinking of him alone in this echoing building, his family and servants leaving him for other, better places while he sacrificed so much to keep the estate intact. He deserved to have someone think of him, consider his feelings, and appreciate his work. “I love you, Colin.”

He searched her gaze, his breathing suspended. In a movement both fluid and swift,

he dropped her hand and cupped her face, drawing her closer and pressing his lips to hers. Her eyes fluttered closed while waves of heat billowed through her. Time suspended as Colin kissed her, exploring her mouth while his hand slipped to her back, urging her closer. She no longer felt the heat of the fire nor heard the sound of the crackling log—nothing but the all-consuming feeling of being in his arms.

Mercy's chest burst with warmth, her body flushing as Colin pressed his lips to her jaw and took her lips again. He held her steady while her heart threatened to explode, his lips tenderly brushing hers over and over again, each time a new angle. He pulled her closer and deepened the kiss, making her lightheaded with joy.

She leaned back, chest heaving, and looked at him.

Colin dropped his forehead to rest lightly on hers, his fingers pressing into her back. "That was well worth waiting for, Mercy." He tilted his head to look at her. "You have been worth waiting for. I love you. Can we begin anew?"

"I wouldn't wish to forget the last few weeks. I greatly enjoyed my time with Lady Edith, and I think we both learned a great deal about each other that will prove useful in the years to come." She grinned impishly. "I would not mind if you forgot the idea that you ought to wait for my approval to kiss me."

"Consider it forgotten," he said, and leaned in to kiss her again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

On Christmas morning, Mercy walked into the church on her husband's arm and immediately found her mother sitting beside Grace. They made their way to the pew near the front of the building. "Merry Christmas," she said, unable to dampen her smile.

Mama stood, reaching for her. "Merry Christmas, darling."

Colin seemed loath to release her, but he did so, allowing her to embrace her mother, then Grace.

Mama stepped back to allow them room to sit on the same pew, but she was watchful, her eyes narrowing. She glanced between them. "Something has changed."

Mercy decided not to respond to this. That her mother could clearly see a difference between one-sided attachment and confessions of love was not lost on her, but she did not wish to point out how she had been dishonest on her wedding day. While she had not loved Colin yet, not truly, she had cared for him then.

Now, however, her heart was near to bursting with returned affection, which felt wholly different. To be loved in return was a joy she had not expected to experience.

Colin settled beside her on the pew. "Must we sing today?"

"Papa is expecting it. You ought not to have expressed your interest in his violin if you did not wish to be pulled into the choir."

He muttered something unintelligible, but given the dimple popping in his cheek, she could see he was genuinely happy.

Mercy rested her hand on the bench seat between them as her father took his place in front of the congregation and welcomed them to the Christmas service. She felt Colin's hand come down over hers, and despite the layers of gloves separating them, warmth coursed through her body at the touch. A smile fell over her lips, and she relaxed into her place beside Colin, holding his hand throughout the sermon.

"Who would have known it, Mercy?" Mrs. Hoopes asked, her eyes wide, her head subtly shaking. They stood in the churchyard, the snow creating a blanket of white over the tombstones and the rock wall that ran the length of the perimeter. It was cold, and Mercy could already feel her nose turning red and her patience ebbing.

She looked behind her, but Colin was still speaking to Mr. Fairfax, who had apparently recovered enough to attend church this morning, looking very much the worse for wear. His skin was pale, dark circles pooling beneath his eyes.

Mrs. Hoopes's attention was direct, recalling Mercy to the conversation at hand. "Can you believe it was only last month we had spoken of Grace's engagement? I did not believe it when I heard you were going to marry Mr. Birchall, but everything seems to have come out all right, hasn't it?"

Mercy gave a stiff nod. "He has proven to be an excellent husband."

"I do not doubt you have been a wonderful wife, Mercy. You have always had such a caring disposition. If not for you bringing your mother's jelly, I do not think Mr. Hoopes would have recovered enough to sing today with the choir." For all her gossiping, Mrs. Hoopes sounded distinctly authentic in her gratitude.

"We are all grateful Mr. Hoopes felt able to sing today. 'Angels We Have Heard On

High' was a beautiful addition to the service."

Mrs. Hoopes preened. "Thank you, Mercy. Or shall I call you Mrs. Birchall now?"

Mercy could not dampen her smile, feeling the soft push of forgiveness entering her heart. "I do like my new name very much."

Mrs. Hoopes leaned in slightly, wearing a conspiratorial grin that was more endearing than the situation warranted. "Very well. Merry Christmas, Mrs. Birchall."

