



THE DUKE
HUNTERS CLUB

*The Duke
Before
Christmas*

BIANCA
BLYTHE

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THE DUKE BEFORE CHRISTMAS



SHE ACCIDENTALLY PROPOSED to a duke... then he accepted.

Marriage was only supposed to be a business arrangement; Portia wasn't supposed to fall in love. But then, Colin North, the Duke of Brightling, wasn't supposed to board the ship to Guernsey either.

Unfortunately, Portia isn't informed about a clause of her late father's will that stipulates that if she doesn't marry by the end of the year she will lose her inheritance, until it is almost too late. She must find a husband herself—one who is not picky and requires money. Fortunately, she finds just the person.

Colin North, the Duke of Brightling, does not require a bride. But when he mistakenly takes the cabin of Portia's new betrothed on a ship bound for Guernsey, and she insists he marry her, he decides he may as well accept her offer. There's something appealing about her, and he can't abide the thought of ruining her life. After a decade of being chased by matchmaking mamas and simpering debutantes, it's a relief to find someone who doesn't know he's wealthy and titled.

Then the chaos begins.

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CHAPTER ONE



PORTIA TATE DASHED through the foyer toward the steps leading to her bedroom, ignoring the butler's disgruntled look. Cranston cleared his throat noisily. The sound thundered through the room, as if he were practicing for the stage. The butler had long ago mastered the art of gravitas and was always finding opportunities to showcase it.

Portia swallowed her sigh and turned toward him. He gave a smug smile, as if she should applaud his discretion, even though Portia personally would prefer he simply say her name when he desired to speak with her.

"Sir Vincent would like to see you," Cranston said soberly.

"Thank you, Cranston."

"He's in the library."

Portia nodded. She shouldn't have spent so much time at Daisy's.

"Perhaps you should tell him that I'm here," Portia suggested. "I know it's evening now. I'm—er—sorry I'm late."

"*Everyone* is sorry you're late."

Portia's cheeks heated. "I haven't forgotten about the ball. I'll be down soon."

"I suggest you change your clothes. Mrs. Jones is waiting for you upstairs. There is no need to damage Sir Vincent's library."

"Er—naturally. Thank you, Cranston. I'll be right down." Portia gave Cranston a bright smile, but the butler's face didn't echo her expression.

Portia turned to the staircase and reminded herself she was happy, no matter if, after over a year, Sir Vincent's servants still viewed her with suspicion.

She was lucky Sir Vincent had taken her in after her parents died. Other guardians wouldn't have moved to London so she might have a season.

She moved up the staircase, careful to lift her hem to lessen the possibility of mud spread, though not to a degree that might cause Cranston's thick eyebrows to make any further athletic ventures across his lofty brow.

Sir Vincent had bought the townhouse for his new, now dead, bride, and there was something appealing about the high ceilings and white moldings, so prevalent in the 1790s. Unfortunately, Sir Vincent had never spent much time in it after that, and had filled it with heavy dark wood furniture from two centuries ago, the ones which he thought might be comfortably transported from his estate in Northumberland without excessive worry about the risk of highwaymen and treacherous ditches.

The dark furniture squatted awkwardly, as if uncomfortable against the painted walls, and suspicious of the occasional gilt embellishment.

Portia flung her bedroom door open and forced her features to form an apologetic look.

Her lady's maid rose from a wooden chair and shoved a book into the pocket of her skirt. Portia's stomach sank. No doubt, Jonesie had been waiting far too long. On the bed lay Portia's yellow gown.

"I'm so sorry I'm late, Jonesie," Portia said.

Jonesie's blue eyes shimmered. "It's fine." She patted her skirt and leaned toward Portia. "I was reading a book."

"Was it a good one?"

"It had an adventure on the seas, and a handsome hero."

“That sounds splendid.” Portia said as Jonesie helped her undress. “Daisy and I lost track of time. I hurried through Hyde Park—but got a bit lost.”

“You went there in the dark?” Jonesie halted unbuttoning Portia’s afternoon gown, as if Portia’s statement had been sufficiently shocking to render them to stone like in some Nordic legend. “I assumed a carriage had dropped you here.”

Fiddlesticks.

“It wasn’t dark most of the time. And I wasn’t *that* lost.”

Gusts of wind blustered noisily, filling the silence.

“Do you *want* to attend the ball?”

“It would be terrible to stay in the house,” Portia replied.

For a moment, Portia thought her lady’s maid might protest. After all, Portia had only just arrived from a lengthy visit with her dear friend Daisy. Instead, Jonesie inhaled, as if being in the same room as Portia required copious quantities of oxygen. “Very well, Miss.”

Jonesie assisted Portia into the shimmering yellow fabric.

“I doubt Sir Vincent would mind if you desired to stay home after all,” Jonesie mused.

“Nonsense,” Portia said. “I already wrote Sir Seymour’s wife that I would come. I can hardly *not* make an appearance.”

“Yes, she is bound to be overwrought with despair should you be absent.” Jonesie brushed Portia’s hair firmly, then pulled it into a simple chignon.

Portia stared at Jonesie. “Was that irony?”

A sense of humor was not something she associated with Jonesie. Nobody in Sir Vincent’s house laughed.

Her maid gave a tight smile and finished arranging Portia’s hair.

Finally, Portia exited her room and proceeded down the steps.

Cranston assessed her, and she shivered. Perhaps she’d lived here for over a year, ever since leaving finishing school, but the servants still made her feel like she was a bumbling, unwelcome guest. When she’d arrived, she’d imagined marrying a peer, and having all the servants marvel that they’d underestimated her. She’d imagined men calling at the house, and Sir Vincent escorting them into the drawing room for tea and interrogation.

But no dashing peers carrying glossy black walking sticks had ever arrived.

Nobody had arrived.

Her heart clenched. No doubt, Sir Vincent simply wanted to speak to her about something trivial. Perhaps he didn’t want to remain in London for Christmas.

Or perhaps he doesn’t want me to have another season.

She should have found someone to marry her. That was why Sir Vincent had taken her to dressmakers to get fashionable clothes.

In truth, the clothes would have been more fashionable if they’d waited until they’d arrived in London to purchase them. Apparently, the styles the dressmakers lauded in Newcastle were not the same ones typically seen in London ballrooms. Portia had suspected that, since *Matchmaking for Wallflowers* and similar material aimed at women had extolled dresses with wide hems, equipped with abundant flounces and ribbons.

Still, Sir Vincent had liked the idea of Portia dressing like a Greek goddess, and Portia had acquiesced to the dressmaker’s enthusiasm.

London had reacted with less enthusiasm. Apparently, Greek goddesses were considered dull. Since Portia could hardly go about telling people about the time she’d clambered from her school

window in order to visit the nearby village for a festivity, or the time she'd spent playing with the neighborhood boys over summers when her father was still alive, long after they'd begun attending Harrow, she had to allow herself to be called such things.

Dull. Provincial.

Fortunately, other members of her finishing school were also debutantes, though unfortunately, most of them were now married.

Next season she wouldn't have the advantage of being new. There would be a slew of younger women, with fresher faces, whose eyes sparkled more at the majesty of each ballroom, for whom the exact pattern on the ceilings would be novel.

Portia sighed and entered the library.

Sir Vincent glanced at her from his red leather armchair. "Have a seat, my dear."

"Very well." Her voice squeaked, even though her nervousness was absurd. Sir Vincent had taken her in after her father had died. Perhaps he never chuckled, and perhaps his eyes never twinkled, but he was a kind man.

She'd been lucky to have him as a guardian. Other people had fared worse when their parents had died. Some people had considered it odd he was unmarried, but it was hardly his fault his wife had died. Death was a misfortune and not an etiquette lapse. Perhaps Sir Vincent had never had his own children, but that was the sort of thing that happened when one's wife died in childbirth. It was a tragedy, not lessened by the normalness of it. People seemed more drawn to stories of winter drownings in lakes that were less frozen than they appeared or malaises brought on by unassuming insects crawling about the banks of the Nile.

Portia was fortunate her father's cousin had taken her in. Certainly, she hadn't had any other relatives. Father had been wise to arrange for Sir Vincent to be her guardian, should anything unseemly happen to him.

Unfortunately, it had.

Portia sat opposite her guardian. "Cranston mentioned you wanted to speak with me. I was late. I'm sorry."

"Oh, I didn't want to discuss that," Sir Vincent said, and Portia's back eased.

"My aim is to make you happy," Sir Vincent continued.

Portia nodded.

This wasn't the first time Sir Vincent had said this, but he hadn't said it so passionately since Portia had first been called to the headmistress's office on that horrible day. Sir Vincent had traveled to the school to deliver news of her father's death himself.

"What did you want to tell me?"

Sir Vincent suddenly glanced at his lap. "It's about your father's will."

"His will?" Portia had not expected Sir Vincent to say that. Perhaps she'd thought Sir Vincent might express the importance of not leaving the townhouse without informing her, or of repeating various negative things the servants had said about her, but she hadn't thought he'd mention her will. "My father died four years ago."

"Yes, indeed." Sir Vincent scratched the back of his neck, even though she was certain she'd been informed in finishing school that neck scratching was unaristocratic. Sir Vincent always seemed to do an excellent job at doing the proper thing, even when that involved taking in the daughter of a distant cousin.

"As you know, your father was a wealthy man," Sir Vincent said.

"Yes."

“He’s always provided for you, even after his death.”

“Yes.”

“That will continue, whatever happens.” Sir Vincent’s gaze was oddly serious, and he sighed, blowing out a plume of ashy smoke from his thin lips. “I promise.”

She nodded.

“It just won’t continue to the same extent.”

This time, Portia jerked her head toward him. The rim of the desk was suddenly much less interesting than before. “Excuse me?”

“You might not be the heir to your father’s estate, but your father had set aside a large—very large—quantity of money for you.”

“I know.”

Sir Vincent’s face reddened. “Unfortunately, you will only receive that money if you marry.”

“Excuse me?”

“Before the end of the year.” Sir Vincent didn’t meet her gaze.

“I don’t understand. How is that possible? Where will the money go?”

She drew back. Had it been...lost? Had vandals broken into the bank where it was stored? Had some ship carrying expensive spices sunk? Or had Sir Vincent invested it poorly? She disliked the faint suspicion that grew in her, but she could not banish it. What was Sir Vincent speaking about?

“Should you not marry promptly, the money will be donated to your father’s former school in Scotland.”

She blinked. “Do they require money?”

“It seems as a child your father dreamed of seeing a building with his name on it on the school grounds.”

“I-I don’t understand.”

“Your father thought very strongly of the importance of male and female roles. He didn’t want you to inherit money without the guidance and wisdom of a male companion in your life.”

Portia stilled and drew her legs underneath her chair.

“Accounting—truly, any mathematics—is a skill better suited for males.”

“Because they’re allowed to learn it.”

Sir Vincent frowned, and a line appeared between his eyes and moved up over his brow, like an enemy’s ship’s mast.

“Has a solicitor looked at the will?” Portia asked. “Perhaps there is something someone could do. Some clause.”

Sir Vincent nodded, and his gaze drifted to the side. “I thought of that. Wills are complex documents. But—er—in this case, there is no leeway.”

“Oh.” Portia’s shoulders slumped down involuntarily, and she forced them up.

She wasn’t going to let Sir Vincent see her unhappy. They might live in the same house, but they were scarcely family. He was still a man to be intimidated of and grateful to. If she ever forgot that, she could trust the servants to remind her.

“That’s one reason why I didn’t tell you sooner,” Sir Vincent said. “I was hopeful the will was not as severe as indicated.”

“So it’s quite severe?” she asked.

Sir Vincent nodded. “As you know you have a fortune of two thousand pounds a year. Should you not marry, that fortune will be limited to fifty pounds a year.”

Her eyes widened. “Fifty pounds a year?”

He gave her a sad, understanding smile she immediately despised. "It is possible to purchase less expensive gowns."

"Of course."

"Most women make their own clothes."

"Er—yes."

"And you have many clothes left."

"Oh, indeed. But I only meant—"

"That fifty pounds a year is not much to live on?"

She nodded.

"You can be a companion to someone," Sir Vincent said. "Or a governess, if you prefer."

She must have contorted her face, for he smiled.

"Companion is better," he said. "You can read books to some elderly woman in some idyllic manor house."

"You mean remote," she said miserably.

He scrutinized her. "Of course, there is another option."

"Oh?" she asked, her voice eager.

He tapped his long fingers languidly over the leather top of his satinwood desk. "I almost hesitate to bring it up."

"I'll consider any option," she said.

"Well," Sir Vincent said gamely. "You can marry...me."



CHAPTER TWO



LONDON COULD BE RELIED upon to have marvelous balls. It was the thing Colin North, Duke of Brightling, loved most about the city. There were balls in Mayfair, balls in Kensington, and occasionally, balls at Buckingham Palace. Balls involved dancing and alcohol and a parade of pretty women. Balls never allowed time for musing and other such melancholic drivel, not when one was occupied with providing scintillating chitchat tailored to charm each member of the *ton*.

Unfortunately, this was December, and there were scarcely any balls at all. Most of the *ton* had abandoned the city, spurred by sentimental images of Christmas to travel with their families to the countryside over muddy lanes, the trip made more vile and unpleasant by the inevitable accompaniment of rain, sleet, or on particularly dreadful occasions, snow.

Colin favored sunshine to any of the winter weather events the sky seemed so eager to conjure. He wondered if he'd imagined the sky could ever be blue and have large fluffy clouds sail over it. He sighed. Perhaps he should have traveled to Rome, where snow was a rarity, and the considerable distance from England precluded anyone from expressing surprise that he did not intend to make a multi-day jaunt to his estate.

A knock sounded on the door, and his manservant sailed into the bedroom. The light from the windows didn't cast a golden glow as it did under other, brighter, better days, but Niles still gave a serene smile as if every strand of his blond hair, unmarred from gray, were glinting. "A letter has arrived for you."

Colin turned away from his contemplation of the dismal season. "I hope it's an invitation to a ball."

"That would be unlikely." Niles's nose wrinkled. "The letter is postmarked Cornwall."

"Sandridge!" Colin sprang from his armchair, grabbed the letter, and tore off the red seal. "I haven't seen him for months."

"Most tragic," Niles said in a soothing voice.

Colin chuckled. "That's nonsense, and you know it. You're glad he's not in town."

"I would never criticize a duke."

"Good." Colin flashed a smile, contemplating his own title. He tilted his head. "But perhaps you would criticize the frequency with which you had to wash my clothes?"

Niles shuddered. "Spot cleaning is far preferable. But your friends—"

Niles was silent, and for a moment, Colin pondered the times spent on horses galloping about Hyde Park. He pondered sudden swimming ventures into unguarded ponds. He pondered nights at smoky gaming hells, sipping brandy and playing cards.

"Well, they're all married now," Colin said.

"Thank goodness."

An aggrieved expression must have shot upon Colin's face, for Niles's expression sobered.

"I shouldn't have said that," Niles apologized. "It was improper."

"That is a state you never achieve." Colin unfolded Sandridge's letter, wishing his friend had taken as much care in penmanship as he had with expressing his affection and adoration for his new bride.

"I believe Sir Seymour is holding a ball tonight," Niles said. "I didn't see an invitation, but I'm certain he wouldn't mind if you were to make an appearance, Your Grace."

Colin grimaced. Sir Seymour was one of his least favorite members of the *ton*. The man had the pomposity typically found in butlers of large country estates with none of the fawning servitude.

“You mean I can be a reliable dance partner?” Colin asked.

“I have no intention of implying you must do athletics for your tea,” Niles said stiffly.

“I wouldn’t describe the thin slices of dry cake and punch Sir Seymour normally puts on the buffet table for his balls as tea. One would think Almack’s horrible food has made it fashionable for some households to attempt to equal that institution’s in unpleasantness, and Sir Seymour is determined to be fashionable.”

“Given the state of the soles of your dance slippers, I’d rather assumed you enjoy twirling and hopping.”

Colin smiled. “I do. You might find the activity appealing yourself.”

Niles’s eyes shot open. “You want me to twirl?”

“Why not? Though you can wait until I leave the room.”

Niles appeared somewhat reassured, and Colin smiled. Niles might be near his own age, but his manservant seemed to think it his professional duty to adopt the tastes and demeanor of a man four decades older.

Colin focused his attention on the letter.

Dearest Brightling,

Life in Cornwall is idyllic. Genevieve is the most marvelous woman in the world, and matrimony is very agreeable. I urge you to join Genevieve and me here. Christmas in Cornwall promises to be magical.

Colin shuddered. There were sufficient references to Christmas these days to not want to happen upon adulations of it in letters. Sandridge had never suffered from sentimentality before, and Colin attributed that change to the change all happily married men seemed to adopt.

Colin refused to visit Cornwall until *after* Twelfth Night had safely ended, and people were once again eagerly anticipating spring and summer and not filling their homes with greenery and red ribbons.

If he wanted to experience Christmas, he could return to his estate in Devon. Certainly, his sisters-in-law were sufficiently accomplished in the art of flinging red-and-green decorations over every table and sideboard. Even the mirrors and candelabras were not left untouched from their holiday enthusiasm.

Colin returned his attention to his friend’s letter.

I have a favor to ask of you. Genevieve’s father is in a bit of a pickle, and I suspect Sir Seymour is behind it. Would you pop into Sir Seymour’s library and see if there are any financial documents there about Genevieve’s father’s estate?

Sir Seymour is being his typical impossible self but, this time, we’re talking about extortion. I’ll pick up the papers when Genevieve and I return to London next month.

Colin read the rest of the letter quickly. Sandridge was appropriately apologetic about asking Colin for this task. Still, they’d fought in war together. If Sandridge needed help, Colin would give it.

“Niles, I’m going to Sir Seymour’s ball.”

His manservant’s eyebrows jolted up, but he quickly adjusted his expression to its customary indifference. “Very well, Your Grace. Shall I inform Reynolds to prepare the carriage?”

Colin glanced toward the window. The wind rattled against the windows, as if determined to shatter the glass, now it had practiced by stripping the leaves from all the trees. Still, no rain pummeled the glass panes. For England, this was the very best of weather.

“I’ll walk,” Colin said.

Niles grimaced, and his carefully pruned mustache appeared slightly less pristine.

“It’s not raining, after all.”

“I suppose you can take advantage of that anomaly,” Niles said in a grudging manner.

“Yes.”

Niles bowed, then removed Colin’s evening clothes from the wardrobe.

“Oh, better not do that,” Colin said.

“Your Grace?”

Colin joined Niles. “I wouldn’t want Sir Seymour to know I’ve been at the ball. That’s the sort of thing that a man might find curious.”

“Excuse me?” Niles’s eyes goggled.

“I’m anticipating he’ll feel disgruntled tomorrow, and I wouldn’t want him to think of me.”

“So you don’t want to change to evening dress?”

“Just something simple.” Colin removed a plain suit.

“Very well,” Niles said coldly.

Niles fetched Colin’s top hat and frockcoat, and soon, Colin was strolling toward Sir Seymour’s townhouse. The sky had long ago darkened, and the wind continued its ferocious bluster, as if it were determined to make up for the temporary lack of rain or snow. Still, Colin enjoyed the fresh air and the golden light that streamed from the surrounding buildings.

London was the very best place in the world. Colin smiled and imagined blossoms once again adorning the trees, a consistently crisp blue sky, and warm weather that negated the need for greatcoats. The city would be filled with wide-eyed debutantes, and Colin would be happy to introduce them to all the city’s delights.

Colin had never considered himself old, but he was now thirty. His closest friends were all married. They’d done so rapidly this year. Now, only Hammett was left, but it was hard to imagine him marrying. Hammett was too fond of boxing. He was never found at London balls, and he certainly would not make an exception during this, the most unpleasant time of year.

Soon, snow would fall. People who should never sing would go door to door and thrust their untrained, unpolished voices onto perfect strangers. Soon, it would be too cold to even go outside, and Cook would be occupied making strange dishes he only wheeled out for this time of year. All music would change to sentimental German melodies. Finally, someone would drag in a yule log, as if they considered a large, burning piece of wood an improvement to life.

No, Colin was anxious for this dreadful season to be over.

Colin scrutinized Sir Seymour’s townhouse. Unfortunately, the street was filled with carriages and well-adorned guests. Though Colin found both carriages and well-adorned guests generally enhancement to life, tonight they were worrisome. Guests had a propensity to recognize him, and Colin did not want to be recognized.

Not when he needed to sneak into Sir Seymour’s house to find documentation that would prove Sir Seymour’s estate had unlawfully taken over a portion of its neighboring estate.

He surveyed the building. A tree reclined toward a balcony. With any luck, the door leading to the balcony would be open, and he could slip in undetected. Colin might not have mastered every art—a fact his science tutors at Harrow had found it necessary to perpetually remind him—but tree climbing was one of his still lengthy list of accomplishments. He’d done a bit of tree climbing with the Duke of Vernon before the duke had gallivanted off to Guernsey with his new bride. Colin climbed trees elegantly, effortlessly—and in this case, he was certain to draw an audience.

A few people turned in his direction, and he stepped quickly into a shadow and pretended to observe the facade of another townhouse, with fewer guests streaming into it. He retained the corner of his gaze on Sir Seymour's townhouse. Stairs led clearly down to the lower entrance...the servants' entrance. Colin smiled, grateful he had foregone an evening tailcoat and pantaloons and, instead, gone with half-dress.

He strolled down the steps and knocked on the door to the servants' entrance. A housemaid answered and stared at him with obvious suspicion. Well, he would be suspicious too. He flashed his largest smile, and she smiled slowly back.

Perfect.

Colin stepped inside. The housemaid's smile vanished—evidently she required additional charm.

"Who are you?" the housemaid asked, and some other servants joined them in the tiny corridor.

"I'm the new footman." Colin screwed his face into a confused expression. "Aren't you expecting me?"

The housemaid surveyed him, and a dubious expression remained pasted on her face.

Colin strode in over the cobbled floor. Confidence was everything, and Colin had always possessed much of it.

"You can't just come in," the housemaid protested. "Our butler will be furious."

"He'll be furious if you don't allow me inside," Colin said smoothly.

"But he didn't say anything about a new footman," the housemaid said miserably.

"I'm just a temporary one," Colin said. "For the ball tonight."

"You're dressed in terribly nice clothes."

Colin gave a nonchalant shrug. "My employer is prone to give me his cast-offs." He leaned toward her conspiratorially. "Between you and me, he gives them to me too early. He's a Bond Street enthusiast."

"I see." The housemaid craned her neck toward a busy kitchen. Cooks and undercooks dashed about the room, and footmen lined up to carry platters away. "The butler is upstairs..."

"And you wouldn't want to disturb him." Colin grabbed a platter, balanced it in his hand, and moved up the steps.

Guilt moved through him, but he ignored it. Sir Seymour was guilty of something much worse, and with any luck, no one besides the housemaid would even notice the townhouse had suddenly obtained an extra footman.

"Stop," the maid said, and Colin froze.



CHAPTER THREE



PORTIA HAD NEVER GIVEN much consideration to her heart before, but now it thumped mightily. She was vaguely aware of her lower lip moving downward, and though she attempted to stop its descent, attempted to appear unshocked, unappalled, in this moment, she seemed powerless.

But then, she'd felt powerless this entire time.

"E-excuse me?" she stammered.

"I can marry you before Christmas," Sir Vincent said with the self-congratulatory air of a man preparing for praise. "And then you will have fulfilled your father's demand. You'll be able to keep your money. You'll be able to actually inherit."

"I see," she said softly. "So you would be my husband."

He beamed. "Indeed."

Something changed in his gaze. It was only for a moment. In truth, there was nothing terribly appalling about it. He didn't seem angry, he didn't seem mean. It seemed...triumphant. She associated the expression more with cricket players after they'd won a game. Portia wondered if he'd truly been showing her father's last testament to multiple solicitors, or if there was another reason he'd delayed telling her.

The season was long over.

This was December, a time when people fled London. Even the most focused matchmaking mamas seemed to believe no romance could happen at this time of year, when there were no flowers to wonder at, no warm weather suited for long strolls, and if one did attempt to have a ball, all the women would appear with mud-stained hems.

Portia couldn't find a husband now.

She hadn't even been able to find one in the Season.

There was only Sir Vincent. She stared at the man who might become her husband.

"What kind of a marriage would it be?" Her voice wobbled.

"A normal marriage," Sir Vincent said. "I have no heirs, as you know. I would be amenable to having children."

"Ah." Portia nodded, but her throat squeezed and constricted. "I couldn't impose on you."

"It would be no imposition." Sir Vincent raked his eyes over her figure, seeming to linger over her bosom. His tongue—a pale pink—darted out over his thick lips, and Portia suddenly believed that he would indeed find it not an imposition.

She recoiled.

"It won't be too different from our current circumstances," he said. "We already live together."

She nodded. "But you're my guardian. My—relative."

"I'm your father's only cousin," Sir Vincent said.

Her father's only, *older* cousin.

And he would expect children.

He would expect a proper marriage.

"You've become quiet," Sir Vincent said.

"I've—er—aspired to be quieter," Portia said.

“Well, that should make Cranston happy,” Sir Vincent said. “Now that you’ll be the lady of the manor house, you’ll have more responsibility. No more stomping up the stairs.”

“I stomp?” Portia’s voice took on a higher pitch.

“Oh, everyone can hear it, my dear. You can’t pretend you’re ignorant to it.” He barked out a laugh. “Rather like the elephants when I used to go hunting in Africa.”

“Oh?”

He leaned toward her. “Perhaps we could visit Africa after we marry.”

Her eyebrows darted up. They couldn’t be planning their honeymoon. They absolutely couldn’t be doing that.

“Best place in the world is Africa,” Sir Vincent continued merrily, evidently unperturbed by her silence. “So many animals. So much game. So much *hunting*. We can fill this house with trophies.”

“Oh, that’s not necessary.” She shifted in her seat, and the spindles creaked against her sudden straining. The Sahara seemed to have swept into the library and inundated her mouth.

“If we’re going to kill them, we should have something to show for it.”

“Perhaps we don’t have to kill them,” she said, conscious her voice was hoarse.

He scrutinized her. “You mean to just go to Africa and look at the animals?”

Portia was silent. Sir Vincent shook his head decisively. “Absolutely not. My friends will think I wasn’t able to shoot anything. Dashed embarrassing that would be.”

“You haven’t asked me if I accept your proposal,” Portia said finally, determined not to argue with him about hunting, when she needed to tell him she didn’t want to marry him.

Sir Vincent frowned, and his forehead crinkled, like an old, yellowing map. “But why wouldn’t you? I’m a baronet. And you, my dear, would be a governess.”

“I might enjoy it,” she said.

“And know that you could have had your own children, but you didn’t want to?”

She shifted in her seat awkwardly, trying not to think about children she might have had if only she’d found someone to marry.

“You would always know that no matter how much attention you give to the children, that they would always favor their mother...” Sir Vincent mused.

“That’s only natural,” she said.

“But you’ll always think you could have had your own children, could have been the lady of your own manor house, could have been happy. I’m not so very terrible, am I?”

Portia shook her head. “O-of course not.”

Sir Vincent wasn’t terrible. He might be a man of a certain age, where his silver strands had been abandoned for white ones. He might never even have been handsome, perhaps embracing his older age, where he could blame the passing of time on an always unremarkable complexion and refer obliquely to the parties of his past, when in truth, he might have found his twenties dull, a series of nights with nothing planned.

But he was right.

He wasn’t the worst husband she could have.

He was unlikely to develop a habit of fighting and being argumentative between now and the wedding day.

Heavens, she was thinking as if it was a certainty.

Perhaps her dearest friends had married dukes, but they’d acknowledged their good fortune. There was no reason to bemoan one’s fate when one married a baron, even an elderly one.

Many other debutantes would be jealous. No one would question why she married him. Sir

Vincent would not be the first man to marry his ward.

Still...

She'd never seen Sir Vincent....that way. It disturbed her that he might have seen her differently. For the first time, she didn't consider herself lucky that Sir Vincent had been tasked with the position of becoming her guardian.

"I should have known I needed to marry," she said.

Sir Vincent widened his eyes, and for a moment, Portia cursed her forwardness.

"Every debutante knows she is supposed to marry," Sir Vincent said. "I thought the added pressure might be unnecessary."

She blinked.

Perhaps he was right. Perhaps she would have simply become overly nervous, and perhaps the few men who had approached her would have considered her even needier than they already had.

Sir Vincent rose. "Cheer up, let's go to the ball."

Portia accompanied him from the room. Cranston sent her another one of his stern expressions, and she fought for her face not to crumble.

She shouldn't have been happy.

All her teachers had always scolded her. They'd told her to expect bad things in life if she didn't appropriately master her dance classes and if she failed to learn an instrument well. Her piano skills remained questionable, and the few times she'd been asked to play, she'd been met by silence. Her hours of practice hadn't been enough.

She hadn't been enough.

Portia frowned. She refused to succumb to mawkish thoughts. She didn't make a habit of that, and she certainly wasn't going to develop the practice now. Sir Vincent was wrong. He wasn't the only option she had. London wasn't devoid of marriageable men. If her friends had found husbands, she could as well. She simply needed to find someone else who would marry her before Christmas, and Sir Seymour's and Lady Amberley's ball was her only option.

She raised her chin, but the task felt strenuous, as if it to concede defeat.



CHAPTER FOUR



CHRISTMAS MUSIC FILLED the ballroom, and Portia's stomach toppled downward. She'd never associated Christmas with anything terrible, but now her mouth dried curiously, and she doubted it could be tempted by the cinnamon-and-clove crammed cocktails guests carried in their gloved hands.

How had she once enjoyed these Christmas songs? But then, *before* she hadn't known about her father's will. *Before* everything had been pleasant and perfect.

The musicians played with their customary precision, and she glanced at the grim-faced matchmaking mamas who lined the ballroom walls, wishing she'd taken her role of finding a husband with the same diligence and determination they'd espoused.

She needed a husband.

Now.

Naturally, she couldn't simply stumble into a potential husband. That was the sort of thing that might happen in her daydreams. They didn't happen in true life. If such good fortune ever happened in real life, Portia was certain such instances were confined to people sporting immaculate beauty, who drew men toward them with an efficiency only matched by candlelight that compelled various small-brained insects.

Perhaps her attire lacked the fashionable finesse of other debutantes, and perhaps she hadn't spent her childhood playing with the men when they were both in leading strings. Her father hadn't been prone to sociability, and she'd never had the bevy of cousins and second cousins that others took for granted. Still, Portia was reasonably intelligent. She would be able to manage a household, and she preferred to not spend the rest of her life in a house filled with servants who disparaged her. Even if she didn't possess the sort of great beauty that made other women throw their hands up in jealousy, she couldn't give up hope. A marriage was possible; it had to be.

She'd simply taken her first season too casually. She'd been too grateful to see her friends again, to be able to chat with them about a variety of topics, and no longer find her only socialization from stilted conversations at Sir Vincent's long dining room table.

People bustled about Portia, and she strained to see over the feathered turbans that made even the shortest women suddenly tall and the broad-shouldered and broad-bellied men who laughed comfortably around the punch tables.

She stared at the smattering of men. She recognized Lord Edwards and smiled. The man's face sobered, and he turned away abruptly.

She blinked.

Well, that didn't necessarily mean anything bad. That simply meant he might have had an unpleasant thought. Not about her, of course. Perhaps about the recent Siege of Tripolitsa. That had involved many deaths. Certainly, that warranted a pensive frown. One could hardly smile if one were thinking about eight thousand civilians being massacred.

Of course, that had ended in September.

And Greece was far away.

Still, the facts remained distressing.

If he was thinking of them.

Perhaps there was another man she recognized. How could she imagine she might find someone to marry her? She glanced at various men who had accompanied her on the dance floor for reels and

waltzes, but none even smiled in recognition. Her yellow dress seemed garish against the white dresses that filled the ballroom. The ruffles on the hem scarcely competed with the elaborate green and red patterns that adorned the hems on other women's gowns.

Then she spotted Mr. Daniels. She'd danced with him on multiple occasion, and she raised her hand tentatively in a wave.

He blinked and looked around.

Women weren't supposed to gesture to men. She knew that. Still, no one else was asking her to dance, and time was of the essence. Besides, Mr. Daniels had always seemed agreeable. Perhaps he talked about pigs with unwarranted enthusiasm, seeming to never have outgrown a childhood delight in the livestock he'd spied neighbor tenants caring for, but that was hardly a reason not to marry someone.

He approached her with some trepidation, but she pasted a bright smile on her face.

"I thought you might like to dance," she said.

He drew his forehead together. "That was going to be my line."

Fiddle-faddle.

"Great minds think alike." She forced herself to retain a wide, nonchalant smile, though the effort seemed curiously difficult.

Her stomach fluttered curiously.

Perhaps this is love.

She was certain she'd heard about fluttering stomachs in books. Or were those fluttering hearts? She had the dreadful sense the latter was more likely. Still, perhaps Mr. Daniels simply made her stomach flutter. Perhaps that's what would make them unique from other couples.

The music changed, and couples formed a minuet. Mr. Daniels extended his arm to her, and she took it. He led her to a group of dancers who were forming a long line. It would be rather more convenient if a waltz were playing.

The music took on a more jovial tone, and she began to form the patterns.

"How are you?" she asked.

Mr. Daniels' eyebrows rose, as if startled she was addressing him. "Er—fine."

Silence ensued, then they separated to form circles with other dancers.

"Anything on your mind?" she asked when they rejoined.

"Pigs."

"Ah. Most—er—good preoccupation."

"You think so?" He eyed her curiously. "Most women find them dull."

She gave him a strained smile. "They—er—seemed interesting when you described them to me last time we met."

"Ah."

"In truth, I didn't find them terribly interesting," she said, conscious she didn't want to give him the wrong impression. There was no use beginning a marriage under a lie. She was certain of that.

He blinked, and irritation floated over his face.

"I didn't mean to offend—" she began, but the music shifted, and they once again danced in a circle with other partners.

When they rejoined, she flashed him an apologetic smile. "I only meant I can see why you might find them interesting."

"Because you think my mind lacks intellect?" he asked.

"No, of course not."

He pouted. "You wouldn't be the first person to think that."

This wasn't going well. Still, she could hardly give up broaching the topic now, lest she spend the next few decades regretting the interaction. "In truth, there's something else on my mind."

He was silent.

"You're supposed to ask me what," she prompted.

"What?" he asked, his face still sullen.

Her heartbeat soared, but she forced herself to respond. "Marriage!"

His eyes widened.

"Specifically, marriage to you," Portia added hastily. There was no point having a theoretical conversation on the benefits of matrimony. This was a time for action.

Mr. Daniels' eyes widened further, *and* his eyebrows darted up. "You can't be serious. Only the most desperate woman would concoct such a plan."

"But I am," she said quickly. "We can marry in a fortnight if we do the banns now."

"You must be mad to think I would agree to such a plan." For some reason, his gaze darted to her belly.

She blinked. "But I have money. And I'll lose it if—"

He halted dancing, and other couples collided into them.

"Forgot how to dance, Daniels?" one man asked with a wink.

Mr. Daniels's face grew purple.

Oh, no.

"Of course not." He pointed at her, and her stomach fluttered uncomfortably again. She decided stomach fluttering was a bad thing. "Miss Tate just suggested marriage. In *two* weeks."

Portia stiffened, and her skin heated, as if Mr. Daniels had casually thrown her into the greenery-adorned fireplace. Mr. Daniels had said those words *very* loudly.

"Good Lord," another man said and shot a suspicious look at the woman he was dancing with, as if to assess the likelihood she might also suggest they entwine their lives together for the next half-century or so.

Females stared at her reproachfully, and Portia hurried away. Tears stung her eyes, and she forced her chin up.

"My dear." A deep voice she recognized at once startled her. She turned toward Sir Vincent. "Would you care to dance?"

Portia didn't want to dance. She didn't want to go anywhere *near* the dancers. She wanted to disappear entirely.

"Perhaps not," she said.

Sir Vincent narrowed his gaze.

"I—er—I think I see my friend," Portia said hastily.

"Indeed?" Sir Vincent's forehead wrinkled.

Fiddle-faddle.

Perhaps he was also thinking about how all of her friends had married.

"Which one?" he asked, his words coming out slowly, as if performing advanced mathematics to discover an unknown friend.

"Daisy," she said, hoping she wouldn't cry in front of him.

He widened his eyes. "Here? But she's in a chair..."

Portia flushed. Daisy might be the most loquacious of her friends, but she didn't walk, a fact that made her an unlikely guest at balls. Few hostesses extended invitations to her, perhaps in the mistaken

belief Daisy might feel embarrassed or unhappy at any reminder she could not take part in the chief component of balls: dancing.

“Precisely,” Portia lied. “So you see, she’s quite short. You can’t see her past the other guests.”

Sir Vincent gave her a dubious nod, thankfully not inquiring why Portia could see her and not him, and Portia dashed away.

She fled the ballroom. Footsteps followed her, and Portia quickly opened the door to another room. She found a candle and candlestick to her right and lit it with a match. Good Portia would never have done this, but there was no sense being Good Portia anymore.



CHAPTER FIVE



COLIN TURNED AROUND slowly and tried to emanate innocence. Perhaps the maid had changed her mind. Perhaps she was going to holler and call everyone to her.

“You’ll need to wear a livery.” The maid jerked her thumb to the side. “The butler keeps spare ones for the footmen in that room.”

“Of course,” Colin said, and his heart beat merrily. He’d succeeded.

Colin entered the ballroom wearing his new livery and placed the tray on the punch table.

A footman wielding a silver platter topped with delicacies frowned and glided toward Colin with an uncomfortable rapidity for someone supposedly offering guests canapés.

Blast.

Colin needed to leave the ballroom before someone recognized him.

“I don’t believe we’ve met.” The footman scanned his face.

“No, I’m new,” Colin said casually, angling himself away from the guests. “Just for tonight.”

The footman’s eyes narrowed. “But we have a full staff.”

“I suppose Sir Seymour wanted to make certain everything goes smoothly tonight,” Colin said hastily, lest someone recognize his voice.

Sir Seymour, for instance, could recognize him, as could Sir Seymour’s wife, Lady Amberley. Or their son, Cecil. Fortunately, Colin’s new livery seemed an effective disguise. No one expected a duke to serve canapés.

“Everything *always* goes smoothly,” the footman said. “I’m certain you’re not needed.”

Colin quickly realized this was a conversation worth avoiding, and he dashed away. Hopefully the footman was too busy to actually send a parade of well-muscled footmen after him, but just in case, Colin needed to find the library and relevant papers quickly. Sandridge better be dashed grateful.

Colin exited the ballroom, then entered a black-and-white-tiled passage. A lantern sat on a sideboard, conveniently at the space where the light from the foyer dimmed, and he picked it up and lit it. He moved hastily through the corridor, in case someone wondered at the flickering light, but no one was here. He soon came to a deep green room that contained a large desk.

Success.

Colin grinned and entered. There weren’t many books in this library—in fact, there might well be fewer books here than in any other library he’d ever visited, but he’d found Sir Seymour’s desk. That desk was unmistakable. It was large and important looking and just the type Sir Seymour might be prone to acquire.

Rustling sounded, and a figure ducked behind an armchair.

“Good evening?” Colin asked.

No sound responded, but then, perhaps people hiding behind armchairs were unlikely to engage in the niceties of greeting exchanges.

Colin hesitated and contemplated hiding. No one was supposed to be here—he could hardly rifle through Sir Seymour’s papers before an observer.

Still, efficiency was to be prized. Colin tiptoed toward the armchair to get a better view of the person who’d claimed it as a hiding space. He moved quickly over the thick carpet, and Colin felt a sudden rush of gratitude for the fact Sir Seymour did not come from a long line of barons who would

have bestowed him with tasteful, thin worn rugs over which centuries of portly ancestors had trod.

A woman was hiding behind the armchair.

A woman in a bright yellow dress, the color vivid despite the dim light.

She scrambled up, and he was aware of luscious dark hair falling from an imperfectly knotted updo. "I—er—"

"I'm afraid I startled you," Colin said jovially.

This must be one of the guests from the ball. *Not* one of Sir Seymour's relatives, though judging from the pained expressions they normally wore, their loyalty to him was perhaps less sturdy than one might have assumed.

"I'm sorry. I thought I was the only person here." The woman shrank back. There was something intriguing about the movement of her shoulders. It was odd he'd never contemplated women's shoulders before. Perhaps he'd simply spent so long contemplating everything else that it was natural to finally dwell upon them. She was shorter than him and appeared vaguely familiar. Perhaps he'd seen her at a ball before, though he was certain he would remember if he'd danced with her.

He tended to avoid the rows of wallflowers at each ball and the matchmaking mamas beside them. Though most of the matchmaking mamas had attacked him with the ferocity of eagles when they'd first encountered him, throwing in conversations about their daughters' taste, symmetrical features that had been present for so many generations that there was no doubt they would birth babies with equally pleasing features, and various artistic and musical abilities. Now though, all of the matchmaking mamas seemed to have resigned themselves to the fact he had little interest in securing an heir. Having several younger brothers, some of whom already had their own children, rather made the necessity weaker. Despite his eagerness to attend balls, Colin had never courted anyone with much interest. Singledom seemed vastly superior to marriage, and Colin always preferred the more superior activity.

"I should leave," the woman said.

"Very well."

The woman continued to scrutinize his face. He hoped she wasn't going to burst into a simpering recitation of "Your Grace." When people said "Your Grace," it only served to remind him he wasn't supposed to have had that honor—his older brother was.

The strange woman tilted her head, and another glossy strand fell from her chignon. "What's it like to be a servant?"

He blinked. Evidently, she hadn't recognized him. "Exhausting."

She emitted a heavy sigh. "I was afraid of that."

He frowned. "Why ever do you ask?"

"I'm thinking of becoming one," she said mournfully.

His eyebrows jolted up. "Forgive me for being presumptuous, but it strikes me that that is a most odd vocation for a young woman like yourself."

The woman took a long gulp from her tumbler. "I'm going to lose my money after Christmas."

"Indeed?"

She nodded. "My father said so in his dratted will. It's all going to be gone. Gone, gone, gone."

"That's terrible."

"Yes," she said miserably, and she hiccupped. "Excuse me. I said dratted," the woman said mournfully. "Dratted isn't the most polite word. Er—sorry."

"I'll live," Colin said easily. "Bonaparte's army said worse things. The British army said worse things too."

“You were at war?”

Colin nodded, bracing himself for some giggles about his heroism and some improper venturing into upper arm squeezing.

Instead, she gave him a sympathetic look. Her eyes were large. The dim light couldn't reveal their exact color, but he didn't need to see a color to tell they were appealing.

“It must be strange not to be fighting,” the woman mused.

“It is.” Colin stared at her.

“I thought my life would be different too,” she said, and her voice wobbled again. Colin knew when to be a gentleman, and he offered her a handkerchief.

She blew her nose noisily. “I'm sorry. We shouldn't be talking.”

“I'll keep it a secret,” he said amiably.

That was better for him. He didn't need anyone to know he was here.

“You don't have to,” she said. “My reputation will be ruined by the end of the year anyway.”

“You're planning to bed some man in the middle of Leicester Square?” Colin asked casually, moving toward Sir Seymour's desk.

She gave a harsh laugh. “You're funny.”

He shrugged.

“I wish peers were funny,” she said mournfully.

He stifled a chuckle. “They're not?”

“They're the most dreaded bores. You're lucky you don't have to converse with them. Pigs this, pigs that.”

He ducked his head below the bureau, hiding his smile. Clearly, the poor woman had been speaking with Mr. Daniels recently. That would compel any person to scramble toward the punch table.

“I shouldn't tell you this.”

“I expect not,” Colin said carefully, opening Sir Seymour's drawer quickly.

He glanced toward the door, lest some angry chaperon appear, shouting compromised or some such nonsense. The more distance between them, the better, and the quicker he left the room..

Genevieve's father's name appeared on a file, and he beamed. He scanned the documents, then folded them carefully. He tucked the documents in his breast pocket, closed the drawer, and rose.

The woman stared at him. “Is it customary for footmen to go through their employers' bureaus?”

Colin resisted the urge to freeze or blink at her guiltily. Instead, he shrugged. “I'm cleaning his desk.”

“Late at night?”

He nodded solemnly. “Sir Seymour can't abide an unpolished desk.” He took out his handkerchief and scrubbed the desk carefully. “He's going to see it first thing.”

“I would have thought you would be serving drinks at the ball.”