Despite herself, Mercy liked that exchange very much. She returned the season's greeting and moved to search for her husband. She didn't need to look far. Colin was still speaking to Mr. Fairfax.

Grace approached and took her hand, pulling her away from the crowd of lingering parishioners before she was forced to approach the men. "I was wrong."

"About what?" Mercy asked, her eyes darting to where Colin stood only a few feet away, his back to her .

"You." Grace shook her head and frowned. "I thought you were only marrying Colin to ruin my engagement." Her cheeks went pink. "I can hear how silly that sounds, to say nothing of the fact that it is not in your nature to act so bitterly."

"It was not an unreasonable thought, given the timing," Mercy said with what she believed to be a healthy dose of charity. "I've long admired Colin, but I did not share my feelings with anyone. You could not have known."

Grace gave a soft scoff. "I should have seen it earlier. He clearly adores you."

"Clearly?" Mercy asked, surprised by her choice of words.

Grace's dark eyebrow lifted suggestively. "Do not think I missed the way he helped you into your coat before we left to deliver Mama's shortbread, or the way he held your hand during Papa's service. That man very obviously adores you. I am glad you've found love, Mercy. Forgive me for refusing to hear reason."

Mercy pulled Grace in for a hug. "I love you, Grace. To think, a few weeks from now your husband can hold your hand during Papa's service."

Grace grinned. "I cannot wait."

"But the man is ridiculous," Mr. Fairfax said, scoffing. He spoke loudly enough for both women to hear him, and Grace and Mercy looked his way in unison. "You cannot expect me to believe you are glad to have him for a father-in-law."

Mercy's stomach dropped. Did Mr. Fairfax realize how his voice carried? She counted it a blessing Papa was still inside the church, likely caught up speaking to another parishioner.

"That is precisely what I expect, for it is the truth," Colin said sharply. "Furthermore, I will assume your illness has addled your good sense and will give you the opportunity to rephrase your sentiments."

Mr. Fairfax's face turned dark red, his eyes darting between Colin and Sophia. He took his daughter by the arm. "Good day, Mr. Birchall," he said stiffly, withholding an apology. They walked away together.

Colin let out an irritated huff.

Grace gripped Mercy's arm and leaned close. "He is a good man, Mercy."

"Yes," she agreed, her heart bursting with warmth. "He is." She left her sister's side

and approached Colin.

When he glanced down at her, he was frowning. The expression quickly shifted to one of delight, as though he was happy to see her. “Are you ready to leave?” he asked. “I need to find your father and invite your family to dine with us tonight, though I imagine it is too late for them to accept an invitation.”

“We should have done so weeks ago.” She was certain Cook had already prepared a veritable Christmas feast, but it could not hurt to extend the invitation.

“Indeed,” he muttered, reaching for her hand. She liked that he seemed to always want to be touching her. It made her feel wanted in a way she had not experienced before in her life.

Yes, Mercy had always been needed, but being wanted was far superior.

They walked to the other side of the church, where Mama was speaking to Mrs. Brooks.

“You needn’t worry, dear,” Mrs. Brooks was saying. “You can hardly be blamed for missing the knitting circle when you’ve had two daughters to marry off in such little time. Surely you are exhausted beyond all measure. Now, do tell me when Mr. Raybourne is expected to return? He has not left Grace jilted, I hope.”

Mama gave a tight smile and noticed Mercy waiting behind Mrs. Brooks. “If you will excuse me.” She circumvented the gossiping old biddy and came to Mercy’s side. “Sometimes it is better to pretend you did not hear a question at all.”

“It is certainly effective,” Mercy said, noticing Mrs. Brooks’ confusion as she left to find other willing ears.

“We understand we have waited too long to extend the invitation, but we were hoping you would join us for dinner this evening,” Colin said, his thumb rubbing over the back of Mercy’s gloved hand while he spoke.

Mama looked between them. “We wouldn’t wish to impose.”

“We have more than enough,” Mercy said. “I’m certain Cook has already made an effort?—”

“She’s made nothing,” Mama said, shaking her head. “The poor dear is ill. I’ve given her some of my restorative jelly, of course, and set her up with a tea tray, but she’s abed. Whatever has been traveling around Millcombe finally made its way into our house. I wasn’t certain what I was going to do for Christmas dinner.”

“Then you will spend it with us, I hope,” Colin said.

Mama turned a wide smile on him. “We would love that, if you are certain it is not an imposition.”

“I am certain,” he confirmed.