“It takes many servants to take care of this townhouse,” Colin said solemnly.

“I can tell.” The woman's eyes remained wider than previously, and Colin knew he should feel guilty. Instead, his lips curled. This was turning into the most amusing ball he'd attended in some time, and he wasn't even jumping to the joyful beats of a reel.

He smiled and rose from Sir Seymour's desk.

“My father wanted to make sure I married. Didn't become one of those independently wealthy bluestockings causing chaos in society.”

Colin sputtered.

She shrugged, moving her shoulders in that intriguing manner again. “Well, that’s what he would say. I think. He’s dead.”

Colin nodded. “The talk of a will was the clue.”

“I suppose so. But the problem is—I need to find a husband at once.”

“Perhaps you would be more likely to find one in the ball,” Colin suggested.

She shook her head. “I tried that. Didn’t work. I’m not pretty enough.”

He blinked. The woman was mad. “I assure you, you’re plenty pretty.”



THE ROOM FILLED WITH an odd heat. Perhaps the exertion of rising rapidly had been more strenuous than she’d imagined. She stepped away from the footman and smoothed her dress. Suddenly, it was important that the fabric was not beset by wrinkles and creases.

There was something familiar about the man, and for a moment, Portia stared at him.

But of course the man was familiar. He’d probably been handing her drinks at Sir Seymour’s townhouse for the past year. A man like that was noticeable, even if he was a footman and probably hadn’t said anything more to her than “Ratafia, miss?”

“I-I’m sorry,” she stammered. “I’ve kept you from your work.”

“I can polish a desk with you in the room,” he said. “Just a pleasant distraction.”

She nodded, deciding not to tell him he had only polished a small portion of the surface and had even forgotten to move the few books and papers on the desk to the side so as to achieve a better polish.

“There must be something you can do to find a husband,” the man said. “I’m sure plenty of men would want to marry you.”

“None have proposed.”

He gazed at her thoughtfully. “Then perhaps you could ask someone for help. In my experience mothers are a most aggressive force. There is a reason they’re called *matchmaking mamas*.”

“I hadn’t realized that terminology had entered servants’ vocabulary.”

His smile wobbled momentarily, then it grew wider than before. “Oh, everyone knows about matchmaking mamas.”

Portia scrunched her lips. “I don’t have a mother, but…” An idea occurred to her, and she beamed. “Thank you. That was good advice.”

Puzzlement spread over his face. The fact didn’t render him less handsome. Footmen were often chosen for their looks, and his must have made his employer offer him the job at once.

Perhaps Portia didn’t have a mother or a string of female relatives. She did though have friends. One friend, in particular, Daisy, might be helpful.

“Farewell!” Portia raised her hand to the footman, then nearly sprinted from the room.

Daisy.

Daisy was her best friend. Perhaps she knew of someone who might be willing to elope with her. Someone poor who might find Portia’s heiress status attractive, someone of not too intolerable a personality. Sir Vincent wouldn’t do, but there must be other options.

The footman was correct: she couldn’t give up. If she couldn’t find a husband on her own, she shouldn’t assume it was impossible to do so with help.

She marched through the ballroom door. Sir Vincent regarded her with a concerned expression, but this time, it did not take much effort to keep her chin raised.

“Do you want to stay longer?” he asked.

Portia surveyed the dance floor. She'd already stood around waiting for someone to ask her to dance. She turned to her guardian. "We can leave."

Relief spread across his face. "Very well, my dear."

Earlier Portia might have been disconcerted, but now she simply considered the words of the kind footman. There was hope. Perhaps not at this very ball, but that didn't mean she couldn't find a solution.

She had to.



CHAPTER SIX



"I TRUST YOU HAD A SATISFACTORY time at Sir Seymour's?" Niles asked when Colin returned.

"Yes," Colin said, and his mind mused on the odd woman he'd discovered in the library. Their conversation had been most unanticipated. Then he remembered the papers Sandridge had asked him to find. "In fact, it was most satisfactory."

"Sir Seymour must have improved his hosting abilities," Niles said.

"The guest list makes a difference," Colin said.

Niles gazed at him oddly. "You wouldn't want me to look into procuring new attire?"

"Nonsense, I have quite enough. Whatever gave you that idea?"

"I've found that some gentlemen prefer to get married in new suits," Niles said.

"Married?" Colin drew his eyebrows together. "Whatever gave you that impression?"

"Just an instinct," Niles said.

"Hmph." Colin decided not to tell Niles about his encounter with the woman in the library. His manservant might come to the oddest conclusions. "Obviously your instincts need additional fine-tuning."

Niles shot him an aggrieved look and continued undressing him in silence.

Sandridge would be thrilled to learn that he had the papers. Now he only needed to deliver them. Colin could certainly manage to do that.

"Very well, Your Grace." Niles folded Colin's clothes. "I think tomorrow I shall do a full wash."

"But they're not good for the clothes."

Niles shrugged. "And yet, on occasion, they must still be done."

Niles swept the clothes together, and Colin gasped. "One moment."

"Yes, Your Grace?"

"I believe I left some papers in my breast pocket." Colin removed the papers smoothly.

"Those weren't there before."

Colin shrugged. "Reading material."

"You anticipated being bored at the ball?"

"Preparation is everything," Colin said.

Niles nodded slowly. "I'm much gratified you're adopting that phrase."

"Oh, yes," Colin said. "It's quite wise." He tucked the papers in his desk, away from Niles's eyes.

He did trust Niles, but Sandridge had impressed upon him the importance of secrecy. Curiosity was a state that might befall even the most morally stringent. Certainly, Colin was always falling victim to that.

He rather wished he'd had the good sense to take the name of the woman he'd spoken to tonight.



IF DAISY'S BUTLER THOUGHT it odd when Portia arrived at the early hour of ten o'clock, he did not say anything. Instead, he led her to the parlor. Shortly after, Daisy arrived and rolled her chair toward Portia. Her blonde curls glinted in the light that streamed from the picture window, hindered only by a thin lace curtain.

“I require a husband,” Portia declared.

Daisy’s eyebrows didn’t jolt up. “That is a refrain every woman says.”

“In my case it’s true.”

Her friend’s gaze softened. “Did your guardian say something?”

“Why would you say that?”

“Then he did,” Daisy said smugly.

“Er—yes.”

“I thought you weren’t feeling pressured to find a husband.”

“I wasn’t,” Portia said miserably, regretting her feeling of superiority over harder working debutantes who researched every eligible man carefully, so as to be careful to impress them with their immaculate taste. They expressed passions for Florence and Venice to the men who’d done grand tours. To the men who were wary of traveling from the comforts of their manor houses and castles, they expressed similarly strong laudations for remote portions of the country.

Portia had done no such thing.

She’d told men her opinion of the musical quality of certain musicians without first ascertaining whether the man in question had a particular attachment to the musicians.

“I was naive,” Portia said.

Daisy chuckled. “That sounds unlike you.”

“Father wrote in his will I would lose my money if I didn’t marry by the end of this year,” Portia said flatly.

Daisy’s eyes widened. “Can he do that?”

“It’s his will.” Portia sighed. “He did it.”

“Who will get the money?”

“His old school in Scotland.”

“The one famous for making boys trample through mud for miles?” Daisy asked. “The one that was in the broadsheets for making the boys build fences in the rain?”

“He said the school formed character.”

“I’m so sorry.” Daisy tilted her head sympathetically.

“You’re not the only one,” Portia said.

“And you didn’t know beforehand?”

“Of course not.” Portia drew back. “Had I done so, I would have found somebody. I think.”

“Naturally you would have,” Daisy said in a soothing tone.

“And to be fair, Sir Vincent *has* offered to marry me.”

“How self-sacrificing of him,” Daisy said. Her tone was sarcastic, and Portia stared at her friend.

“I suppose I could find a position as a companion,” Portia said. “Or a governess.”

Daisy waved her hand dismissively. “Nonsense. You can do anything. If I were you—” Daisy’s voice had an odd longing quality to it, and Portia flushed.

Daisy’s eyes lit up, and she tapped her fingers against her chair. “The Honorable Rupert Andrews.”

“What about him?”

“He would make you an ideal husband.”

Portia blinked. Evidently, her friends were correct when they’d lauded Daisy’s matchmaking abilities. Daisy hadn’t needed to ponder much.

“Truly?” Portia pressed. “And he desires a prompt marriage?”

“Money issues.” Daisy shrugged nonchalantly. “Such is life.”

“How do you know him?”

“He was a neighbor back in Staffordshire. Have you met him before?”

Portia nodded. Rupert Andrews had been an amicable man who’d danced with her sporadically, presumably on those occasions when he couldn’t justify standing about the punch table with his friends. It seemed odd to think of him being her future husband.

“He’s rather nice,” Daisy said, then frowned. “At least for a man. What was your impression?”

“I thought he was courting Mathilda.”

“So did he.” Daisy leaned closer, and her eyes sparkled with that peculiar force that descended during particularly excellent gossip. “But she eloped with a Frenchman. All quite scandalous, and now he truly requires coin. *And* he no longer trusts his judgment.”

“Which makes him perfect for a husband?”

“Perfect to make a suggestion of marriage,” Daisy said. “Quite different.”

“I see,” Portia said, even though clarity wasn’t her current emotion.

Daisy seemed certain though, for she beamed. “Leave it to me, my dear. Now, where do you want to elope?”

“Elope?” Portia sputtered. She’d anticipated a normal wedding, in a church.

“Well, your guardian might put up protestations otherwise. He might claim Mr. Andrews is imperfect. All nonsense, of course, but the banns process is sufficiently long. I doubt a delay would be in your interest.”

“You’re right,” Portia said miserably.

“You have two options,” Daisy said in the matter-of-fact manner that had caused her to receive the best grades at their finishing school. “Gretna Green—that’s the traditional option, or the Channel Islands. The Duke and Duchess of Vernon eloped there. It’s *en vogue*.”

“Which is closer?”

“The Channel Islands.” Daisy’s smile grew less pronounced. “Though I imagine the voyage is choppy this time of year.”

Portia shrugged. “I have sea legs.” She leaned nearer her friend. “Does Mr. Andrews?”

“Mr. Andrews is a man. They *all* claim to have sea legs.” Daisy’s eyes shimmered, and her lips moved into something approximating a smirk. “Guernsey it is. I’ll write you once I learn the time of the next ship departure.”

“And I’ll just meet him then.”

“Yes.” Daisy nodded decidedly, then scrunched her forehead. “Of course, it’s not the best thing to do for your reputation.”

“Neither is being poor.”

“I suspect Mr. Andrews will feel the same way.”

Portia turned the conversation to other things, but an odd excitement moved through her. She was going to be married.



CHAPTER SEVEN



BANGING SOUNDED ON the door, and Colin rolled over in his bed. His head ached, as it normally did these days after long days of visiting a gaming hell, and he buried his head under a pillow. Somehow, gaming hells had seemed more intriguing when he'd first moved to London. The banging continued, and he frowned. Was today a delivery day? Was there a driver who was concerned about parking his carriage outside?

Voices sounded. Colin could swear one of the voices belonged to the butler. Was somebody attempting to enter the main door? *Dashed odd.*

Then footsteps moved upstairs. Heavy footsteps. Trampling footsteps.

Damnation.

Niles never attacked the steps with such ferocity. His footsteps glided, tiptoed, and strode.

Colin scrambled up, casting his pillow to the side.

The deafening footsteps continued to thud. Since a charging rhinoceros was unlikely to have gained entry to the townhouse, Colin suspected the intruder might desire to speak to him. He grabbed his dressing gown, pulled it over his nightshirt, and tied it.

In the next moment, the door swung open. A red-faced Sir Seymour entered the room and pointed a finger at Colin. "Thief."

Dash it.

"Sir Seymour," Colin said in his most consolatory voice. "I didn't expect to see you."

"I'm sorry, Your Grace," Niles said. "I tried to stop him."

Colin surveyed Sir Seymour. The man's cravat was loose, as if he'd abandoned his manservant's attempts to tie it midway, and his tailcoat billowed in an unbecoming fashion.

"I suspect nothing could have stopped him," Colin said generously. "With the possible exception of three rugby players."

"Three *good* rugby players," Niles qualified.

"Quite."

"You're not supposed to be talking about damned rugby players." Sir Seymour banged his fist on a conveniently placed bookcase. "I'm your guest. You're supposed to speak about me."

"You're not an invited guest," Niles said.

"This is no time for etiquette," Sir Seymour bellowed. "Etiquette followers do not steal. They are not criminals. They are not *vile* beings."

"Sir Seymour," Niles said. "I must insist you speak with more decorum to the duke. Your behavior is most unacceptable."

"Balderdash." Sir Seymour waved his hand in a dismissive fashion.

"Should I fetch the kitchen servants?" Niles suggested. "Perhaps with their help, I could toss Sir Seymour out."

"I am right here, and I do not like this conversation," Sir Seymour said staunchly.

"It seems you don't like much of anything right now." A frosty note emanated through Niles's voice.

"That's true." Sir Seymour whirled around and faced Colin again. "You stole from me."

“Nonsense,” Niles said. “The duke has plenty of money. That is an absurd accusation.”

“I’m not talking about money. I’m talking about *papers*.”

Niles’s already pale face turned a whiter shade, as if this were February, and it had been even more months since Niles’s complexion had properly seen the sun.

“My valet told me you were in the house last Friday. And you *weren’t* at the ball.” He glanced at Niles. “I find that suspicious.”

Niles gave a nervous laugh but tiptoed away from Sir Seymour. His gaze was focused on the floorboards.

And Colin *knew*.

He knew Niles must have told someone Colin had visited Sir Seymour’s house. *Damnation*. Colin knew servants of the *ton* were often friends of other servants of the *ton*. Servants would never knowingly tell a scandal, at least not trusted ones like Niles, but perhaps Niles had only thought Colin’s visit a curiosity and had mentioned it in innocence.

“You have to leave, Sir Seymour,” Colin said sternly.

“Nonsense. I have to find those papers. I need them.”

“I won’t give them to you.”

“Then they’re here.” Triumph gleamed through Sir Seymour’s eyes, as if he were an explorer who’d happened upon a new section of the Americas.

Colin glanced at Niles. “I’m afraid we’re going to have to toss him out.”

“Very well, Your Grace.”

Colin pushed Sir Seymour from the room and escorted him downstairs.

“Open the door, Niles,” Colin said.

Niles rushed to the door, and in the next moment, Colin pushed Sir Seymour out.

“I’ll come back,” Sir Seymour shouted. “You’ll see. If you could break into my house, I can break into yours.”

“They’re not here.” Colin forced his voice to be firm.

Sir Seymour assessed him, then broke into a wide smile. “You’re lying.”

“I’m not,” Colin lied.

“No, I can always tell a liar,” Sir Seymour said.

“You probably have experience staring in the mirror while you lie,” Niles muttered.

“Excuse me?” Sir Seymour jerked his head toward Niles.

“N-nothing,” Niles said.

“That’s a lie too,” Sir Seymour shouted. “See? I can tell.”

Colin shut the door and locked it quickly.

Niles shifted his feet over the marble floor. “I’m sorry, Your Grace. I’m afraid I mentioned where you were—”

“It’s my fault,” Colin said. “I didn’t tell you not to do so. I—er—didn’t want you to be involved in this.”

Niles nodded.

Colin scratched his head. “But he’s right about those papers. I do have them here.”

“Then might I suggest taking them somewhere else?”

“I need to give them to Sandridge,” Colin said.

“In Cornwall?” Niles swallowed hard.

“We’ll go by water,” Colin said. “It will be quicker than taking a coach.”

“Very well, Your Grace. Then I shall pack.”

“But be quick about it. I want us on the next ship.”



NERVOUSNESS THRUMMED through Portia. She was going to be married. Daisy had arranged a ticket for her onboard *The Empress*, and she would be in Guernsey in two days. She pulled her trunk from the wardrobe and set it on the bed. She opened the clasps, conscious she would need to pack lightly, despite the ample space available in the trunk, if she wanted to carry the trunk outside with sufficient speed.

This was Jonesie’s and Cranston’s half day, and Portia trusted her guardian would confine himself to his library as customary, perusing tomes and scoffing that the rest of the world didn’t devote equal time to the contemplation of culture and classics.

Portia marched to her wardrobe and stared at her clothes.

“Why is your trunk out?” Jonesie’s voice startled her.

Portia turned around hastily, hoping her guilty conscience had simply created Jonesie’s voice.

But that was Jonesie.

Jonesie with her mouth open, and her blue eyes rounded.

“This is your half day,” Portia stammered. “What are you doing here?”

Jonesie shrugged. “It’s raining, and I finished my book.”

“Indeed?” Portia pushed her hand through her hair, despising how her fingers trembled. She forced herself to remain nonchalant and thought of lakes, the ones devoid of whirlpools, ice or monsters. “Would you like to borrow one of mine?”

Jonesie’s gaze remained focused on the trunk. “Why is your luggage on the bed?”

“I—er—simply wanted to see if I needed to buy a new one,” Portia lied, conscious her voice was wobbling rather too much. “Examine for wears and tears.”

“These trunks last decades,” Jonesie said sternly. “And you shouldn’t have it on the bed.”

“Oh?” Portia averted her gaze.

“It’s good I came back.” Jonesie marched toward the bed, snapped the trunk shut, and hauled it to the wardrobe. She turned to Portia and beamed. “I can assure you the trunk is quite suitable for traveling. No need to worry at all.”

“How lovely,” Portia said faintly.

Jonesie assessed the now open wardrobe. “But perhaps some of these clothes do need to be replaced.”

Having a discussion on her attire would no doubt consume time, and time was what she lacked.

She couldn’t stay here.

She needed to leave. *Soon*.

What would Mr. Andrews think if she wasn’t on the ship when he arrived? What if he thought Daisy had been jesting?

“Actually, I’d prefer to do it another day,” Portia said.

“Is that so?” There was an odd scrutinizing look in Jonesie’s gaze. Normally, Jonesie didn’t draw her eyebrows together in such fashion. Normally, her brow didn’t wrinkle. Normally—

“You’re running away.” Jonesie beamed, and her blue eyes sparkled with a force Portia was more accustomed to seeing on sapphires. “I knew it.”

“What? That’s nonsense,” Portia lied valiantly.

“Oh?” Jonesie sat down and stretched her legs. She yawned. “In that case, perhaps I’ll stay here.”

“You wouldn’t.”

Jonesie smiled sweetly. “There’s nothing I’d rather do, even on my half-day, than work here. I doubt anyone would mind.”

Portia glanced toward the door. Could people hear their conversation?

“Well, the truth is—” Portia sighed.

“You’re running away.” Jonesie’s voice remained curiously firm. “You’ve been acting odd all week.”

“I often act odd,” Portia protested.

Jonesie seemed to hide a smile.

Heavens.

This was no time to find amusement in anything. Portia placed her arms on her waist and pretended she was much larger and intimidating and important than she truly was.

“Perhaps you often act odd,” Jonesie acquiesced, “what with insisting on going out so often, and heavens knows, no one has ever seen you with any embroidery, but you don’t learn every day that you will not inherit the money promised to you if you don’t marry by the end of the year.”

Portia jerked her head to Jonesie. “You knew that?”

Jonesie sighed. “The servants have been discussing nothing else this week.”

Portia remained silent.

“You know, if you marry Sir Vincent, you might be able to have some of those dinner parties here. You’d be his wife. You’d have influence.” Jonesie’s voice was gentle.

“Perhaps.”

“It’s not a terrible prospect,” Jonesie said.

Portia sighed. “You must think I’m spoiled to not want it.”

Jonesie shook her head. “You’re lucky to even think you have more options. That’s a blessing.”

Portia smiled guiltily. “Are you here to tell me not to leave?”

“No.” Jonesie stood and narrowed the distance between them. “Take me with you.”

“What?”

“I imagine you found another husband?” Jonesie asked. “Because I’m really not up for a life of too much uncertainty.”

“I found another husband.” The tension from Portia’s back eased. She’d done that.

Jonesie gave a relieved sigh. “Oh, good. So I can continue to be paid?”

Portia grinned. “Indeed. I’ll have my fortune, after all.”

“Splendid.” Jonesie smiled, then she narrowed her gaze. “I heard the Duchess of Belmonte sneaked onto a ship bound for the Caribbean before she met the duke. I have no desire to go to the Caribbean.”

“You won’t,” Portia said. “But we will be taking a ship, and the ship leaves soon. So if you want to come—”

“—I’ll help you pack,” Jonesie said with a smile.

The next minutes were a delicious flurry of clothes being flung into the trunk, followed by a brief wait while Jonesie grabbed her small collection of belongings. They absconded from the townhouse and Sir Vincent.

Fortunately, they found a hack quickly and scrambled up the metal steps. Portia told the driver where to go, then the horses moved into a trot.

Soon they would be at the Docks, soon Portia would be married, and soon Portia could forget this temporary unpleasantness had ever happened. Hope surged through her, and she beamed.



CHAPTER EIGHT



“THIS IS MY FAULT,” Niles said mournfully, and his shoulders descended to an uncharacteristic slump as he leaned against the coach’s cushioned interior.

“Nonsense,” Colin said.

Niles’s newfound gloomy expression did not dissipate. “You’re being kind.”

“Well, it’s only partially your fault,” Colin amended.

“I abhor even partial faults.”

“I know.” Colin smiled. “It’s why I hired you. I have exceptional judgment.”

“Judgment that does not extend to cravat tie preferences,” Niles said.

“Just because you can tie a mathematical knot does not mean it has to be my preferred cravat choice,” Colin said.

It was not the first time Colin had expressed this particular argument, and Niles’s nostrils flared, but he did not deign to discuss any of his frequently used points on the benefits of going about in the world with an uncomfortable, if aesthetically appealing and envy-inducing cravat.

Colin supposed he was grateful for that silence.

“So the plan is to go to the London Dockyards and board a ship to Cornwall?” Niles asked.

Colin gave his best patient nod, the avuncular sort practiced by the kindest tutors at Harrow, the ones who’d happily got it into their minds that the best way to impart a love of knowledge in students was by not wielding rulers and whips.

Perhaps Niles’ strengths were really best confined to mending and the occasional fashion advice.

“We’ll be out on the open sea soon.”

“How nice.” Niles’s voice wobbled, and Colin gazed at his valet sharply.

“You have been on the water before?”

Niles nodded. “I had an uncle who used to take us out on rowing boats.” Niles’s face turned a curious shade of gray. “He seemed to think we would find it enjoyable.”

“Well, a ship is far more stable than a rowing boat,” Colin said. He decided not to add that the waters that a ship sailed in were likely to be far rougher than anything a rowboat was bound to reach. This was after all a time for optimism. They’d managed to leave the townhouse with a collection of clothes, a matter Niles insisted was of the utmost importance, as well as the papers. Sandridge’s new bride’s father would be much happier soon. His whole family would be.

“We’re doing a very good thing,” Colin said. “Sandridge didn’t expect the papers yet. He’ll be so pleased to have them.”

“How splendid.” Niles stretched a forced smile on his face.

The carriage jerked, and the carefully manicured townhouses, adorned with tasteful Grecian flourishes and the occasional floral and plant embellishment, disappeared. The curricles and barouches, driven by valiant drivers determined to pretend their carriages withstood any combination of dreck English weather and occupants might throw at them, had also disappeared. Evidently, their owners were content to round the nicer sections of Mayfair and Kensington, listing the superiority of their vehicles without ever truly testing them.

The streets widened, a concession to the heavy wagons that streamed from the docks. The

buildings were functional, designed more for their ability to store corn and grain than any aesthetic purpose.

A pungent scent filled the air, perhaps from the waters themselves. Shouts and orders streamed into the carriage, uttered by the sort of brusque types his nannies had always warned him to stay far away from. They were less intimidating now that Colin had grown, though Colin suddenly wished his coachman had been less fastidious in maintaining the carriage. Perhaps the wheels didn't need to be quite so freshly painted, perhaps the sides did not require such care in polishing, and perhaps the gilded crest, a compilation of lions and unicorns, did not need to sparkle with such magnificence.

Finally, the coach stopped before the Thames.

"Let's go, Niles." Colin flung the coach door open and scrambled out.

Niles moved from the carriage more gingerly, clasping hold of the bars, and gazing firmly at the thin set of stairs that led from the coach door, as if to prepare lest the steps suddenly collapsed before him.

"Don't worry, Niles," Colin said lightly. "There will be more room on the ship."

He turned his attention to the large ships that crowded the docklands. Workers scrambled to carry cargo off some of the ships. People shouted and pushed together, each seeming to be headed for a different ship.

Colin headed toward the nearest ship, conscious of Niles behind him, hauling the luggage.

A carriage rumbled quickly over the cobblestones, undeterred by the crowds of sailors, passengers, and workers.

"Carriages shouldn't speed," Niles grumbled. "Someone could get hurt."

A few passers-by yelled at the coach driver, adding various obscenities to underline their conviction, and Colin turned his attention to finding the ship.

Colin approached a sailor standing in a guardlike capacity at the gangway of a ship. "Where's the ship to Cornwall?"

"There's no ship to Cornwall today," the man said.

Oh.

"That's unfortunate."

The sailor eyed him oddly. "This is December. Ain't many people who want to go to Cornwall now."

"Cornwall is nice at any time," Colin said defensively.

The sailor raised his eyebrows. "You must not have traveled much."

"Where does this ship go?" Niles asked.

"Guernsey."

"Ah." Colin frowned.

That wouldn't do. Guernsey was part of the Channel Islands. It was insignificant and nowhere near any civilization. Certainly, France hardly counted after what they'd done in their revolution. Colin suspected visiting an island in December was not an improvement upon visiting Cornwall in December. The wind would bluster with even more effort, as if filled with aggression at the fact of being on this island, and as if it had resigned itself to going about the island toppling trees, breaking off branches, and generally forcing everyone to remain inside their cottages.

Niles nudged him and pointed in the direction of the swerving carriage.

Niles didn't strike him as a man prone to nudges, but Colin was supremely grateful for the nudge all the same.

People were exiting the carriage. And one of them looked curiously like Sir Seymour.

Well, one of them looked *precisely* like Sir Seymour.

Blast.

Sir Seymour was looking for him. And unfortunately, this time, he was not alone.

Colin had Sandridge's papers on his person. He wasn't going to disappoint his friend. Not after he'd managed to procure them after significant trouble.

Colin turned to the sailor brightly. "Well, this is our ship."

"You're going to Guernsey?" The sailor drew his eyebrows together. He eyed Colin and Niles with a scrutiny more commonly reserved for chief inspectors when surveying well-known criminals dressed in fine attire.

"Yes," Colin said. "We're going to Guernsey. We love Guernsey."

"It's all we speak about," Niles added, and Colin gave him a grateful nod.

Niles was getting into the spirit of things.

"Hmph. We don't have any more spaces on the ship."

"Oh?" Colin prided himself on his baritone, but right now, his voice was entering a higher pitch. He coughed and turned carefully away. Sir Seymour and his ruffians had stopped Colin's carriage. They were inspecting it with glee, despite the protestations of Colin's coachman.

Damnation.

This was not going well.

"You have no more tickets?" Colin asked faintly.

Niles cleared his throat. "We are the passengers you have been waiting for."

The sailor glanced at his passenger list. "Does that mean you're Mr. Rupert Andrews?"

Niles gestured toward Colin. "He's Mr. Rupert Andrews. I'm his manservant."

The sailor eyed Niles suspiciously. "I don't have you on the list."

"He travels in my cabin," Colin explained.

"Ah. Well, then. Follow me. I thought you wouldn't show up."

"How did you know he was waiting for someone else?" Colin whispered to Niles.

Niles gave a smug smile. "That's why he was on the gangway."

"Oh. You are wise."

"I share a similar wisdom in wanting you to have the elegance of a mathematical cravat," Niles said.

"Too much," Colin said. "Mustn't push your good fortune."

Niles kept a smile on his face though.

Colin allowed himself a gaze at the carriage. Sir Seymour and his men were looking most grumpy. Another glossy carriage approached, and a dark-haired man wearing spectacles, a top hat and tails leaped out. He sprinted toward the ship with flushed cheeks.

"That might be the real Mr. Rupert Andrews," Niles whispered.

"Then we must hurry," Colin said, shoving aside the tinge of guilt. Whatever this Mr. Andrews' eagerness to get on board the ship was, he was unlikely to be fleeing ruffians. No, Mr. Andrews could wait for the next ship. The man had been after all late.

The papers Colin carried would save a man's family. This might not be the most ethical thing Colin had ever done, but he was not going to surrender a man's fate for politeness.

Some things in the world were simply more important than being polite, and Colin vowed to dismiss Mr. Andrews and his inconvenient wait from his mind at once.

Colin adopted a quick pace up the gangway.

"You know, we're not supposed to go to Guernsey," Niles whispered.

“A minor inconvenience,” Colin said. “You’ll adore Guernsey. I visited Vernon and his wife there once. In fact, I believe they’re there now.”

Niles smiled, and his face appeared placated, perhaps eager to adopt the taste preferences of people in lofty positions.

“Once we’re in Guernsey, we’ll simply travel back, then take the next ship to Cornwall.”

Niles grimaced. “How exciting.”

Colin followed the sailor onto the deck. A few passengers were there, then the sailor opened a small door that led to the hull. They descended some steps, then followed the sailor to a small cabin.

Colin grinned. “This will be a wonderful trip, Niles.”



CHAPTER NINE



EXCITEMENT THRUMMED through Portia. The sailors cast off, shouting about wind direction and speed and similarly mysterious things. The sailors moved quickly in a clearly coordinated pattern, as if they were performing a long-produced play. Some sailors clattered up masts, others grabbed ropes, and others focused on the large sails.

“Perhaps we should go to our cabin,” Jonesie suggested.

“And miss this?” Portia found a bench, and they sat as the ship inched from the dockyard.

“This will take forever,” Jonesie murmured.

“It will get faster once we’re out on the sea,” Portia said.

“I hope so.”

Gusts billowed about them, and Portia placed her gloved hands on her knees, lest the wind coax her skirts to do something unladylike.

A few other passengers strolled onto the deck, evidently also eager to enjoy the view.

“Which one is Mr. Andrews?” Jonesie whispered.

Portia surveyed the other guests. “I don’t see him.”

“Are you certain?”

“Do you see a short man with brown hair and spectacles?”

“No,” Jonesie admitted after a few moments. “Though perhaps he’s in his cabin. In my experience, people with spectacles tend to enjoy reading.”

Portia tilted her head. “Perhaps.”

Two men crossed the deck. One of them seemed oddly familiar. But then, London assembly rooms swarmed with men in their late twenties who had regular builds and sufficiently symmetrical features to garner attention. Perhaps she’d seen him before, underneath a glimmering chandelier or kicking his legs to a reel.

Portia turned abruptly away from him, conscious she must have been staring and fixed her gaze on the horizon. The water was a murky mixture of gray and green that the ocean seemed to favor in winter. The wind rolled briskly over the waves, as if determined to keep the foamy waves from leaping from the ocean. Portia watched the wind and waves battle.

It didn’t matter if she could sense the presence of the man beside her.

It didn’t matter if she was conscious of his imposing size.

And it certainly didn’t matter if an odd warmth seemed to emanate from him.

Humans were warm. It was all very technical and scientific.

Where was Mr. Andrews? It was odd he had so little curiosity to make her acquaintance again. Heavens knew cabin rooms were most uninteresting.

Portia vowed to be patient, but that odd nervousness thrummed through her body again. When the sailor who had been at the gangway appeared, she flagged him down. “I have a question. Did Mr. Rupert Andrews board the ship?”

“Oh, yes,” the sailor said. “He and his manservant were the last people on board.”

“See?” Jonesie beamed. “You had nothing to worry about.”

“Thank you.” Relief moved through Portia. Obviously, Mr. Andrews would not have allowed her

to travel to Guernsey by herself.

This was truly excellent news. Still, an odd nervousness came through her. She'd been so surprised and happy that Jonesie had joined her that she'd forgotten to worry about any potential unpleasantness.

Mr. Andrews was here. Somehow, it had seemed nicer to imagine him in theory.

"Perhaps he's in the cabin making himself look nice for you. Retying his cravat, brushing his jacket." Jonesie's eyes sparkled with the glee of someone who'd read many romance penny dreadful and was certain of the consistent excellence of a romance.

Portia's cheeks warmed, and she turned to the landscape to distract herself, lest Jonesie comment on any resemblance her face might have to a tomato.

London was prettier when viewed by the Thames. The buildings were less ugly than when viewed up close, and as strange sentimentality surged through her. When would she be here again?



THE SAILOR HAD LEFT them, and Colin surveyed his new surroundings. The cabin seemed decent. Evidently, this Mr. Rupert Andrews was not one of these people without any money.

"There's a goddess on board the ship," Niles said enthusiastically. "A veritable goddess."

"Did she have a large bosom?" Colin asked.

Niles turned scarlet.

"Then it was very large," Colin said.

Niles jutted out his chin, as if the action might halt the sudden rosiness of his face. "All the best goddesses have large bosoms."

"Naturally," Colin said. "Titian would agree with you entirely."

"Quite," Niles said, less flustered now they were speaking about art.

"I didn't notice any women on board," Colin said.

"That's because you're not observant," Niles said. "There were two of them. And one of them had the most beautiful blue sparkling eyes."

Colin grinned. "You're already enjoying your time on the ship."

"It was merely an observance," Niles said with the aggrieved air of a man who wished someone had invented time travel so he could utilize it and not fall prey to Colin's teasing.

Colin arched his eyebrows as he sat on the bed and surveyed the small cabin.

Niles began to unpack the clothes and hang them in the wardrobe. He tapped the wardrobe door experimentally. "Do you think the furniture might fall on us if there's a storm, Your Grace?"

"I imagine everything is nailed to the walls."

A brief expression of relief fluttered on Niles's face before it was replaced. Going to Guernsey would be a definite delay, but no doubt the experience would be nicer than attending clove-and-nutmeg-scented Christmas balls.

Colin sighed.

He was going to have to marry at some point. He merely despised the excited looks of matchmaking mamas and proud papas when he asked a woman to dance and the inevitable stilted conversation.

Perhaps when he returned to London he should settle the matter. Suddenly, the world felt very dreary.

Damnation. He refused to be in this tiny cabin and contemplate his future.

"Let's go on the deck, Niles."

Niles shuddered. "And be closer to the water?"

Colin glanced at the wall. "I believe we're quite near the water now."

Niles swallowed hard and followed Colin's gaze. "On the other side?"

Colin nodded gravely, and Niles rose rapidly.

"Yes, perhaps we can acquaint ourselves with the deck," Niles said.

"Splendid," Colin said brightly.

Niles cleared his throat. "You will of course require more clothes."

A miserable feeling descended upon Colin. "More?"

"Indeed." Niles's voice remained firm. "The wind is liable to be even stronger when it has no buildings to block its speed. We shall be abandoning civilization."

"We mustn't get overdramatic. We're merely on the water."

"There is nothing overdramatic about leaving society." Niles placed a thick hat over Colin's head and wrapped a scarf about his cravat. Finally, he helped Colin into his greatcoat.

"One would think we were in Scotland," Colin said.

When Colin strode up the steps to the deck, a blustery wind greeted him, and he was suddenly grateful for Niles's guidance, even if it did appear unreasonably smug.

Colin suspected this was really more of a cargo ship as most of the people were sailors. Colin strode over the deck. No doubt islands had a habit of requiring supplies, even in December.

The ship had not yet exited the Thames. Colin took in the murky brown landscape as he strode toward the railing. Perhaps, in summer, verdant grass and wildflowers decorated the shores. But, now, the area was bare, framed by dark clouds flitting over the gray sky. Colin shivered.

Sandridge better be bloody grateful.

Niles's sharp inhale beside him drew his own eyes to where two women were sitting on a bench.

Colin spotted the Goddess quickly—one of the women had a large bosom, not obscured much even by her frockcoat. But it was the woman beside her who drew Colin's attention.

It was the woman from the library. The light in the library may have been dim, but he recognized the curve of those cheeks.

What on earth was she doing here?

Last week she'd been crying, telling him some sad tale about needing a husband. And now...

He stared at her.

"I don't think they require posting the banns in advance in Guernsey," Colin said.

Niles stared at him. "You think I should propose?"

"What?" Colin blinked, then it occurred to him Niles was referring to the blue-eyed woman with the considerable bosom. He smirked.

"Because that would be far too fast," Niles said decisively. "I'm surprised you suggested it."

Colin shrugged. "I suppose you could stick with introducing yourself."

Niles furrowed his brow.

"As a first step," Colin added. He wouldn't mind seeing Niles propose. He wondered whether Niles would kneel, even if it meant tarnishing his trousers.

"I-I couldn't do that," Niles said. "It wouldn't be seemly. One can't simply start speaking to strange women."

Colin supposed this was the reason Niles had never spoken about any woman before. He took Niles's arm and dragged him toward the women. He grinned, and it occurred to him he wasn't only amused to see Niles sudden besotted behavior. It would be quite nice to speak with the woman in the library again.



CHAPTER TEN



“DO YOU KNOW THOSE MEN?” Jonesie asked. “They’re glancing in our direction.”

Two men strolled toward Portia and Jonesie. Well, one of the men strolled toward them, and the other man dragged the other. It was a curious method of ambling. The men were clothed in warm woolen hats, mittens, and scarves, as if in the midst of a blizzard.

“I most certainly do not,” Portia said.

No doubt, these were the strange men teachers at Portia’s finishing school had always warned everyone about. She turned abruptly toward the view and pretended that hills devoid of any grass and wildflowers were fascinating to behold.

“I didn’t expect you to go to Guernsey.” An amaretto voice floated toward her, and despite her best instincts and all of the wisdom of her finishing school, she swung around.

She stared at a blond-haired man. His eyes glimmered, and his lips twitched.

She scrunched her forehead together. “Your voice is familiar.”

The man yanked his scarf from around his head and shot a furious look at his companion. “I told you that scarfs were unnecessary.”

And then Portia recognized him. “You’re the footman!”

“Indeed,” the man said, and the man beside him sputtered and coughed.

The footman slapped his companion’s back. “Mustn’t choke, Niles.”

“Very well,” the footman’s friend said. “Your Gr—”

The footman cleared his throat. “My name is Colin.”

The other man stared in obvious befuddlement, considering the speed which his lower lip fell and his eyes widened.

“Niles,” Colin interrupted and pointed at Jonesie. “Perhaps you would like to show this young lady the deck?”

Niles’s cheeks pinkened. “I’m sure she’s already seen it.”

“Niles...” The footman’s voice was stern, and Niles’s cheeks rosied.

He approached Jonesie haltingly. “Would you care to walk around the deck?”

“I couldn’t leave my mistress,” Jonesie said.

“I promise not to toss her in the ocean,” Colin said.

Jonesie’s blue eyes rounded.

“It’s fine,” Portia said. “I know him.”

“You know...a footman?” Jonesie blinked.

“No, she doesn’t,” Niles said.

Colin shot his companion a disgruntled look, and Niles and Jonesie hastily strolled about the deck.

“What are you doing here?” Colin asked.

“Oh, just holidaying,” Portia said brightly.

“With your lady’s maid.”

“Yes.” She frowned and glanced toward the door to the hull. “Mrs. Jones.”

“Ah. That’s disappointing.”

She turned to him. “You find the surname common?”

“I think my—er—friend will find the salutation disappointing.”

She blinked.

Colin leaned toward her. "He was rather hoping she was not married."

Portia smiled. "All lady's maids are given that salutation. It lends an air of respectability."

Colin grinned. "So Mrs. Jones is only pretending to be respectable?"

Portia stiffened. "I didn't say that. Of course, she's respectable." She frowned. "And as a footman, I would have thought you would know that."

"Er—right." Colin's face sobered. "I suppose Lady Amberley's lady's maid actually is married."

Portia blinked. "How curious."

Colin cleared his throat, as if the sound might succeed in distracting her. "I'm more interested in learning your name."

"It's Portia." She halted. Perhaps telling him her surname was unnecessary. One wouldn't want any gossip to happen.

He smiled. "Portia is a beautiful name."

She swallowed hard and glanced toward the door leading to the hull.

Colin craned his neck behind him. "I wonder whether I should feel insulted that you keep on glancing at the door. You're not even more distracted by a more handsome man. Just...air."

"I don't think there are more handsome men." Portia closed her mouth quickly.

Colin's eyes sparkled. "Is that so?"

The man smirked. Thin lips curled in an almost appealing manner.

Portia despised him. Handsome men were always giving knowing smiles, as if basking in the sheer symmetry of their faces.

"If you must know, I'm waiting for someone," Portia said stiffly.

"Who?"

Tension shot through her. She couldn't let him know she was traveling alone.

"That is none of your affair." She turned back toward the view. They'd left the Thames, and the ship tilted and swerved more, gliding uneasily through the increasingly rocky waves.

"Your guardian?" he asked.

She shook her head, and happiness moved through her. "My fiancé. Anyway, you shouldn't speak with me."

Colin wrinkled his brow. "That is not something I often hear."

"Truly?" Surprise shot through her. "I didn't realize Sir Seymour's managerial style was so lenient. I always imagined he would enjoy intimidating servants."

A ruddy color descended upon Colin's cheeks.

Perhaps the man didn't like to be reminded he was only a footman. But being a footman for a baron in a townhouse in London was not exactly a low position. After all, he was going on a holiday. That was not something most servants did. No doubt, Colin had ambitions of his own. Perhaps he aspired to be a butler one day. Perhaps reminding him of an employer who could not be termed precisely good-natured was not appealing to him on his holiday.

"I'm sorry," Portia said. "I shouldn't speak about your work. You're on holiday. I'm certain that's the last thing you desire to do. I only meant your presence might be difficult to explain."

"Not because I'm an—er—footman?"

"Because you're a man. Some men might find you intimidating."

His eyes shimmered again, and he chuckled. "But you wouldn't?"

"I might, but I don't want you to give me the chance to do so."

"No?"

“No.” Portia turned to the door again. Where was Mr. Andrews? She sighed. “Perhaps he’s already seen you.”

“Can’t be much of a man if he would be intimidated by me,” Colin said.

She smiled. “Then you find yourself not very intimidating?”

Colin furrowed his brow, but the sudden lines on his forehead did not make him appear less handsome than before.

She shrugged. If one were going to converse with a strange man, one might as well converse with a handsome one.

But then he’s not that strange.

Memories of the other night accosted her. He’d been oddly sweet, even though she was certain she’d been distracting him from his desk polishing duties.

She sighed. She should be thinking of Rupert Andrews, and the wonderful life *sans guardian* she would soon have.

The sailor approached Colin. “Mr. Andrews, the captain would like to invite you to sit with him at dinner.”

“Ah, I’d be honored,” Colin said.

“Mr. Andrews?” Portia stared at Colin. “That is a coincidence. I’m waiting for a Mr. Andrews.”

The man’s eyes widened, and he didn’t smile and he certainly didn’t laugh, even though he’d been smiling and laughing before. Portia would have thought he would find the coincidence amusing. Andrews might be a common surname, but this ship was hardly large.

“Mr. Rupert Andrews?” Colin’s eyes widened, and his previously ready smile vanished.



CHAPTER ELEVEN



A DULL FEELING SPREAD through Colin's stomach as he stared at the young lady from Sir Seymour's library. "You were expecting Mr. Rupert Andrews?"

She nodded rapidly. "Do you know him?" Luscious lips curved into a wide smile, and she giggled. "What am I saying? You must have seen him at Sir Seymour's."

"I'm more interested what his connection is with you," Colin said, though he had a horrible feeling he already knew.

"He's my betrothed." Portia's violet eyes danced, and she leaned toward him in a conspiratorial manner. "We're eloping."

Colin's throat closed in. "Indeed?"

"After all, Guernsey has the same lax requirements as Gretna Green. Besides, the weather is nicer."

"There are many muddy roads between London and Scotland," Colin said faintly.

"Precisely."

Colin exhaled. He needed to tell her that he'd ruined her plan. "Perhaps you would like to sit."

Portia raised her eyebrows. "I'm quite happy standing. I just want you to leave so Mr. Andrews is not confused by your presence. I don't normally speak with strange men. In fact, you're the only strange man I've ever spoken to."

Colin's lower lip fell down, as if she'd confessed an urge to murder him.

She sighed. "That was supposed to be a compliment."

Colin continued to stare at her, and his mouth opened and shut in a manner reminiscent of fish. Perhaps he'd simply acclimated to being at sea. Finally, he inhaled. "I'm afraid Mr. Andrews won't have a chance to be bewildered by my presence."