Mama appeared relieved. “Lovely. What time shall we be there? ”

“Come whenever you’d like. Dinner is at six, but perhaps we can play bullet pudding or charades beforehand.”

When Mama walked away to find Papa, Mercy leaned back, appraising her husband. “You hate that game.”

He looked in her eyes, where she detected a sparkle of amusement, but his face remained passive. “Do I?”

“Yes, emphatically. You believe it is for children, if I recall correctly.”

“You might.” He tugged a little on her hand, causing her to step closer, her shoulder butting up to his side. “Yet my aunt gave me some advice I feel I ought to heed. All her other advice worked well for me in the past, anyway.”

“What advice was that?” she asked.

“To allow myself to become a little messy.”

Mercy shook her head, her smile widening. “Very well. I’m certain Grace would play with us. It is only a pity your sister is not here to witness it.”

Colin released her hand to slide his arm around her waist, apparently not heeding the crowd of parishioners around them or what anyone might think. He pressed a kiss to her temple. “Honora will have her chance. There is always next year.”

Mercy leaned into her husband, feeling for all the world like everything had worked out exactly as it was meant to. She couldn’t have been happier.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Bullet pudding was exactly as messy as Colin had recalled, and he enjoyed it as much as he had expected, especially with a full belly from Mrs. Johns' delicious meal making him heavy and sluggish. He should be in his library, drinking port, not down in the kitchen playing children's games. How he had convinced himself to make this happen, he did not know. The entire ordeal had been his idea.

Mercy and Grace were perched across from him at the worktable in the kitchen, their eyes gleaming. The worst of the lot was Mr. Caldwell, who stood beside Colin with his hands pressed together in glee. The man was a menace.

"I thought you would be on my side," Colin muttered. "We men ought to stick together."

"Not in a game, son," Mr. Caldwell argued. "That is when it becomes every man for himself."

Colin gave his father-in-law a heavy look. "I shall remember that when we are teamed up for charades later."

Mr. Caldwell laughed heartily.

Colin had put it off for too long. He'd made the coin fall with his careless cutting of the flour, and now it was time to find it with his teeth. He dove in, face first, and rooted around until his nose hit the coin. It took some maneuvering, but he got the metal bit in his teeth and raised his face to the clapping and cheers all around him.

Mrs. Johns had even joined in from her position near the stove, if his sight could be relied upon. Currently it was a little addled by the flour.

Mercy's laugh broke through the noise. She approached him and picked the coin from between his teeth. "Well done."

"I told you I would lose." His mouth was dry and his skin gritty with powder.

"You should be more positive. Perhaps it would help you next time." She wiped his face with a small dry towel, removing the flour from his eyelashes and making it easier for him to see her wide, beaming smile. At once, it was all worth it.

Lady Edith had been correct in her advice again. Allowing himself to become a little messy had been a wonderful idea—he did not regret it in the least, and Mercy, it seemed, had loved it after all.

"If you'd like to change, we can wait for you in the library," she said.

"That isn't necessary." He took the towel from her and wiped at his shoulders. "I can do a well enough job of dusting off here."

"Shall I fetch my feather duster?" she offered.

He laughed. "That won't be necessary."

"Mama should have joined us," Grace said, beginning to gather the flour on the counter and return it to the bowl. If there was one thing to be said for the Caldwell women, they did not wait around to be told what to do. When they saw a task, they stepped in without a word.

"Your mother likely enjoyed her moment of peace," Mr. Caldwell said. He winked at

Mrs. Johns. “That was one of the best dinners we’ve had in a good long while, but don’t anyone go mentioning it to Cook.”

“You flatter me, Vicar,” Mrs. Johns said, but her rosy cheeks betrayed her pleasure all the same.

“I will return to your mother so she is not waiting alone,” Mr. Caldwell said, then left for the stairs.

Colin accepted a second clean towel from Mercy and wiped his face and forehead. He’d underestimated his father-in-law. Though he had never questioned the man’s spiritual leadership, he had wondered at his methods for ministering and connecting with his parish. Now he could plainly see that none of Mr. Caldwell’s joviality precluded him from doing his job, and his teasing disposition was only that—a silliness that could be put aside when needed.

Mercy took the towel from his hands and spun him, then dusted his shoulders from the back. “How did you manage to cover yourself so thoroughly?”

“It is a skill of mine,” he said drily.

“You need a valet to work through this coat later,” Mercy muttered. “You should have added that position to the list to begin with.”

“Perhaps, but I was more concerned with filling the other positions first. I’d been without a valet for so long, it hadn’t seemed necessary.” Which was the truth, but he had also believed it would be difficult to find someone who could maintain his clothing the way he liked it. Mixing his own polish and keeping his clothing pristine took a great deal of time, but at least he knew it was being done right .

Mercy looked at him. “That cannot be the only reason. I can see it on your face now.”

He blushed. She would think him ridiculous, surely.

Grace finished cleaning up the flour and left to find a broom.

“I am very particular, Mercy,” he whispered. “I did not want to go to the trouble of hiring someone, only to send them away because they could not complete my toilette to my specifications.”

Mercy shook her head. “That is why you teach them.”

Grace returned with a broom and Lydia followed her from the stillroom, gently taking it. “Let me finish this up, madam.”

“Thank you, Lydia,” Mercy said. “Shall we join Mama too?”

Colin felt he was as clean as he was going to become without a bath, so he put the second towel with the first and followed Mercy and Grace upstairs. When he’d decided to ask Mercy to marry him, he had come to the conclusion that he could very well put up with the oddities of her family for the sake of a good marriage and Lady Edith’s promised fortune. He’d had no notion at the time that he had been so wrong, that her family was one of the things he would grow to appreciate in their arrangement. It had been so long since he’d had family in this house—four long years of quiet.

Mr. Caldwell’s laugh and Mrs. Caldwell’s stories at dinner and Grace’s teasing had filled their dining room with more than just bodies to share a Christmas dinner with. They had filled Colin’s heart.

A fire roared in the library hearth, shining against the waxy holly leaves and fading red berries on the mantle garland. Mrs. Caldwell’s cheeks were flushed and she’d moved to a seat further from the fireplace, but Grace eagerly took the place nearest

the hearth.

Colin sat on the settee opposite them, glad when Mercy lowered herself close to his side.

“Shall we play charades?” Grace asked, grinning. “I’ll have you know that my Mr. Raybourne is absolutely brilliant at charades. When he returns to town, we shall have to prove it.”

Mercy’s hand found Colin’s and entwined their fingers. “We’ll play charades, but only if Mama agrees to go first.”

They looked to their mother, who gave a long-suffering sigh before pilfering a ginger biscuit from the plate on the small table between her chair and Mr. Caldwell’s. “Very well. Anything for my darling girl.”

Colin squeezed Mercy’s fingers as the exact same thought went through his mind. Anything for you, Mercy.

There had been a time last month, after Colin had first proposed marriage, when Mercy had the uncharitable thought that she would be happy to have a long break from needing to see her family. Grace had offended her with her refusal to accept that Mercy’s engagement was anything less than a spiteful maneuver. It had hurt to know her sister viewed her so callously. Not wanting to be the final Caldwell girl to marry had influenced her acceptance, but the speed at which they were married had nothing to do with it. That was entirely Colin’s doing.

Now, after waving farewell while they bundled close together for the walk back to the vicarage—Papa had outright refused Colin’s carriage on the grounds that a brisk walk home would be faster than the time it took to ready the horses—Mercy could not imagine Christmas without them.

They closed the door and locked the bolt. Mercy faced Colin and was overcome with a surge of affection for him.

“What is it?” he asked with some suspicion, tilting his head.

Mercy swallowed a laugh and stepped forward into his arms, threading her hands behind his back and resting her head on his chest.

He immediately returned the embrace, tightening his hold around her. “What is this for?”

“Thank you for inviting my family, Colin. I didn’t realize how much that would mean to me, but it was better than I could have imagined.”

“They were the family I needed as well,” he said.

The reality of his feelings hit her like a sudden snowball. “You felt loved.”

“I did. It was not difficult, Mercy. I felt appreciated.”

“You are,” she said, squeezing his waist tightly.

Colin pressed a kiss to her temple. “I love you, Mercy Birchall.”

She tilted her head back and looked in his hazel eyes, brimming with tenderness. Then she kissed him and thought of nothing else.

EPILOGUE

THREE YEARS LATER

Colin paced in front of his bedchamber, wringing his hands. He stopped in front of the door, listened closely, then kept walking until a wail pierced the silence. Dr. Vance's voice came muffled through the door, and Colin couldn't make out what he was saying.

Mercy was making a habit of needing the doctor on Christmas Eve. First, it had been because of the falling debris in the drawing room. The following year, it had been because of a terrible bout of illness that had forced her to remain bedridden despite the house being full of both Mercy's family and Colin's family. Then she had sprained her ankle attempting to tie a kissing bough high above the drawing room door. This year, she had decided Christmas Eve was the perfect day to have a baby.