Portia stared at him.

Dash it. She didn't understand. Of course she didn't understand—there was no reason for her to think he'd stolen the place of her betrothed.

He could continue to muse about the coincidence of the fact that the sailor referred to him as Mr. Andrews and that her betrothed was also referred to as Mr. Andrews. She could continue to direct her attention to the door, and when he saw her looking unhappy later on this trip, by which time she would have resigned herself that her betrothed was not here, he could avoid her.

Still, that would not be right.

"I took his ticket," Colin confessed. "Therefore he's not on the ship, therefore he can't be disturbed by my presence."

Portia blinked, then shrank back. The movement caused Colin's heart to ache, as if she were tearing it from its comfortable setting within his ribs.

Then a smile spread over her face. "No, no. You've made a mistake. I know he's on the ship. I asked the porter. He told me he was the last to board." Portia returned her gaze toward the door. "He probably is just getting settled."

"He's not on this ship," Colin said gently. "I told the sailor my name was Mr. Andrews. I took his spot. I-I saw him after we were on the gangway. He was running toward the ship, but—"

"He didn't make it." Portia averted her eyes, but not before he noticed the pained expression on her face. "So if you hadn't come, I would be standing with him, not you."

Colin drew back. "Something like that."

"You ruined things," she said softly.

"Yes."

"Just because you wanted so desperately to get to Guernsey." Portia's voice wobbled. "I hope you enjoy your holiday."

Colin didn't think this was the time to tell her he hadn't even desired to go to Guernsey, and that if his coach driver had parked somewhere else, he would be headed for another location. Ensuring Sandridge's father-in-law's happiness might be a worthy goal, but Portia would most likely be less enthusiastic that it had come at the expense of her own.

"I'm sorry," Colin said.

"I'm sorrier." Her voice trembled, and she looked away. "Go."

Colin removed a handkerchief and gave it to her. "I can't leave you like this."

"Well, you shouldn't. But you also shouldn't have taken Mr. Andrew's place on this ship!"

Colin looked around. "I'll—er—see if I can find you another handkerchief."

"I don't need a handkerchief. I need a husband."

"You can marry Mr. Andrews when you return."

"There won't be time. I need a husband before Christmas, and the banns take long to announce."

"Several weeks," Colin said.

"That I don't have."

"I-I am sorry," Colin stammered.

Portia tilted her head, and an odd look drifted over her face. "The good thing is, you can fix it."

Relief surged through him. He could fix this.

Colin nodded rapidly. "Anything. Absolutely anything."

"I want you to marry me," Portia said.

"E-excuse me?" Colin asked, and his relief dissipated.

She'd proposed. Pushy parents and desperate debutantes thronged through London, but he'd never received a proposal before, despite his lofty title and corresponding wealth and land acreage.

"Well, obviously Mr. Andrews can't marry me anymore. And I do require a husband."

"And I'll do?" he asked hoarsely.

She sighed sweetly, and her eyes turned warm. "You mustn't worry about your status. I know you're a servant."

"And you would still marry me?" Colin wrinkled his brow. Footmen never married wards of baronets.

"I'll have plenty of money," Portia explained. "And I'll be sure to share some of it with you."

Colin stared at her.

"I know we don't know each other well," Portia said. "But I would be ever so grateful."

Colin tilted his head.

He was accustomed to matchmaking mamas and proud papas hinting at the supposed splendors of marriage, and the general suitability of their daughters to fulfill any duchess expectations. He wasn't accustomed to anyone being so openly blatant about proposing marriage.

He wasn't even certain women were supposed to be able to propose marriage; certainly he'd never heard of anyone else to do it.

Did she know he was a duke? Was this all an elaborate ruse?

Colin dismissed the thought instantly. He was fairly certain most members of the *ton* wouldn't even converse with footmen, at least not with footmen outside their home.

“What about your standing in society?” he asked.

She shrugged. “I’d rather have the money.”

He blinked. Her regard for her inheritance was refreshing. The women in London tended to pretend they had much in common with him, complimenting his taste in fashion, even though Niles regularly mourned that Colin had refused to compete with the Beau Brummels of this world. Still, he couldn’t marry her.

“Perhaps there’s someone else in Guernsey who has a more dignified position. Perhaps you can marry that person. I can put you in touch with the Duke and Duchess of Vernon. I believe they’re holidaying here.”

“How do you know the Duke and Duchess of Vernon?”

Colin’s cheeks warmed, and he scratched the back of his neck. “I—er—used to be a footman for him.”

“Ah.” Portia nodded.

“Would you like me to introduce you?”

Portia paused. “No, that’s not necessary. I’ll just marry you. Presuming you’re not violent.”

Colin scowled at the implication. “No, not violent.”

“And you don’t have a wife already?” Her eyes shimmered, as if she thought her interrogation amusing, as if she thought there couldn’t be any reason for them not to marry.

“No, no bigamist tendencies.”

“Well, then, it’s settled,” Portia said brightly, and something in her wide smile made his heart clench.

Still, marriage was a most unusual proposition.

“Shouldn’t you have more questions?” he pressed. “About likes? Values?”

“I don’t think that’s necessary. We won’t be living together, naturally.”

“Oh.” He blinked.

“I wouldn’t expect a true marriage.” She tossed her thick glossy locks.

“No?”

“You can continue to be a footman if you like,” Portia said. “You’ll just be a somewhat wealthier one.”

“I see.” He stared at her. “You’re serious.”

“Of course I’m serious,” she said matter-of-factly, as if the state of not being serious were some absurd condition that befell other, less thoughtful people. “So will you accept?”

He stared at her. The proper thing to do would be to refuse at once.

Blast it, he’d told her many lies.

Still...

He couldn’t quite form the word “no,” even though the one-syllable word had caused him little trouble before and had prevented him from much unpleasantness.

There was something appealing about her eagerness and no-nonsense demeanor.

In fact...

He couldn’t bring himself to reject her offer. She would, after all, lose her inheritance if she didn’t marry, and he would be the cause of it.

No. The gentlemanly thing to do would certainly be to accept, and if that fact came with a lifetime of being exposed to her, that wouldn’t be dreadful. After all, she didn’t expect them to even live together—his life could continue much the same as always. No one would find it terribly odd he’d married a debutante, and proud parents would no longer thrust their offspring at him in hopes he

would declare himself immediately infatuated.

He gazed at her, noting the manner her luscious dark curls swept over her face in the wind, the exact shade of pink of her lips, and the brightness of her violet eyes. He could spend the rest of his life with her. "I'm honored you asked me, and I'm happy to accept."

"Splendid." Portia's voice wobbled somewhat, and Colin smiled. He felt unsteady himself. It was gratifying the process hadn't been entirely simple for her.

She smiled

He smiled back.

An odd urge to sweep her in his arms overcame him. Wasn't that what most men would do after they became newly betrothed? But this wouldn't be that kind of betrothal, and they wouldn't have that kind of marriage.

Heirs.

Matrimony often resulted in children, and most peers expressed an eagerness to procure heirs. Well, he didn't require an heir, even if having children wouldn't be entirely intolerable. Still, he had younger brothers. Moreover, his younger brothers had already produced half a dozen potential Dukes of Brightling, and he suspected they would continue to have more children, given the enthusiasm with which they complimented their wives.

Blast.

He needed to tell her he was a duke. That was something a wife was bound to learn soon, and it was all he could do to keep Niles from saying 'Your Grace' before her.

"There's something you need to know," Colin said.

"Very well."

Colin raked his hand through his hair. "It's—er—hard to tell you."

She glanced at the horizon. "We have time."

"Yes, of course." He followed her gaze. Gray, foamy waves met an equally gray sky. No land interrupted the bare landscape. Guernsey remained far away. He inhaled. "The thing is, I'm not who I said I was."

She tilted her head. "You're not a footman?"

"No," he admitted, conscious the back of his neck was growing curiously warm, despite the steady spray of salty water the waves insisted upon sharing.

"But you were in Sir Seymour's room," she said. "You were polishing his table."

"I was pretending to polish his table when you were looking in my direction."

"But you did such a good job! You even paid attention to the drawers—" She halted and stared at him. "You're a thief."

He scrunched his lips together. No one besides Sir Seymour had called him that. Still, she had a point. "Well, technically."

"Heavens, I'm betrothed to a thief!" Portia buried her face in her hands.

A worried look appeared on the faces of Niles and Portia's maid.

"This is horrible," Portia wailed. She lifted her head. "But you were in livery."

Colin's shoulders descended downward. "I—er—stole that too."

Blast it, he really had behaved terribly.

Portia's violet eyes rounded, and her long dark lashes fluttered in obvious confusion.

"But I put it back," he added hastily. "That was more of a borrow situation."

"I-I see," Portia stammered, though it was obvious she didn't see.

"I haven't told you everything."

“You mean there’s more?” Her eyes widened in obvious horror, and she buried her face in her hands again. This time she did not withdraw her face, and Colin’s heart ached.

“It’s really not such bad news,” he said. “In fact, quite a few women might term it good news.”

“Because you’re good at stealing?” Portia sniffed and collapsed onto the bench. “Is that what paid for this fare? I suppose those women live in brothels in the East End.”

Portia’s maid hurried toward them, gamely sprinting over the ever-tilting deck of the ship, and unperturbed by the ever-greater waves. Niles followed swiftly behind.

“Is something wrong?” Niles asked tentatively.

Portia’s lady maid gave Niles a grateful smile, and it occurred to Colin that Niles had succeeded in winning her attention. Somehow, Colin had assumed he’d be more successful with women.

He looked at Portia. Her shoulders shook, as if she were crying. He doubted this counted as swooping a woman off her feet, even if she no longer stood.

Colin swallowed hard and forced a smile on his face. “We just became engaged.”

“Heavens!” Portia’s lady’s maid widened her blue eyes and clutched her hand to her heart.

“Meet my betrothed,” Colin continued. “Portia, this is my valet, Niles.”

“I’m pleased to meet you.” Niles turned to Colin. “Congratulations, Your Grace.”

Portia jerked her head toward Niles.

Niles stared at Portia.

Portia’s maid stared at Portia.

And Portia’s head moved from Colin to Niles. Portia eyed him suspiciously, and her forehead did that adorable scrunching business again. *Blast*. He shouldn’t focus on her forehead. It was most distracting, and Colin had the definite sense that foreheads weren’t supposed to be distracting.

“Did you say Your Grace?” she asked Niles. “Forgive me. That’s a silly question. I—er—must have misheard you.”

“You didn’t,” Colin said. “Niles’s enunciation is excellent. It’s one of his strengths.”

“I have many strengths,” Niles explained with a smile.

“Indeed, he does.”

“My top strength, actually, is cravat tying. If you would like to see him in a mathematical tie—”

“Wait.” Portia blinked. “You’re his valet?”

“Indeed.”

Portia’s maid turned to Niles. “You’re the valet for a *duke*?”

Niles beamed. “I am.”

Portia’s maid stared at his hands. “You must be very nimble.”

“I am,” Niles said, and there was an odd moment of tension between them, as if Portia’s lady’s maid were imagining all the things his fingers might do.

“You said the word duke.” Portia’s tone was wondrous.

“That’s right,” Niles said gaily, then frowned. “Though if you’re betrothed to him, I would have thought you would have known.”

“I didn’t.”

“Well, now you know,” Niles said. “That means you’re going to be a duchess. A duke is married to a duchess.”

“I suspect she is familiar with the concept,” Colin said gallantly.

“Well, she didn’t know you were a duke,” Niles said. “That’s rather basic knowledge.”

“I suppose I didn’t get the invitations to those balls,” Portia said faintly. She stiffened and turned to Colin. “I-I can’t marry you now.”



CHAPTER TWELVE



COLIN WAS A DUKE.

Heavens.

She'd managed to convince a duke to marry her.

The fact should have made her overjoyed. Every debutante dreamed of marrying a duke, and every teacher at her finishing school had noted the successful alumnae who'd succeeded in grabbing that loftiest of titles: duchess. Portia, certainly, had nothing against dukes.

"You said no?" Colin asked haltingly.

Portia was silent. She opened her mouth, but the act of speaking seemed impossible, as if the wind had swept away her diaphragm and vocal chords as efficiently as it moved the ship across the English Channel.

"I'm sure she didn't mean that," Jonesie said hastily. "Isn't that so, Miss?"

Jonesie gave her a stern look that a less charitable woman might have deemed impertinent.

Portia sighed. She didn't blame any of them for being surprised. In fact, Portia was almost tempted to tell Colin that she had, in fact, meant to tell him they would of course still marry. *Almost.*

The fact was that Portia couldn't marry him. She'd thought Colin was a footman, a man who might be happy to become somewhat wealthier. But Colin was a duke; he was already wealthy. He didn't need her. If she married him, she would always be in his debt. Perhaps now he fancied being heroic. It was a whim that was not uncommon in men in possession of certain honorable characteristics.

No. She couldn't marry him. He didn't need a hasty marriage with a woman he barely knew. She'd already lived with Sir Vincent's comments about the great sacrifice he was making by taking her in. She didn't want a lifetime of reproach.

Besides, people fell in love. Most of her friends had fallen in love this year and married. What if Colin fell in love with someone, then couldn't marry that person?

No, Portia would not hold him to his idiotic, if marvelously gallant, acceptance of her proposal.

"It was most kind of you to accept my unresearched offer."

Portia vowed to act with pragmatism. There was no point entering an institution as irreversible as marriage with anything else.



COLIN FROWNED. THIS was not how proposals were supposed to go, even if he wasn't the person who'd technically done the proposing. "You asked me to marry you."

"You weren't supposed to be a duke," Portia protested. "You were supposed to be a footman. You were dressed like a footman."

"Most women might think it a pleasant surprise to find they're marrying a duke," Colin said. "Their eyes might even glisten and their cheeks might even pinken."

"And then you would glance at them smugly?" Portia asked.

He shrugged. "That would be optional."

"Oh, you're being impossible," Portia said.

"But you'll marry me?" Colin asked.

"Of course she'll marry you," Portia's maid blurted.

Portia glowered. "You're being talkative."

“Only when necessary,” her maid replied.

“Then we’ll marry in Guernsey,” Colin said. “This ship will land there tomorrow. It’s all settled.”

“But I don’t understand. You don’t have to do this. You can marry anyone.”

“And I chose you.”

“But you would never marry me if I hadn’t needed a husband. And if you felt guilty you told the sailor you were Mr. Andrews.”

“No,” Colin admitted, “that’s true. Though I’m sure that’s a character flaw. It’s best not to dwell on that.”

Portia studied him. What was she thinking?

“I should go to my cabin,” Portia said. “Please forget this.”

Damnation.

This was Colin’s fault. Portia’s lower lip was trembling as she turned away. He was damned if he was going to allow her lips to continue to tremble.

“Wait!” Colin called.

Portia swung around. Her long skirt swirled, and it made her look small and frail. “What is it?”

Colin knelt on the deck, ignoring the sudden hoots from sailors.

“Marry me,” Colin said.

Portia stared. “E-excuse me?”

“You wanted a husband. Perhaps Rupert is still in London, but I’m here.”

Portia tilted her head. She was supposed to be delighted. She was supposed to smile in that delightful way of hers. Colin was certain of it.

But only bafflement was on her face.

“You needn’t look so bewildered,” Colin said. “Most women would be happy to have a proposal from me.”

Her lips twitched. “How conceited of you.”

“But I’m not wrong.”

She was silent.

Somehow it seemed terribly important that she smile.

“I know you don’t love me,” Colin said.

“You don’t love *me*.”

Colin was silent.

“But I would still make a good husband,” Colin said. “I am a duke.”

“You’re just proposing to be honorable,” Portia said.

“I always knew I had to marry one day,” Colin said. “There’s no reason why it shouldn’t be you.”

Hurt moved on Portia’s face.

“Look,” Colin said hastily. “I won’t have your life be ruined just because I got Mr. Andrews’s ticket.”

“So as atonement for that, you’ll marry me?”

He nodded. “You do understand.”

“I don’t want to be an atonement.”

“Oh, you have other advantages.” Colin shifted his legs over the swaying deck. “Your features are tolerable.”

She blinked, and regret pulsed through him immediately.

“I didn’t mean that,” he said awkwardly.

She'd been hoping to marry this other man, and instead he'd only mocked him to her and offered himself.

No wonder she must despise him.

"Look," he said. "Perhaps you loved Mr. Andrews and that's why you chose him to marry."

She stared at him.

"I'm afraid I don't know much about love," he said. "But when we return, you can be with him."

"Excuse me?" Her forehead furrowed in an adorable manner.

"Or someone else," he said hastily. "He might not like that you married another man. I—er—don't know him well."

"Most people would find that displeasing."

He shrugged. "Well, then he would be missing out. He should be enjoying having such a beautiful woman."

A strange flicker passed over her face.

He took her hands in his, and a jolt of energy passed through him. Her fingers were warm, even though it was cold outside, even though they shouldn't be warm.

She looked at him strangely, and he dropped her fingers. No doubt, she thought him odd for clasping onto her hands for so long.

"I'm sorry." His voice lacked its customary vigor. "What I meant to say is that I wouldn't expect you to be tied to me. But I do want to marry you."

Understanding finally moved over her face. "For my money? Are you one of those penniless dukes? Because I can be helpful in that regard."

He blinked. "I have loads of money. I come from a long line of ancestors who liked nothing more than managing their money, making good investments, ensuring their estate had the most modern equipment, and being all-around dull."

"Oh." Her shoulders seemed a trifle shorter than they'd been before.

Colin forced himself to stop gazing at her shoulders, no matter how appealing they were.

"I would advise you to accept and have a kiss," Niles told Portia. "Kisses make everything better."

Colin suddenly remembered why he'd hired Niles, despite his valet's insistence on the benefits of uncomfortable cravats. He narrowed the distance between Portia and him and swept her into his arms.

"But I haven't said yes." Her voice trembled, and her gaze darted to his lips.

"But you will," Colin said.

Her lips were soft and full. They parted, and he wanted to delve into them.

Sailors applauded, and she blinked, perhaps startled by the noise of clapping. Sailors managed to be quite noisy, even when they were just banging their hands together and not shouting instructions and profanities over the wind.

"Please let me back up," she said.

Colin sighed, then swept Portia back up, enjoying the feel of her tiny waist in his hands. To his surprise, he didn't want to release her. He'd wanted to kiss her. He still wanted to kiss her.

Her dark eyes stared at him. They appeared stunned, and he gave her a lazy smile, the kind that always made women giggle and ruminate over his boyish qualities.

Then Portia scrambled from his arms, straightened, and...glared. "You almost kissed me."

"Yes." He grinned, and his heart fluttered.

Portia stepped toward him, and for a moment, he thought she might kiss him.

Instead, she slapped his cheek.

He blinked.

“Come, Jonesie,” Portia said.

Portia’s maid’s eyes widened, but she followed Portia toward the door to the hull.

Colin rubbed his cheek, then turned to Niles. He smiled. “She’s going to be my wife.”



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

PORTIA PACED THE CABIN she shared with Jonesie. "I shouldn't have slapped him."

"No," Jonesie agreed for the thousandth time.

Portia swung around. "But he was going to kiss me."

Jonesie should be expressing outrage. That was the sort of agreeableness she expected from her maid. But instead, Jonesie smiled. "He thought you were becoming engaged."

"Well, we're not."

"Perhaps you still can be. He did seem certain."

Portia waved her hands dismissively. "The man has good manners and wouldn't withdraw his proposal immediately. A grasp of etiquette is hardly unusual for peers."

Jonesie swerved her head away with rapidity, but not before Portia noticed a smirk forming on her maid's face.

"I hope you don't find this amusing."

"But isn't it amusing?"

"Absolutely not." Portia crossed her arms. "And the worst thing is—"

"Yes?" Jonesie stared at her, but Portia averted her eyes.

"Well, the worst thing is, now we can't be on the deck. It would be far too embarrassing."

"You wouldn't be intrigued to see the duke again?" Jonesie's eyes shimmered.

"Of course not."

"He is very handsome," Jonesie mused.

"And he knows it. A dreadful combination."

Jonesie shrugged. "He would have to be terribly unintelligent *not* to know. Those cheekbones—set so perfectly high, and that nose—so straight. Quite distinguished."

"You needn't catalog his strengths," Portia said. "We're never going to see him again."

"If you say so." Jonesie used the sort of condescending voice a mother might use when a child explained that the sky was bound to turn green tomorrow.

A knock sounded on the door, and the porter appeared. "Would you care to join Captain Mortimer for dinner with Mr. Andrews?"

Portia rolled her eyes. "Ha. Absolutely not."

"She does not care for the company of Mr. Andrews," Jonesie rushed to say.

"Indeed." Portia tried to forget that their conversation had been quite pleasant...before the proposals and dishonesty, of course.

The porter scrunched his forehead together.

"Please just bring our food to the cabin," Jonesie said. "We'll be remaining here."

The porter nodded and left.

Portia plopped onto her bed. "I'm sorry, Jonesie. I'm being difficult."

"The situation is difficult."

Portia tilted her head. "You probably want to see the duke's valet again. You seemed to be getting on well together."

Jonesie smiled. "Romance doesn't blossom that quickly, even if he was quite good at pointing out seagulls."

"See!" Portia said triumphantly. "It doesn't blossom that quickly. The duke never should have

accepted my proposal.”

“Of course,” Jonesie said thoughtfully, “it was the first time I met Niles. It seems this was the second occasion you met the duke.”

“I’m sure it takes more than two meetings to decide to marry someone,” Portia grumbled.

“This is an unconventional situation.” Jonesie’s eyes sparkled in that infuriating manner again.

When the porter arrived with their food, Portia quickly ate her meal. The sooner she did that, the sooner she could go to bed, and the sooner this day would be over.

“Are you certain the reason you’re upset is not just that you were looking forward to marrying him when you thought he was a footman?” Jonesie asked.

“Nonsense.” Portia frowned and focused on her vegetables. The cabbage demanded attention.

Jonesie was thankfully silent the rest of the evening, at least on the uncomfortable topics of life and love, but when Portia snuggled into her berth, her mind remained on Colin, still on his ridiculous acceptance of her proposal, still on the manner in which strong arms had held her, and still how his lips had almost touched hers.

She despised him.

She had to.



NEITHER PORTIA NOR her maid made an appearance the next day, and they were similarly absent the day after.

But when Guernsey appeared on the coast, and the ship slowed as it made its way into the harbor, the women finally appeared.

Colin beamed when he saw them. Portia was every bit as lovely as she had been before, even if she seemed careful to not make eye contact. Her long dark lashes fluttered down in a becoming manner, and Colin valiantly resisted the urge to dash toward her and declare his delight at seeing her again after her unnecessary enforced absence.

Colin had always scoffed when his friends had termed him impetuous before, but now it occurred to him they might have had a point.

He hadn’t intended to marry so soon, and he’d always imagined a lengthy courtship with time for the appropriate number of curricule rides through Hyde Park and strolls through rose gardens.

Still.

Portia met all the qualifications to be a bride. There was no reason to leave her penniless because he’d had the gall to steal someone else’s berth.

He focused on Guernsey and pretended the pastel-colored houses in the idyllic harbor were as interesting as Portia. Night was falling, and the sunset cast a pink and golden glow.

“It’s pretty,” Niles said.

“Yes,” Colin assented.

The ship soon cast anchor, and a shore boat was prepared for them.

“Good evening, Your Grace,” Portia said in a polite voice Colin despised. He rather preferred the plucky woman who’d convinced him to marry her.

“Good evening.” Colin lowered his torso into an elegant, practiced bow, unencumbered by even the tilting of the ship.

Portia turned to the captain. “When do you return to London? I would like to overnight in my cabin.”

“Oh, I’m afraid we’re off to France next,” Captain Mortimer said. “We won’t be back here for a

while.”

Portia’s face paled, and Colin’s heart squeezed.

“A while?” Portia’s voice rose miserably.

“But you must have other ships going to England,” Colin said.

“Oh, yes,” Captain Mortimer said. “The next one leaves tomorrow at midday.”

Portia gave a relieved smile, and Colin’s heart swelled, even though he realized that strategically, it might be more beneficial for him if they were delayed longer in Guernsey. Perhaps then, he could convince her to marry him.

“You don’t by any chance have a ship sailing to Cornwall?” Niles asked the captain.

“Not anytime soon,” the captain said.

“Ah, how unfortunate.”

“Cornwall?” Jonesie’s eyes widened.

“We are quite the travelers.” Colin put an arm about his valet’s shoulders.

“Very adventurous,” Niles said, and Jonesie’s lashes fluttered more.

Colin chuckled. “Even the snow can’t keep us away. I suppose we’ll have to find an inn before the next ship to London. There won’t be time to see my friends.”

“You want to return directly to London too?”

“More time with you, my dear.” Colin winked, but instead of smiling or blushing, she turned her head sharply toward her maid. He sighed. “Actually, I’m not trying to follow you. It is essential I reach Cornwall.”

Colin extended his hand to Portia to help her into the shore boat. She pasted an unwelcome frown on her face and marched onto the boat herself. The others joined, closely crowded with a few sailors who were evidently eager to experience Guernsey nightlife.

Niles peered at the water. “I suppose it’s cold.”

“I imagine,” Colin said lightly.

The wind certainly was plenty cold. It moved briskly about them, as if to taunt them of the fact they needed to disembark and couldn’t simply stay on the ship. Still, it wasn’t the ship’s coldness Colin focused on—it was Portia’s.

Her brunette hair fluttered in the heavy wind. Her chignon collapsed, and Jonesie shot Portia a horrified look.

“I’m sorry, Miss. We lost some pins.”

“I think your hair looks beautiful,” Colin said firmly.

“Well, it’s not proper to show it,” Jonesie said.

“My reputation is already ruined,” Portia said.

“Not when you marry me,” Colin replied.

“You cannot still be serious.”

“I exude seriousness,” Colin said.

“That’s not what your tutors at Harrow said,” Niles said.

Colin shot his manservant a disgruntled look. “That was on matters of geometry and geography. Those are entirely different.”

The shore boat bumped against the dock.

“We’re here,” the sailor announced brightly. Colin stepped up, then assisted the ladies from the shore boat.

“Where’s the inn?” he asked the sailor.

“Just at the end of the harbor.”

“Splendid.” Colin turned to them. “Isn’t this a marvelous adventure?”

The others were not appropriately enthusiastic in their responses. No doubt, Portia remained upset he’d stolen Mr. Andrews’ place. Colin sighed. Perhaps he’d misjudged things. He’d assumed Portia was marrying Mr. Andrews for the convenience and decided financial benefit of having a husband, but perhaps he’d been wrong. Perhaps she cared for the man. Colin had dismissed Mr. Andrews as being short and wearing spectacles, but perhaps the true fact was that Colin was tall and hadn’t read enough as a child to even require spectacles.

He strode slowly toward the inn, and when Portia expressed a desire for her food to be sent to her room, Colin did not protest. He resigned himself to supporting her in marrying Mr. Andrews.

Colin said goodnight to the others and decided to remain in the pub portion of the inn. Normally, the honey-colored wooden floorboards, paneled walls, and matching chairs and tables were comforting. The hum of the other patrons as they threw words like “snow” and “Christmas” hardly distracted him from his sudden odd urge toward melancholic musings. Evidently, even people in Guernsey liked to muse about weather patterns. One wondered what they might do if they lived in a place with an actual changing weather.

He sighed and approached the publican. “Give me your best drink.”

“Very well. You’re going to like it.” The publican handed him a drink, and Colin imbibed warm liquid that burned his throat in a familiar manner. The drink would almost be good if it weren’t marred by...spices.

“Does this have cinnamon in it?” Colin asked.

The publican beamed. “*And* nutmeg.”

“Gracious.”

“It’s good, isn’t it?”

Good wasn’t the word Colin would use to describe it. Atrocious would be a more apt description, though the publican might not appreciate the preciseness of that particular word.

“Is this for Christmas?”

“Best season in the world.”

“I think I need another drink,” Colin said faintly. “Though—er—perhaps you can hold the spices.”

The publican frowned. “I have mulled wine if you prefer. Or egg nog.”

“That’s not necessary,” Colin said.

The publican shrugged, and soon Colin drank his fresh brandy.

Then he drank another brandy.

And finally, he drank another brandy.

It was far better to drink brandy than to think about Portia.

Finally, the world dulled and became blurry. The Christmas music softened, and the candles danced with such fortitude he could almost ignore the red ribbons tied to each candlestick.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN



PORTIA ROSE RELUCTANTLY when Jonesie woke her. Her night had been full of the uneven sleep of one who fears she might be making a mistake.

“Time to go to the ship,” Jonesie said. “Are you certain you won’t accept the duke’s kind offer?”

“Of course. I could never permit him to act on such impulsivity.”

“I think he’s genuine.”

“Perhaps now, but I don’t want him to resent me later. I couldn’t stand that.”

An odd look flickered over Jonesie’s face.

“What is it?” Portia asked.

“Nothing.” Jonesie helped Portia pull her dress over her shift. “You just strike me as caring for him.”

“Perhaps.” Portia sighed. “Heavens, I’ll have to look for governess positions when I return.”

“Just don’t mention your adventure to Guernsey.”

“I’ve been so foolish,” Portia said miserably.

“Come now,” Jonesie said. “Let’s get you to the ship. It’s a nice day—it even snowed last night.”

“Snow!” Portia smiled. “Just in time for Christmas!” Her face saddened. “Though this won’t be an enjoyable Christmas.”

Jonesie squeezed her hand, and the women exited the room. Colin and his manservant were waiting for them in the public house with food.

Colin gave her a grim smile. “I suppose you haven’t changed your mind?”

She shook her head.

“Then let’s return to London,” he said.

“Very well.” Portia nodded.

They left the inn and proceeded toward the ship. It sailed toward them, but the masts and sails weren’t what Portia focused on. Snow dotted the landscape. It covered the pastel houses and every road.

“It’s beautiful,” Portia breathed.

Colin smiled at her. “Indeed.”

They strode toward the harbor. Portia’s nostrils contracted at the brisk, frigid air.

“It’s a pity we couldn’t be here longer,” Jonesie remarked.

Portia’s face stiffened, but she forced herself to smile.

“It’s good there’s another ship,” Colin said. “Perhaps you’ll have a chance to marry Mr. Andrews after all.”

“I doubt there will be time for that,” Portia said.

“You mustn’t give up hope,” Colin said with his customary confidence.

“Well, that would be preferable to her marrying her guardian,” Jonesie declared cheerfully.

Colin scrunched his forehead together. “He’s surely not a contender?”

“He offered to marry me so I could retain my fortune,” Portia said.

“And he didn’t tell her about the clause in the will that would have her lose everything until it was almost too late,” Jonesie continued with the peculiar glee unique to sharing good gossip.

Colin widened his eyes.

“The duke doesn’t need to know everything,” Portia said.

Jonesie's cheeks pinkened. "Of course, Miss."

Portia didn't want Colin to feel sorry for her. Not after he'd offered to marry her. That had been a good and honorable thing, and the man should only feel pleasant emotions.

They neared the ship, which was now anchored. A shore boat was being lowered with passengers. No doubt, they would take the shore boat to the ship once it arrived.

Brisk air rustled the long strands of yellow and green grass, and they rolled pleasantly, as if seeking to rival the waves. Trees bent forward, and their few leaves rustled, as if delighting in the sudden athleticism. Foamy waves moved quickly up the gold pebbled beach.

"There's bad weather," the man said. "That ship ain't going anywhere until the weather clears. It's certainly not going to London."

Portia glanced at Colin.

"It doesn't seem that dreadful." Colin tilted his head, as if half-expecting to find a fleet of steel clouds. "Just a few snowflakes."

"That's not how the captain will feel," the fisherman said. "You mark my words."

"Well, we'll just speak with him ourselves," Colin said.

Nervousness moved through Portia, and she stared at the sky. Snowflakes landed on her nose and cheeks, and she swept them away, staring at the pretty shapes.

Perhaps the snow wasn't simply pretty. Perhaps it was every bit as ominous as the fisherman claimed.

Portia didn't have that much money. She couldn't just take a sudden long holiday. People would notice her absence then, and it would be harder to find a position as a governess or companion.

The crowded shore boat approached them. She glanced at the different people, noting their woolen hats and thick greatcoats.

Then Portia's gaze stopped, halting at a man with curly gray hair. The strands were still visible underneath his beaver hat. Portia nudged Jonesie. "Is that—"

Jonesie followed her gaze to the boat. "Great Golly!"

"Maybe he just resembles him," Portia said.

"No. That's him." Jonesie's eyes were wide. "That's Sir Vincent."

"What are you two speaking about?" Colin asked.

Portia opened her mouth, but she couldn't bear to form the words, and she soon closed it again.

A flicker of worry moved over Colin's face. Well, Portia's face was probably being pummeled with worry.

Sir Vincent spotted them and clambered up. "Portia. Dearest!"

"Sir, you must sit down," a sailor said.

"Sir Vincent," her guardian declared. "Not merely sir."

The sailor rowed the last few yards valiantly with a pained expression on his face, despite Sir Vincent's continued upright position.

"Portia!" Sir Vincent waved, and the shore boat quivered threateningly.

Portia returned his wave reluctantly.

Heavens.

He'd found her.

Which meant he would remain with her. He would ensure there was no chance she might marry Mr. Andrews. He would ensure there was nothing she could do but marry him. Even hopes of running off to be a companion, to be a governess, to be—heavens—a *nanny*, were now impossible. No doubt, Sir Vincent appreciated the income she would bring him.

How on earth had he found her? But she shouldn't be shocked. Sir Vincent was a powerful man. Heavens, she hadn't even changed her name for the passenger log.

She just hadn't expected him to follow her. If Mr. Andrews were here, it wouldn't matter.

But he wasn't here.

Everything is over.



PORTIA'S FACE PALED, as if it were attempting to compete with the snowflakes flitting down at an ever more rapid rate. She tightened the hold on her maid's arm, and her legs quivered.

Well, if she fainted, Colin would catch her. There would be absolutely no uncomfortable collisions with icy ground and subsequent rollings into the harbor.

That he could ensure.

He stared at the man who seemed to have caused both ladies such distress, recognizing him vaguely from various concerts and festivities.

"I found you," the man bellowed, pointing a gloved hand in Portia's direction.

Portia shifted her legs over the snow and gave him a strained nod.

Sir Vincent scrutinized her, slamming thick salt-and-pepper eyebrows against each other. "You shouldn't have fled."

"I'm sorry," Portia squeaked.

The passengers stared at them, equally bewildered by this exchange. The shore boat touched the harbor walls, and the fisherman who had given such distressing news about the weather helped anchor it.

Colin didn't need to touch her to sense that every muscle in her body was on alert, was worried.

He didn't want her to feel that way.

"Is that your guardian?" Colin whispered.

"Yes," Portia answered in a soft, wobbly voice that tore at his heart.

"Let me off first." Sir Vincent scrambled from the boat, stepping over people, despite the fact he was not positioned nearest the harbor wall. The boat rocked awkwardly, and for a moment, Colin wondered whether the man might plunge straight in.

He did no such thing.

Instead, he marched toward Portia. The lace on his old-fashioned collar fluttered in the wind, the dainty fabric contrasting with his fierce expression. "You shouldn't have made me come get you."

"I-I know," Portia stammered.

Colin didn't like this new, meeker Portia. Portia had done something brave and incredible. She should be praised for it, and she should be proud of it.

"So you were trying to elope," Sir Vincent said. "Well, that didn't happen, did it?"

Portia shrank back.

The rest of the passengers filed from the boat, their steps slowed by the spectacle. Colin attempted to look nonchalant, as if this were a normal conversation, of absolutely no interest to anyone.

"How do you know she hasn't eloped?" Colin asked.

"I spoke with Mr. Andrews. He was still at the dock when I arrived."

"You followed me to the Thames?" Portia's voice reached an unusually high pitch. "And how did you know we planned to marry?"

Sir Vincent managed to look guilty. "You were acting strangely."

“You must have told someone to follow me if I left the house.”

“Yes. But only because your safety is paramount. After all, I’m your guardian.” He gave her a sickly sweet smile.

Colin resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

“But now that I’m here, *we* can marry,” Sir Vincent said. “After all, we’re in Guernsey.”

“The thing is…” Portia’s voice shook. “I don’t want to.”

Sir Vincent’s eyebrows narrowed. “You do not have any other options, my dear. You’ve been traveling by yourself. Who would want to hire you for a position? You hardly emulate ladylike caution and responsibility.”

“You mean you would tell people?”

Sir Vincent shrugged. “I couldn’t keep something like that serious, if someone desired a personal reference. It would be unseemly not to mention it. My word is important, after all.”

Portia’s face fell.

Colin cleared his throat. “Sir Vincent, I believe we’ve met before.”

Sir Vincent stared at him. “Ah, Brightling. Sorry to bore you with this family matter. I see you’re in line to board the ship.”

“Yes,” Colin said.

Sir Vincent nodded. “What a pleasure to see you here.”

“And I am glad to see you,” Colin said.

Portia shot him a quizzical look, but Sir Vincent puffed out his chest and shot Colin a wide smile, a mixture of pride and smugness.

“I’m afraid I have news of some inconvenience for you,” Colin said.

Sir Vincent shot an apologetic look at Portia. Clearly he regarded Colin as a bumbling, self-obsessed aristocrat.

“You see,” Colin said, “Portia and I are married.”



CHAPTER FIFTEEN



THE WORLD DIDN'T MAKE sense. If it made sense, Colin North, the Duke of Brightling, would not be announcing to her uncle that they were married. Portia stared at him. Jonesie stared at him. Colin's manservant, though, only beamed, as if impressed by his employer's quickness of thought.

"What?" Sir Vincent widened his eyes, then sucked in a noisy breath. "I'm—er—afraid I misheard."

"Portia is my bride," Colin said, his voice firm, as if he were stating the capital of France.

Portia swallowed hard, and Colin grasped her hand with his. Warmth emanated from him, despite the icy cold, and swirled up the back of Portia's neck.

Sir Vincent frowned. His mouth opened and shut, as if he were replicating some of the favored movements of the fish he'd left in the English Channel.

"You're t-truly married?" Sir Vincent stammered.

Colin squeezed her hand. *Hard.*

"Yes." Colin turned to Portia and kissed her hand. "To the loveliest woman in the world."

"Well," Sir Vincent sputtered. "Well, well." He extended his hand to his head, then lowered it, as if he'd forgotten hair raking was not a doable practice when wearing top hats. "I suppose I should offer congratulations."

"Precisely," Colin said. "Thank you."

"Y-you're welcome." Sir Vincent stared at them both, and Portia shivered. She had the uneasy sense Sir Vincent was assessing whether she was truly sufficiently beautiful to attract the duke, and could not come to an affirmative answer.

"Now, if you will excuse me, my bride and I are heading back to England." Colin took Portia's hand and headed toward the shore boat.

The sailor was rowing alone toward the ship.

"Wait!" Colin hollered, and his voice barreled over the blustering gusts.

The sailor frowned.

"We're boarding the ship!" Colin said. "It's returning to London, right?"

The sailor shook his head. "No, you're not. Not with this weather."

"I told you," the fisherman said. "The ship cannot go in this weather."

"But when will it leave?" Colin asked. "Later today? Tomorrow?"

The men laughed.

"You'll be lucky if it leaves this week," the sailor shouted.

The men nodded knowledgeably.

"Because of the weather?" Colin asked.

"That and it's Christmas," the fisherman said.

Christmas.

Colin grimaced. "Well, my wife and I will go back to the inn."

"You're really married," Sir Vincent said.

"Yes." Colin clutched hold of Portia's hand. "Yes, we are."

Portia nodded meekly, too bewildered to protest. She hoped Colin had a plan.

"You're not going back to the inn," the fisherman said. "It closes for Christmas."

Sir Vincent glanced at Colin. "You didn't plan this well."

A disgruntled look spread over Colin's face. "I wouldn't have had to plan so last minute if my now-wife's guardian hadn't withheld important information from her until the last moment."

Heavens.

Colin always appeared jovial, but after a few minutes with her guardian, he looked dreadful. No doubt, he was regretting announcing they were married.

"I have friends on Guernsey," Colin said. "My lovely bride and I will visit them."

Then, before Sir Vincent could answer, they hurried away.

"Why did you tell him we were married?" Portia whispered.

A guilty look drifted over Colin's face. "I'm awfully sorry about that. I thought if we told him we were married, he wouldn't insist on marrying you here. I thought we could sail back to London on this ship, and then I could take Mr. Andrews and you to Canterbury to get a special license."

"Oh." She stared at him, impressed by his thoughtfulness.

"I know you wanted to marry him."

Portia averted her gaze. "And why didn't you simply tell him we were engaged?"

"I didn't want to have to get married here. I know now you care about Mr. Andrews—that's why you didn't want to marry me. I'm sorry I pressured you. It was most ungentlemanly."

"I suppose it was kind of you to propose."

He sighed. "But now we're in a pickle."

"A big one."

"With large brown spots."

Portia giggled.

Colin's manservant and Jonesie hurried toward them.

Colin's manservant cleared his throat. "I assume you have a plan, Your Grace? Because I believe it is necessary to form one."

Jonesie inclined her head toward the heavens. "Because of the falling snow."

"And the lack of lodging," Colin's manservant said.

Jonesie hugged her torso, rubbing her arms vigorously. "And the frigid temperature."

"And the fact no ships are scheduled to leave soon."

"Of course, I have a plan," Colin said, his tone affronted.

"But is it a good one?" Colin's manservant asked.

Colin jutted his chin out. "My plans are always good."

"Not your taste for cravat knots."

Colin rolled his eyes. Portia had the impression he'd become quite practiced at the action, perhaps because of very similar conversations with his valet.

"My taste is excellent," Colin said. "It places emphasis on the practical."

"Simplicity is much overrated," Colin's manservant grumbled. He turned to Jonesie. "You must see me tie a mathematical cravat."

"I would love to see that," Jonesie cooed. "I've only seen drawings of them in *Matchmaking for Wallflowers*."

Jonesie and Colin's manservant continued to speak merrily together, and Portia and Colin let them drop behind. Jonesie and the valet were evidently more focused on staring at each other than keeping a good pace.

"What *is* your plan?" Portia asked Colin.

Colin smiled. "We are going to see my friends. The Duke and Duchess of Vernon."

"They live here?"

“They spend all their holidays here.”

“Think of that,” Portia said.

Colin tilted his head, and his eyes shimmered. “Are you nervous?”

“Of course not,” Portia said quickly. “Why should I be nervous about that?”

“Precisely.”

They were silent and continued to walk.

Colin turned to her. “You *look* nervous.”

“My heart is simply exerted from walking.”

“The surface is flat.”

“Is it?” Portia glanced at the ground.

Colin chuckled. “I don’t believe you’ve been paying attention to the walk at all.”

“Well, why should I be nervous about spending the holidays with a couple I hardly know, who just happen to be a duke and duchess?”

“You mustn’t forget they’ll think you’re a duchess.”

“We’ll be pretending to be married,” Portia groaned. She turned to him. “So how do I pretend to be a duchess?”

He laughed, and something changed in his voice. “You’ll just be your natural self. They’ll adore you. How could they not?”

Portia turned to him sharply.

Colin was silent though, and for some reason, the conversation had seemed to turn serious, and Portia’s heart ached.

A tall white manor house stretched over a hill that looked over the ocean. The place shimmered under the falling snow, and she shivered.

“It’s beautiful,” Portia said.

“The duke’s brother designed it.”

“Truly?”

“His family is talented.”

Somehow the fact did not reassure Portia more that she belonged.

“How nice.” Her voice wobbled.

He turned to her. “I never asked...Do you have a family? I know your parents passed away, but...”

“There’s no one else,” she said. “My mother found it sufficiently difficult to birth me, so I never had siblings.”

“Did she...?”

She nodded. “She died when I was born. I never met her.”

“I’m so sorry,” Colin said.

“I suppose I must have cousins,” Portia said. “But she came from Devon, and Father never took me there.”

“He lived in London?”

“Bath.”

“Ah.”

“Then what do you think of the Channel?”

“It’s a novel experience.” Portia smiled. “But I enjoy it.”

“I’m glad.”

“And what about you?”

“I have hordes of relatives.”

“Oh.” She blinked.

“Not a father, of course. That’s why I’m the duke. But my mother is still around, as are my five younger brothers and three younger sisters.”

“Eight siblings?” She rounded her eyes.