He shook off the thought. Of course Mercy hadn't chosen this day in particular to welcome their first child, but it was a little ridiculous that Dr. Vance had been required for the fourth Christmas Eve in a row.

Colin worried what next year might bring.

He closed his eyes and slumped against the wall. It had taken over two years for Mercy to become pregnant, and the anticipation of being a father had finally reached a head. He was going mad not being at her side.

The door to their bedchamber opened and Dorothy poked her head into the corridor.

“Mr. Birchall?”

He lost the ability to breathe. “Is the baby?—”

A cry pierced the calm night air and sent a cold flush through his body. It was so young, so sweet, so... his . That was Colin’s child.

“Can I go to Mercy?” he asked.

Dorothy struggled to minimize her smile. “In a few minutes. She’s feeding the baby first.”

He nodded, and she disappeared to the sound of his child’s wails cutting through the quiet house. Waiting was agony. When the door opened again, he forced himself not to charge through.

“The doctor said you can go to her now,” Dorothy said.

Colin rushed into the room, his heart in his throat. Mercy lay on their bed, her cheeks and neck flushed, her copper hair sweaty and streaked against her cheek. But her eyes were bright, and she had never glowed quite like she did at that moment.

He hurried to her side, his gaze dropping to the bundle in her arms.

“She still needs to be cleaned properly,” Mercy said, and he could hear the exhaustion in her voice.

She . They had a daughter .

“I’ll just be off now,” Dr. Vance said with a tired smile. “Baby is healthy. Well done, Mrs. Birchall.”

Colin shook the doctor's hand. "Thank you, sir."

Dr. Vance gave a nod before slipping from the room.

Colin perched on the mattress beside Mercy, looking down at the dark-eyed baby. She squished her face into a grumpy frown before it flattened out and her lips pursed. "She's perfect," he said. "What shall we name her?"

Mercy's eyes met his. "How do you feel about Noel?"

"Noel," he repeated, trying the name on his tongue. It was beautiful. She was a Christmas baby, so he supposed it made sense.

"She's finished eating, Dorothy," Mercy said, getting her maid's attention. "If you could finish cleaning her now?"

"Of course, madam."

Dorothy took the baby to the other side of the room, where bowls of clean water and rags were waiting.

"Do you recall our first Christmas together? The way you brought the Yule log into our room because I could not leave my bed?"

"How could I forget? It was the first time you kissed me." He grinned. "Our wedding did not count."

"No, I don't think it did, either," she agreed. "Well, when you were preparing the Yule log and lighting it, we sang."

"The First Noel, I remember," he said.

“That was the moment I realized how deeply I loved you, Colin, but it was also when I felt loved by you. That song will always be a particular favorite of mine.”

His eyes grew misty as he recalled that night, and he reached for her hand, leaning forward to kiss her gently on the mouth. “I think Noel is a perfect name. ”

“Do you? I worried you would find it strange. We’ll need to use it during the rest of the year too.”

“Why? We can change her name with the seasons, surely,” he quipped.

“My, my, Mr. Birchall. You are making jokes.”

“It comes with the relief of knowing you are all right, darling,” he said. Glancing over his shoulder, he moved aside to make room for Noel as Dorothy brought her back to them. “And knowing this little bundle has safely arrived.”

“Would you like to hold her, Mr. Birchall?” Dorothy asked, unsure whom to hand the baby to.

He nodded, taking the tightly wrapped baby into his arms. He felt a little awkward at first, uncertain how to position his hands. She nestled against his chest perfectly, allowing him to relax.

“She’s perfect,” he whispered, not wanting to wake Noel. “Thank you, Mercy.”

“For what, exactly?” she asked, lying back against her pillows and closing her eyes.

“For being mine. For giving me this angel.”

She opened her eyes then. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas to both of my darlings.” He leaned down to leave a lingering kiss on her lips before pressing a soft kiss to Noel’s forehead. Then he moved toward the chair near the fireplace and settled in, holding his baby so his wife could sleep. Colin had never felt more content in his life.

“Colin?”

“Yes?”

“What is a constant presence through thin and thick; my source of joy, the one I pick; a partner in life, come what may; who makes me smile and brightens my day? ”

He looked endearingly down at her. “You’ve gone soft, Mercy. That one is easy.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. It’s clearly Mrs. Hoopes.”

Mercy laughed, her face alighting with amusement.

Colin smiled at her, nestling into his seat. “Mercy?”

“Yes?”

“I love you, too.”