“Our house was very noisy. Mother said it was always good we lived in a castle because of it.” Portia laughed. “I can’t imagine living in a house with so many people.”

Colin shrugged. “So you see, I know the dukedom will be in a good position, whether or not I have heirs.”

“You have sensible relatives?”

“Indeed.” He smirked. “Sensible *and* noisy.”

Colin led them up the long set of steps from the beach to the manor house.

“We’re disturbing the duke’s and duchess’s Christmas plans,” Portia said.

“Vernon and his wife are nice,” Colin said. “You have nothing over which to worry.”

Portia doubted the veracity of this particular statement. She was silent as she navigated the icy steps, clasp hold of the banister.

“Perhaps you would like to look behind you?” Colin whispered.

“Behind?” Portia drew her eyebrows together, then glanced surreptitiously over her shoulder. She half-expected Sir Vincent to be marching behind her.

Instead, there was the English Channel, beautiful as ever. The poor weather had made the waves taller, stronger, more ferocious, and Portia was tempted to simply stare at the greenish water with its foamy crests.

But her eyes didn’t linger on the waves. Colin’s manservant and Jonesie were striding hand in hand together. Portia turned to Colin quickly. “Heavens.”

“I spy a little romance,” Colin whispered.

“Er—yes.” Portia’s cheeks warmed.

“You can hold my hand.” Colin’s dark eyes gleamed, and she noted the straightness of his nose, the chiseled manner of his cheeks, and his lips.

“The banister will do.” Portia’s voice rose another octave with an ease her singing instructor at her finishing school would have marveled at.

“But my hand is sturdier.”

“You don’t know that.”

He smirked.

“Well, very well. The path *is* icy, and a broken leg might cause you even more inconvenience. You’d probably try to climb up these slippery stairs with me. And where would that leave you?”

“Clasping a beautiful woman in my arms?”

Portia rolled her eyes. “With two broken legs.”

He smiled and took her hand. “How thoughtful.”

Portia ignored the odd jolt of energy that moved through her body at his touch. She refused to think of him in a mawkish manner. Marriage was far better founded on pragmatism than sentimentality.

Colin needed to find his own wife. A wife who was everything he decided after careful, meticulous elimination of other options. Not some woman whom he happened upon in a library and felt sorry for. Portia knew that. In fact, she was even more convinced: Colin was everything a woman would want, and it wasn’t simply because of his title.

No, she had to forget about his hasty proposal.

He turned to her. “I’ll promise I’ll get you back to London as soon as possible, but for now, you

are my wife, my duchess.”

She nodded, silently, conscious all the moisture had drained from her throat, and hoping he wouldn't require her to say anything. Simply gazing at him seemed sufficiently trying.

Colin kept his gaze on her, then leaned closer. Portia's heart hammered furiously.

He was going to kiss her.

He was going to actually kiss her.

Instead, he grabbed hold of the door knocker, then tapped it against the door.

Portia's shoulders eased, but for some reason, relief did not appear.

For three seconds, nothing happened, and it occurred to Portia that perhaps no one was home.

But then, the door swung open. A portly man with a shiny bald head that equaled the glossiness of the black door, the black-and-white marble floor, and the crystal chandelier that hung in the entry beamed.

“Your Grace!” the man said.

“Bowman, how nice to see you again,” Colin said. “I'm afraid we're surprise guests. Are the duke and duchess here?”

“Indeed. You can join them in the drawing room.”

“Splendid.” Colin flashed his smile, and the butler assisted them with their coats.

“My manservant and my—er—wife's maid are behind us.”

“I'll see they get a hot meal in the kitchen,” Bowman said.

“Thank you,” Colin said.

Bowman leaned closer. “Congratulations on your wedding. I wasn't aware.”

“We eloped,” Colin said.

“And now you can't get a ship back to London.” The butler's eye sparkled.

“How did you know?” Colin asked.

“The weather always surprises non-islanders,” the butler explained.

“Well then, you are becoming quite the local.”

“I am.” Bowman had a pleased expression on his face.

Cranston's expression was always pained, as if he were going through Dante's tribulations with each task, even though letter carrying and wine selecting in a nice house in the nicest neighborhood in the best city in the world shouldn't have been an impossible burden.

Bowman didn't resemble Cranston in the slightest, even though some butlers might have considered that being sent to an isolated part of the country, a part that wasn't even well connected to the rest of England, might be unideal.

She followed Bowman to the library. Though the Duke and Duchess of Vernon did not live here the whole year, the place looked as if it had belonged to the family for generations. Every inch was perfect, as if someone had made certain no matter where a person was standing in the house, that everything needed to look ideal, the perfect place for some artist to set up his easel.

She shivered.

“Are you cold?” Colin asked immediately. “Perhaps you would like a wrap?”

“I'm fine. Everything is splendid.”

She didn't want to explain that the only thing that was making her shiver was nervousness. She'd thought Sir Vincent was very grand, since he was a baronet. Her father had not been titled, and now she wondered whether Sir Vincent's title had inspired her father to trust him, perhaps thinking of doors Sir Vincent might open, or perhaps thinking that a man well-versed in etiquette would possess the ethical values necessary to raise her.

The butler knocked on a door, then announced them. “The Duke and Duchess of Brightling.”
Heavens.

He was talking about her. *She* was the Duchess of Brightling.

Of course, she wasn’t actually.

And she never would be—a fact that, to her great distress, was starting to cause her more than a little regret. Soon, her presence would be explained away by Colin, as an odd act of gallantry.

She stepped into the room, vaguely conscious she was stepping onto soft carpet, vaguely aware that everything in this room sparkled and shimmered and...glowed. Cherubs dancing on fluffy clouds stared at her from the painted ceiling. Tall windows ushered in a view of the channel in all its magnificence surrounded her.

And then she was surrounded by actual people.

People in fine attire. People with smiling faces.

“My dear!” a woman with blonde hair and spectacles who couldn’t have been much older than her said, “I’m so happy to make your acquaintance. I am the Duchess of Vernon, but you must call me Charlotte. We are certain to be great friends.”

A handsome man, who also had blond hair, stood beside her. Charlotte gestured to him. “This is my husband, the Duke of Vernon. Isn’t this a pleasant surprise, Vernon?”

“Oh, indeed.”

“I hope you don’t mind us showing up here,” Colin said. “I’m afraid we’re stranded.”

Charlotte and Vernon looked at each other, then turned back. “No ships.”

“You knew.”

“It’s a winter occurrence. Normally we don’t have so much snow.”

“Well, I for one am happy about the snow,” Vernon said. “If it means we get to see you. Though I must scold you for not inviting us to your wedding.”

“I’m sorry about that,” Colin said. “It was hasty.”

“Oh?” Charlotte raised her eyebrows, and her gaze dropped toward Portia’s stomach.

Portia stepped hastily away and glanced at Colin.

She didn’t want anyone to think she was with child. Is that what people might think? But what other reasons were there for elopement?

Colin squeezed her hand. “I’m afraid Cupid’s arrow had its way with my heart. We were determined to elope in Guernsey. After all, the road to Gretna Green is muddy this time of year.”

“I’ll tell you a secret. The roads to Scotland are always muddy.” Vernon chuckled. The sound was warm and appealing, and Charlotte smiled up at him.

Perhaps the duke and duchess had been married a few years—Portia remembered reading about their marriage in finishing school, but they still seemed wildly in love.

“Vernon is from Scotland,” Colin said.

“Oh.” Portia stared at him. Vernon didn’t speak with a Scottish accent, but then, he must have gone to schools in England. All the peers seemed to have attended Rugby, Harrow, or Eton. “Do you visit often?”

“When we can,” Vernon said. “But now we like people to visit us here.”

“Everyone likes the ocean,” Charlotte announced.

“It is remarkable.” Portia stared out the large windows. The waves toppled and rolled in a glorious, unpredictable rhythm.

“Oh, what am I thinking,” Charlotte exclaimed. “You two must be exhausted. I’ll have the servants prepare a room for you.”

“A room?” Colin asked.

Vernon and Charlotte glanced at each other.

“Yes,” Charlotte said. “I hope you don’t mind. I know lots of people prefer to sleep separate, but my sister and her husband are also visiting, and with the children, and my parents arriving soon—”

For the first time, Portia noticed there were children in the room. They had their parents’ blond locks.

Vernon was also staring oddly at the two of them. No doubt, Vernon thought it odd a newly married couple might not want to share a bedroom.

Portia despised the thought they might think Colin’s wife wouldn’t desire to be close to him.

“A single room is perfectly fine,” Portia blurted.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN



THE ONE THING COLIN was certain of was that he didn't want to share a room with Portia. He certainly didn't want to share a bed.

He'd been in this house before, and he knew how the rooms were decorated: with romantic flourishes. Though Vernon had never seemed a likely candidate to give way to sentimental urges and displays when Colin had known him—dash it, the man had even run his own gaming hell—it was obvious time had changed him. Charlotte had changed him.

The duchess rang for the housekeeper, and a red-headed woman with warm brown eyes appeared. “Mrs. James will show you to your room.”

“We also brought my manservant and my—er—bride's maid,” Colin said.

“They can sleep in the servants' quarters,” Charlotte said. “We still have beds for them, don't we, Mrs. James?”

“We do indeed,” Mrs. James said. “I'll take them there after their meal.”

“We're having our dinner at seven,” Vernon said. “Though if you would like something sent up beforehand—”

Colin glanced at the grandfather clock in the room. “Seven is fine.”

“I'll send your servants up to help you dress.”

“Splendid,” Colin said, even though there was nothing particularly splendid about any of this.

He extended his elbow to Portia, and she slipped her fingers through the crook. Energy pulsed through him at her touch, but he ignored it.

This woman desired to marry another man. She was in love with someone whom she couldn't marry...because of him. It was a wonder she smiled at him at all. The woman must possess immeasurable strength.

The housekeeper led them to a set of sweeping, curved marble stairs. No doubt, this was also the work of Vernon's brother. Colin had a sudden urge to see his own family.

He sighed and strode up the steps, conscious of Portia beside him. She emitted a pleasant vanilla scent that made him want to get even nearer to her.

That would only be bad though.

She'd made her feelings about a marriage between the two of them clear.

Mirrors dotted the steps, reflecting light. The housekeeper turned onto a new corridor Colin was unfamiliar with. He'd visited before with some of his friends, and evidently a male wing had been arranged for them. He strode over the carpet. Children's voices sounded, and Colin experienced an odd pang.

Perhaps he'd been hasty when he'd said he didn't require children. He simply hadn't imagined any of the women the matchmaking mamas and proud papas pushed toward him would make him happier than he could make himself on his own. He hadn't enjoyed the stilted conversations about his estate and the even more stilted conversation about current events. No one, after all, was likely to express any sorrow that Bonaparte had been defeated, and he'd been tired of people stating the same thoughts they'd read from the same newspapers. Perhaps he hadn't given them the chance they deserved. Or perhaps...

He glanced at Portia and smiled. She was the only woman he knew who would take it upon herself to sail to Guernsey to elope, and she was certainly the only person who would propose to a

practical stranger, not giving up on her happiness. He liked that quality. It was one he was not accustomed to seeing.

Mrs. James turned toward them and gave a bright smile. "Your room is right here, Your Graces."
"Thank you so much," Portia murmured, and stepped into a red room.

Colin followed her and did his best to avert his gaze away from her now-scarfless neck, did his best to focus on the room's furnishings, and not the way the light played across her bare skin.

"The bell pull is there if you require anything." Mrs. James gestured to a long piece of pink and gold braided fabric. "And of course the wardrobes are there, and I'm certain you spotted the bed."

"Oh, yes."

The bed was unmistakable. It sat in the center of the room. Pink damask panels dangled from its four-poster frame.

"Isn't it pretty?" Mrs. James asked. "I think it's the most romantic bed here. The duchess's sister doesn't find the rug practical—too much white, as she has three children, but I like it."

Colin resisted the temptation to ask Mrs. James if she might switch places with him tonight. He didn't want to lie beside so much temptation. He didn't want to think about soft curves and a slender waist. He didn't want to imagine whispering to her, and imagining the manner in which she would quietly laugh.

He turned to Mrs. James. "I—er—tend to get cold in the night. Do you by any chance have any extra bedding?"

Mrs. James shot him a worried look, perhaps going through her bedding supply in her head and finding no good answer. "Well, that's a bit tricky, since the house is full. But I can be certain to put extra hot bricks in your bed."

He gritted his teeth. "Thank you."

"If you get cold, perhaps you would like to wear something warmer," Mrs. James continued.

"I'll be fine," he said.

"Very well, Your Grace. I'll send your servants up here."

"Quite nice."

She smiled, then left the room.

Portia and he were alone.

Though they'd had conversations alone, they'd never been truly without any company. Even on the ship, there'd been sailors about them, and even Niles and Jonesie could see them. Now, there were no witnesses, and Colin's heart raced.

Portia gestured to the window, distracting him from the sudden awkwardness. Plump snowflakes drifted from the sky. "I suppose it's good we're not in the ocean amidst all of this."

"Yes."

Portia frowned. "Weren't the Duke and Duchess of Vernon once in a shipwreck?"

"Coming back from Guernsey after their elopement."

"Oh." Portia averted her eyes, and Colin's heart ached. No doubt, she didn't want to give any indication anything similar could have happened between them. Perhaps she was musing about the honorable Mr. Rupert Andrews, a man who didn't steal tickets from other passengers.

"I'm awfully sorry about everything," he said.

She shook her head. "It couldn't be helped."

Then Portia tilted her head. Light glowed over her glossy brunette locks, and his fingers longed to touch it. He turned away, lest Portia notice his gaze. The last thing she would want was to think he lusted over her.

Finally, steps sounded and Niles and Jonesie appeared. They dressed quickly, making use of the screen in the room.

“I suspect you are grateful for my premonition that you would require evening dress.” Niles held Colin’s trunk.

“Er—yes,” Colin said.

Portia glanced at Niles. “Are there any other premonitions you would like to share?”

“Oh, I do hope you’re not nervous about the dinner,” Jonesie said.

Jonesie and Niles glanced at each other.

“I care to limit my premonitions about the future to attire,” Niles said.

“Well, I suppose that is your expertise,” Portia said.

Niles raised his head. “In my experience, not everyone is prepared to learn about the future, however true it is.”

Niles was giving him a knowing look that Colin did not appreciate. He cleared his throat. “Well, make me handsome, Niles.”

“Ah, I like when you say that. I’m glad I’m getting all the credit. Don’t you find the duke is already naturally very handsome, Miss?”

Portia’s cheeks flushed, and she averted her gaze.

Colin’s heart sank. No doubt she was thinking about that blasted Mr. Rupert Andrews and knew it was impolite to say that Colin’s features were of little interest to her.

“I’ll just change behind the screen,” Colin said, following Niles to a corner of the room. “We won’t be able to see you.”

“Thank you,” she said, but her voice was at an unusually high pitch, and his heart tumbled even farther.

Evidently, Portia was uncomfortable by his very presence, and Colin was silent as Niles helped him dress for dinner. This wasn’t the time for his customary jests, and when he tried to smile, even his lips felt rigid.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



PORTIA MOVED DOWN THE steps in her best afternoon gown, wishing she'd had the foresight to bring a gauze-overlaid evening gown that sparkled and shimmered with every turn. She wished she could adorn herself in jewelry, so everyone might focus on that, and not on herself.

She strove to generate feelings of lightness, just as her teachers at her finishing school had always advocated, but her feet seemed to have turned to stone, as if she'd instead been formed into one of the hideous sculptures created in the art room the staff always silently discarded. She didn't want to go to the dining hall and pretend Colin was her husband and they were happy newlyweds. She didn't want to live a life, however briefly, that would never happen.

"You look lovely," Colin murmured. "Just enjoy yourself tonight. There's no need for any nervousness."

She tilted her head. Had he sensed her discomfort? Was he so accustomed to being with beautiful women he gave her compliments naturally, because that was simply what he did in conversation pauses, even though she couldn't compare?

"The green color suits you," he said. "It does something to your face." Then Colin turned away, while Portia was left to assess whether 'something to your face' was a positive expression or not.

People in lovely, shimmering attire filled the drawing room. Servants opened adjoining French doors, revealing the wood-paneled dining room. A long dining room table, adorned with silver platters carrying jewel-colored food, lay underneath a sparkling, shimmering chandelier.

"It's beautiful," Portia murmured.

This was nothing like what she'd experienced at Sir Vincent's house. They'd never had guests in London. Though Sir Vincent was not opposed to attending dinner parties and balls, it occurred to Portia that some of his enthusiasm had not simply been to provide her London life and the opportunity to find a husband, but so someone else might arrange food and drink.

"Ah, my dear..." Charlotte crossed the room toward them. She'd changed into an ice blue gown, and her blond hair was arranged in beautiful curls. "I hope the room suits you."

"It is wonderful," Portia said.

And it was.

If Colin had truly been her husband, if they'd truly eloped to Guernsey because the prospect of waiting for a proper wedding was intolerable, given their urgent desire to bed one another, well, then the bedroom would have been perfect and romantic. The general narrowness of the bed would have been no cause for concern, since they would never have desired to stop touching one another.

Portia blinked rapidly, then pasted a bright smile onto her face.

Charlotte tilted her head. Portia had heard rumors her hostess was very intelligent.

Those rumors had also said Charlotte had been a wallflower, and all of London had declared themselves shocked when Charlotte had married Vernon. It seemed odd to imagine she'd ever been relegated to the smoke-filled section where the wallflowers were so often abandoned, left to chitchat amongst themselves, and with which only the most awkward, penniless men ever ventured to find a dance partner.

"My sister and her family are here," Charlotte said smoothly, evidently deciding against questioning Portia. "Let me introduce you to them."

Portia ignored the rapid rise of her heart. "How nice."

More people meant more opportunities for her to be discovered as a fraud. Portia would have been happy to take her dinner in her room and to never venture out. Instead, she followed Charlotte to a woman with beautiful auburn hair who stood beside a broad-shouldered man. Portia's heart pounded.

"Georgiana," Charlotte said. "I would like to introduce our newest guest, the Duchess of Brightling."

"Pleased to meet you." Portia hoped just because the back of her neck was warm, and just because her cheeks had similarly risen in temperature, that her face did not resemble that of a tomato.

Charlotte and her sister might find it curious if her face changed colors every time Charlotte referred to Portia as a duchess. That was the sort of tell a card player might find intriguing.

"I'm so happy to meet you." Georgiana gave a bright smile that made Portia wish she weren't lying to everyone and that these were truly her new friends.

"I'm so sorry to disturb your Christmas," Portia said.

"She and her husband eloped to Guernsey," Charlotte announced. "And then couldn't find a ship back to London."

Georgiana's long dark lashes fluttered. "How romantic."

"Isn't it?" Charlotte breathed, and her eyelashes also seemed to move with similar contentment.

Portia's chest tightened. Charlotte and her sister were upper members of the *ton*. Portia had prepared herself for snide comments, stating that Portia should have been prepared for poor weather, that Portia had missed the opportunity to have a lovely wedding, that Portia had acted in an irresponsible manner now affecting a duke and duchess's Christmas holiday—but instead, they simply seemed pleased to see her.

"You have a wonderful husband," Charlotte said. "I'm so glad he's married. You've made the catch of the season."

"Yes, you must tell us how you managed to wrangle him to the altar. I rather expected him to wait until he was in his forties or fifties," Georgiana said. "So many rakes do take ever so long to marry. How did you ever convince him?"

Portia's face pinkened as she remembered her angry proposal to him on the ship's deck before a crew of sailors and the duke's own valet. He must have truly felt sorry for her to ever have said yes.

Colin squeezed behind her. "It was simply true love."

Portia trembled at his sudden presence but managed to turn to look into his face.

"Wasn't it, dearest?" Colin asked.

"Oh, yes," she said, but she had the horrible impression her voice was shaking.

"It's dreadfully romantic," Georgiana said. "Come, I'll introduce the children to you."

"They'll be joining us for dinner," Charlotte explained to Portia and Colin. "I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all," Portia said. "They seem adorable."

"Well, they know Father Christmas can still change his mind about presents."

"Charlotte," Georgiana said with a horrified voice.

"Well, he won't really do that, will he?"

Georgiana took Portia's elbow. "Come, I'll show you around."

Portia was relieved to be away from Colin. She couldn't be with him when he was smiling at her with such fondness, when she knew everything he said was untrue.

The children were adorable, and Portia soon made their acquaintance.

Neither Charlotte nor Georgiana were advocates of keeping children away, to be ushered out only

when some music was required, only to scold them for not playing music with the perfection demanded to not experience ear pain.

A footman handed Portia some negus, and she sipped the Christmas drink eagerly. Her body warmed, and the tension that had made every part of her body rigid dissipated.

Perhaps Colin was right. Perhaps she should simply enjoy the evening.

Eventually, Bowman announced that dinner was served. Portia took Colin's proffered arm, and they entered the dining room. She inhaled the scent of roast beef and venison that emanated through the room, merging with Brussel sprouts and carrots.

They all sat down. Bowman poured wine, the Duke of Vernon gave a toast, and in the following moments Portia was eating and everything was wonderful.

Portia bit into the tender meat, sighing happily as the children giggled on the other side of the table.

Stomping sounded, and Portia was interrupted from her delightful enjoyment of the food. Was this some odd music that the Duke and Duchess of Vernon had arranged?

The stomping continued, followed by shouts.

Well, this did not sound like music.

This sounded like a disruption.

She glanced at Colin. Though the man had seemed to be enjoying the steak the Duke and Duchess of Vernon's cook had prepared, an uneasy expression flitted across his face.

This couldn't relate to them.

Surely not.

Their guilty consciences were simply being active.

But Portia still breathed uneasily, and her fork and knife seemed too heavy. The food no longer tasted delicious, despite the doubtless valiant efforts of the cook and cooking assistants.

"You can't go in!" somebody, perhaps a servant, said.

The butler stared at the door, pausing his rhythmic refilling of drinks, and the footmen's expressions appeared more puzzled than the bland neutrality they had displayed so well when Portia had entered the room, where it seemed possible they truly were an appendage of the room and couldn't understand conversation any better than the bureau.

The butler dived toward the door as it swung open, barely succeeding in rescuing a painting from the metal handle and not succeeding at all in saving wine from sloshing on the floor. His cheeks reddened.

"E-excuse me," he said.

"That's quite all right," Vernon said. "It seems we have company."

A man strode into the room, and Portia longed to sink to the Persian carpet and never rise.

She recognized this particular man; she'd lived with him for years.

What on earth was Sir Vincent doing here? The man moved his portly frame at a speed Portia had never witnessed. Even the wine spilled on the floor did not phase him, and he strode deeper into the dining room.

Portia preferred not to linger on the red wine he must be tracking.

"Sir Vincent?" Vernon asked. "What are you doing here?"

She shot him a grateful look. At least he could speak. Her throat seemed to have turned to stone, as if Sir Vincent were one of those monsters found in only the most terrifying Greek myths, without Medusa's accompanying beauty.

"I am preventing a travesty," Sir Vincent declared. "An abomination! A fatal mistake! A

horrifying occurrence!”

“You are preventing our Christmas dinner,” Colin said.

“Precisely,” the disgruntled servant behind Sir Vincent stammered. “You must leave. This is not the time for guests.”

Sir Vincent glared at Portia, and her stomach trembled. “You’ve taken that woman as a guest.”

Even the children halted their chatter at his accusation. He pointed at her with abhorrence in his eyes. “And she’s a fraud.”

The other guests turned to gape at Portia.

“Your name isn’t truly Portia?” Vernon asked.

“Of course, it is,” Colin said impatiently.

“But she’s not the Duchess of Brightling,” Sir Vincent declared triumphantly, and his eyes sparkled with a joy she’d never seen in him before.

Evidently, Sir Vincent’s joy came from the destruction of others and not from the polite conversation and good behavior to which Portia had always aspired.

She almost didn’t recognize the man who’d been her guardian for so many years. His eyes glistened, and his trousers were rumpled. Evidently, his valet hadn’t had a chance to iron his attire before he ventured here. He still wore his greatcoat, and snow and ice scattered haphazardly and dripped to the floor in large chunks.

“She is indeed the Duchess of Brightling,” Colin said gallantly.

“Prevarication!” Sir Vincent threw up his arms.

“I don’t have another wife.”

“You don’t have *any* wife.”

Audible gasps sprang from the other guests, and they hastily sipped their wines and waters, so as to at least feign calm.

But no calm could occur in the face of Sir Vincent’s utter crazed manner.

“I don’t know what you’re speaking about,” Colin said icily.

“I’m sure you would remember a marriage,” Sir Vincent said. “And you didn’t have it.”

“But they got married today,” Vernon said. “Isn’t that true, Brightling?”

For a dreadful second Portia thought Colin would admit the lie.

For a moment she thought he might confess everything, and she would be promptly ruined.

No doubt, Colin considered it.

“What I’d like to know is why this gentleman would accuse me otherwise,” Colin said.

“Because I checked with the vicar,” Sir Vincent said. “I checked with *all* the vicars.”

“What prompted you to do that?” Portia asked.

“Just a little suspicion, my dear. And I was correct—there was no marriage.” He smirked as the words reverberated around the impeccably decorated room. “I am your guardian, after all. I do know you.”

“He’s your guardian?” Georgiana’s eyes widened.

Her sympathy was palpable, and Portia cringed.

Most people didn’t have guardians. If their parents died, most people were raised by their aunts or uncles, grandmothers or grandfathers. They weren’t handed off to strangers with bulging eyes and an eagerness to destroy everything about their lives.

Another man cleared his throat. For the first time, Portia realized that Sir Vincent and the servant were not the only newcomers to the room.

This man’s eyes didn’t appear nearly as wild as that of her guardian’s, but his eyebrows were

drawn together in a manner she instantly distrusted.

“Mr. Halstead,” Vernon said. “What are you doing here?”

“I was informed a grave wrong was going on here,” Mr. Halstead said.

“No wrong,” Colin said quickly. He took Portia’s hand in his. “This is my new wife.”

“Who married you?” Mr. Halstead asked.

Colin turned to Portia. “Do you remember his name, sweetheart?”

“I don’t,” she said. Her voice trembled, and she coughed, as if the sound could mask her nervousness and guilt.

He shrugged. “I’m afraid we don’t remember.”

“I don’t remember you having a poor memory, my dear,” Sir Vincent said to Portia. “I find it most odd you would have forgotten who performed the ceremony.”

“I’m fairly distracting.” Colin smirked and gestured to his face. “It’s my cheekbones. And —er— chin.”

“And I imagine your hair and broad shoulders,” Georgiana said, then flushed.

“Yes, Portia is quite drawn to my hair and broad shoulders. Isn’t that right, sweetheart?” Colin’s eyes twinkled.

“Yes.” Portia nodded hastily.

He kissed her hand. “Just as I’m always remarking about her glossy hair and upturned nose.”

“My nose?”

“Most adorable, sweetheart. You know that.”

“Er—yes.” She turned to the others. “That’s what he’s always saying.”

“Precisely.”

“There’s absolutely no reason for us to pretend to be married,” Colin said. “I find the suggestion laughable.”

“I must say I do too,” Vernon said.

Mr. Halstead stroked his beard thoughtfully. “Perhaps this *was* all a misunderstanding. What did the person look like who married you too?”

“Well, he was about this high?” Colin stretched out his hand. “Of course, I’m sitting down, so—er—let me move my hand. Would you say that’s right, sweetheart?”

“Perhaps raise your hand up a bit,” Portia said.

Colin nodded. “See the problem is that I’m tall and she’s not tall, so our perspectives are imperfect.”

“Yes,” Portia said.

“Both of your perspectives are flawed?” Georgiana’s husband’s eyes had a dangerous skeptical look in them.

“Well, he was between us in height,” Portia said finally. “More or less.”

“More or less,” Colin agreed, and flashed a bright smile at her, that made Portia’s heart ache.

“That’s not that helpful,” Mr. Halstead said. “But perhaps you could describe his hair.”

“Yes.” Sir Vincent beamed. “Do describe his hair.”

“Ah, yes.” Colin nodded. “Well, it was gray.”

Mr. Halstead’s face was sober.

“Though I think it had some brown mixed in it,” Portia said hastily.

“Did he have a lot of hair?” Mr. Halstead asked.

“Er—yes,” Colin said.

Mr. Halstead’s face remained stony.

“Well, I didn’t think it was so full,” Portia said. “What with the bald patches and everything.”

“Oh, I wasn’t thinking about those parts of his head,” Colin said.

“So he had somewhat gray hair with some bald patches.”

“Not very obvious bald patches,” Portia said hastily.

“My darling wife has such thick luscious hair that she thinks that everyone whose hair isn’t of that precise thickness has bald spaces.”

“Indeed?” Charlotte sent them a horrified look and patted her own head, perhaps conscious her hair was rather finer and less thick than Portia’s.

“Well, not in a bad way,” Colin said hastily.

“No, no,” Portia said. “I’ve always found my hair too thick. So I—er—enjoy seeing people’s hair when it is less thick.”

“So you enjoyed seeing the vicar’s hair,” Mr. Halstead said, scribbling something down into a pad with his pencil.

No doubt, he was scribbling that they were both mad.

“I’m afraid the food is getting cold,” Colin said.

Vernon shot him a grateful look.

“Perhaps this could be continued at another time.”

“Tomorrow,” Mr. Halstead said. “First thing in the morning.”

“Not Christmas Day,” Charlotte said.

“Well—er—perhaps not then,” Mr. Halstead amended. “But only because my wife wouldn’t like it. Not because I don’t think justice is important.”

“Naturally,” Vernon said in a soothing voice. He rose. “How lovely to see you again, Mr. Halstead.” He glanced at Sir Vincent. “And how nice to make your acquaintance.”

“You’ll see me tomorrow,” Sir Vincent barked.

“Not in the morning,” Charlotte said.

Sir Vincent scowled. A sense of ownership flitted over Sir Vincent’s red face, and Portia drew back, pressing her spine against the chair rails. Her breath quickened. She’d never seen that expression on her guardian’s face before.

“I don’t know what is on this woman’s mind, but I assure you it’s nothing good,” Sir Vincent said. “She’s *not* the sort of woman to marry a duke.”

And with that, he strolled from the room. Mr. Halstead and the servant followed.

For a moment, it seemed as if a temporary peace had been achieved. Banging continued to sound. It took Portia a few moments to realize it was the sound of her own frightened heart.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



SIR VINCENT WAS WORSE than Colin had thought. No wonder Portia had been eager to elope. To think the man had hidden such an important part of her father's will from her. To think he'd pressured her to marry him. Colin grimaced at the sour taste that invaded his mouth.

"I'm terribly sorry for the disturbance." Portia's voice trembled, and Colin squeezed her hand, as if they were truly married and as if she really had no cause for concern.

He needed to make certain she married Mr. Andrews. A woman like her deserved the best man in the world. Portia had decided that person was Mr. Andrews, even though Colin was certain that he exceeded Mr. Andrews in material advantages. Other women would be happy for any excuse to marry Colin. Colin only wished Portia had chosen him, but clearly, luck was not infinite. Colin was lucky to be a duke, lucky to come from a nice family, and he couldn't expect he would be lucky in everything else.

Helping Portia would have to be enough.

The footmen swept away people's plates, and soon they placed a cake on the table. The sweet taste of sugary sponge did not compare with Portia's overall sweetness. How could it?

Colin glanced at Portia thoughtfully from time to time, grateful when Portia gradually relaxed.

"You mustn't worry about your guardian," Charlotte said. "People are bound to be disgruntled when others elope. It was difficult when Vernon and I came back to London after we eloped."

"It was difficult because you didn't want to marry me," Vernon said.

Charlotte's cheeks pinkened, but she turned to Portia, and explained, "I—er—wanted the marriage to be annulled."

"Is that possible?"

"Everything is possible."

"With sufficient coin," Georgiana's husband said.

"Well, I'm glad it never came to that," Vernon said.

Portia stared at her hosts. "You seem so happy."

"We were always happy," Vernon said staunchly, and Charlotte's face pinkened again.

"My dear husband married me because he thought I was dying," Charlotte said. "When I wasn't—well, it didn't seem right to hold him to the marriage."

Vernon rolled his eyes, but he smiled.

"Well, if there's a problem with your marriage license, you could always remarry," Georgiana said.

"E-excuse me?" Portia coughed.

"If there's a problem with the paperwork from the marriage," Georgiana said. "I'm sure you don't want the magistrate and your guardian continuing to worry needlessly."

"That's a wonderful idea," Charlotte exclaimed. "Mr. Halstead is fussy. He's the magistrate, and the island lacks crime. I'm afraid he'll be very thorough."

"We couldn't marry again," Portia said, perhaps scrambling for an excuse.

Colin and Portia couldn't remarry. If they did, they would actually be married, and that was an impossibility.

"It shouldn't take long," Georgiana said brightly.

"My wife is a wonderful problem solver." Georgiana's husband stroked her hand.

Georgiana beamed. “The idea just came to me.”

“And it’s good.”

Colin cleared his throat. “Perhaps we should focus on enjoying Christmas Day tomorrow.”

“Yes, yes,” Vernon said. “Good plan.”

Colin nodded.

He despised that Portia had asked so many questions about annulment. Even though Portia and he weren’t married, she seemed eager to dissolve their marriage.

Finally, the dinner was over. The brandy had been sipped, then finished. The children had expressed their enthusiasm for Christmas, and they’d sung some songs over the yule log.

Then Colin and Portia followed the other couples upstairs. Colin tried to not linger on the manner in which Vernon and Charlotte held hands, or the way in which Hamish held Georgiana’s waist. Instead, he resisted the temptation to touch Portia, even if she did look lovely in her green gown. The fabric hugged her curves in a delicious manner.

They said goodnight to the others in the hallway, then entered the room.

Jonesie and Niles jumped up. They were suspiciously near each other, and Colin wondered just why they’d been alone in the dark.

“We’ve—er—come to help you undress,” Niles said.

“You needn’t wait in the dark,” Colin said.

“It’s good to be economical,” Niles said.

“Though I’m certain our hosts appreciate that urge, I doubt they require it. Vernon is a duke with many estates.”

“Is that so?” Niles asked innocently, even though Colin was certain he’d known all along. “Well, next time.”

“I’ll help you undress, miss.” Jonesie led Portia to the screen.

Colin pretended not to imagine what was happening there.

He tried not to imagine buttons unbuttoning. He tried not to imagine a chemise. He tried not to imagine soft skin.

“I’ll assist you, Your Grace,” Niles said.

Niles helped him undress. Finally, Jonesie and Niles departed, and Colin and Portia were alone.

Light from the candle Colin held threw a golden glow over the too-romantic room. The bed seemed soft and tempting, and Colin fought to restrain himself from flinging her over the bed.

“I’ll prepare my bed,” Colin said, removing a blanket and laying it on the floor. He tried not to shiver. That was the sort of action that might make Portia feel sorry for him, and that was the last thing he desired.

“It’s all prepared,” Colin said.

“Splendid,” Portia said.

Heavens.

Her voice truly did sound angelic.

Then Colin lay on the floor and pretended everything was fine.



PORTIA SMILED BRIGHTLY, as if it were perfectly normal to be in a room alone with a man, and as if her heart were not beating at a worrisome speed.

This is not awkward.

She certainly wasn’t focusing on Colin’s presence on the floor beside the bed. That would be

unnecessary.

She wasn't focusing on the fact he was wearing a nightshirt, and that his feet were bare. That wouldn't be a ladylike thing to notice after all, and Portia did, in general, strive to achieve the ladylike values lauded by her finishing school.

Colin's nightshirt moved, and she could swear she noticed blond curls creeping from his chest. An odd urge to touch them overcame her, and she drew her fingers toward her lest she become overcome with temptation.

Portia's own hair was straight, but Colin's hair curled in a most fascinating manner. Still, that chest hair had seemed even curlier.

"What are you thinking about?" Colin asked.

"Me?" Her skin heated, and she shook her head furiously, perhaps partly in the hope the vivid movement would mask the red that most certainly must be spreading on her cheeks. "I—er—don't think."

"No?" Colin chuckled, and the warmth heightened in temperature, as if the demons had just piled another cart of coal into the fires of Hades. "I hope my presence does not frighten you."

"Frighten?" Her eyes widened. "Should I be frightened?"

This time, Colin's cheeks had taken on a rosy hue. Perhaps the temperature in this room was simply inconsistent.

"Of course you shouldn't be frightened," Colin said.

"Well then, I'm not." Portia sat in the bed and slid her feet from her slippers.

For some reason, Colin had decided to quickly examine the carpentry of the night table.

Men, Portia decided, were most odd. Even the ones who didn't need to build their own furniture seemed forever interested in their construction. It was as if every man thought it possible he might be forced to become a carpenter and was studying the craft now in anticipation of such a moment.

"I'll blow out the candle," Portia said.

"Good idea." Colin's voice seemed to have taken on an odd husky quality, and Portia frowned.

"I hope you're not catching a cold."

"No, no."

Portia refrained from blowing out the candle. Instead, she leaned over the bed. Colin's face seemed to grow red, and Portia frowned. Redness was a sign of fever. He might be more ill than she'd realized.

Portia extended her hand, and Colin licked his lips. Did the poor man have a parched throat as well? How dreadful.

"Let me feel your forehead," Portia ordered.

"Why?" Colin swallowed hard.

"I want to see if you have a fever."

"I do not have a fever." Colin scrambled up. His nightshirt revealed his neck and throat, and this time, Portia swallowed. She put her hand as matter-of-factly as she could on his forehead, hoping her fingers wouldn't tremble. She drew her hand back rapidly.

He stared at her. "Is something wrong?"

Heavens, his eyes were so wide.

"No. You don't have a fever."

"Good," Colin said.

"Yes."

"Are you going to blow out the candle now?"

“O-of course,” Portia said, and did just that, cursing her nervousness.

Colin wasn't going to touch her, after all. That had been the first thing he'd said. He'd wanted to make it clear that on his end there was absolutely nothing romantic at all.

She settled into bed, squeezed her eyes shut, and willed sleep to come immediately.



CHAPTER NINETEEN



THE NIGHT LASTED FOREVER.

Portia was so near him, and Colin's heart ached. Everything ached, and not just because of the rigid floor and inability of his blanket to appropriately withstand the cold. A sweet scent of oranges wafted toward him, and he wanted to hold her in his arms and feel her body against his own. He craved to feel her hips against his body, and he yearned to trace the curve from her tiny waist to her hips. He wanted to feel the softness of her limbs, and he wanted to feel the softness of her bosom.

God in heaven.

He shouldn't be thinking about her bosom at a time like this. He shouldn't be thinking about the roundness of each breast. He shouldn't be imagining her buds pebble and harden at his touch. Would her buds be tawny? A pale pink? A deep rose?

His fingers twitched, as if anxious to touch her. She was so near him. So light. So exquisite. If he wanted, he could pull her to him so quickly. He could move his fingers through her dark, silky hair. He could unhook the clasps on her shift.

It wouldn't take long.

Colin had been with many women. He was an expert at female fashion. He'd bedded opera singers and actresses in London. Though he'd never installed a mistress in an apartment—if he desired seriousness he would do things the proper way, and get a wife, there was no shortage of appealing women in London.

Heavens, he'd even bedded some of the matchmaking mamas who'd tired of lauding their debutante daughters and, acknowledging he was unlikely to make a match with any of them, had claimed him for themselves.

And blast it, Colin loved women.

He loved their soft shapes. Some women were tall and slender, others were petite, and still others were curved. It didn't matter. Women were the most delightful creatures on earth, and he'd enjoyed discovering their charms.

But he'd never craved a woman with the ferocity with which he craved Portia. He'd never yearned for one in the same all-consuming manner. In fact, he'd always rolled his eyes when his friends had declared themselves besotted with a woman. It had seemed foolish when they'd lamented not being with a particular woman, when there were dozens of other options. Similarly, it had seemed insane when they'd abandoned their rakish ways for marriage.

Colin had always suspected marital bliss was an illusion, one invented by matchmaking mamas and proud papas, anxious for someone else to take care of their daughters. Now, Colin was unsure. In fact, the thought of ensuring a lifetime with the woman he adored seemed most reasonable.

His heart ached, and he moved, as if the pain in his heart could possibly be lessened by a simple shift of position.

Dash it. He craved Portia. He bloody well wanted her to be right here beside him.

Well, on top of him perhaps. Or below him. That would work quite nicely too.

Though there were various pleasant things they could do if she were beside him. His eyes fluttered shut for a moment, and images of Portia's bare bosom flashed over him, as did images of the curve where her waist and hips met, the curve where her neck and shoulder met, and the curve of her bottom. Dash it, the woman was all curves, as if she'd been designed just to induce men into

insomnia.

He shifted on his makeshift bed again and tried to not focus on the cold floorboards beneath him.

“Colin?” a voice whispered in the dark, and Colin stilled.

Surely that couldn't be her. Surely he was just thinking about her in his imagination. He'd memorized the sound of her voice long ago, even the sound of her whisper. “Are you awake?”

“Portia?” he whispered.

“I can't sleep either.”

He gave a wry smile. “I'm sorry I'm in this room. Maybe I could sneak into the drawing room and return before the servants light the fire.”

She snorted. “That will be difficult. Besides, there are children, and tomorrow is Christmas Day.”

He chuckled. “Perhaps not.”

“I forgot you grew up in a house filled with children.”

“So I did.” He smiled, thinking about his family.

“I'm sorry you're spending Christmas with me instead of them.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Well, that's no worry. I wasn't planning on visiting them anyway.”

“No? Why not?”

He scrunched his brows together. The reason had seemed to make more sense when he was in London. “I'm not certain. I think all those questions about when I was going to get married and have a little marquess and a few spares running about. They all have their own families, and I feel...extra.”

“Ah.” She was silent for a moment. “That's a silly reason not to visit.”

“I think so too,” he admitted. “Maybe they were right.”

“About what?”

“To question me. I was just enjoying my life so much. I-I should have seen them more.”

“Well, at least you still can,” Portia said.

“Yes,” Colin said. “There is that.”

Portia was silent, and he wondered if she was thinking about the fact she couldn't see her family. He hoped not. He didn't want to give her pain. He wanted only nice things for her.

“I wanted to suggest—” Portia stopped suddenly.

“Yes.”

“Well, I hope you don't think I'm too forward, but I—er—just wanted to let you know that you could sleep beside me.”

He blinked.

Did she mean?

He shook his head. Of course she couldn't mean *that*.

“I don't understand. I am beside you.”

“On the bed, you silly thing.”

“Oh.”

He was silent.

“Unless you don't want to.”

“N-no, that would be nice.”

“It would be warmer. And—er—softer.”

Dash it.

She didn't realize what she was saying. Now he was thinking of her warm body, her soft body, her—

His throat dried. “I—er—don't think that would be a good idea.”

“Because I don’t like thinking of you as uncomfortable.”

Colin certainly wasn’t going to fault her for her values.

“And if I think you’re uncomfortable, I can’t sleep,” she said. “It wouldn’t be fair.”

“Even if I tell you I don’t mind?”

“Especially then,” she said. “You’ve already been so kind and good and wonderful. You can’t do that at every opportunity.”

Portia didn’t seem to realize she’d been the person being kind and good and wonderful.

“If you truly want me to—”

“Yes.”

“Well then... I—er—suppose I can join you.”

“Splendid,” she said.

Colin raised his torso and scrambled up.

He was certain this was a bad idea.

But the thought of a soft bed was tempting, and it would be ungentlemanly to refuse such a generous offer.

At least, it would probably be ungentlemanly to refuse.

Colin decided he wasn’t going to linger too much on the precise ethics of the matter. That was the sort of thing that might make his head hurt, and he was quite certain that was not the point of all of Portia’s kindness. Colin scrambled from his makeshift bed. He picked up the covers and put them on the bed. Too late he remembered that his manhood was stiff.

Thank goodness the light was out. He spread the blankets over the bed. “Now we’ll both be warmer.”

“How nice,” she murmured.

Her voice had a delightful drowsy sound to it, and now Colin was certain he was doing the right thing. He lifted up a corner of the blankets and slipped into bed, careful not to touch Portia.

There.

That wasn’t dreadful.

They could both be in the same bed. No touching of anything, not even an elbow.

He smiled happily. “Good night, Portia.”

“Good night, Colin.”

His heart continued to move quickly, but then it settled, eased by the sound of Portia’s regular inhalation and exhalation of breath, and everything was wonderful.



LIGHT STREAMED INTO the room, and Portia opened her eyes. An odd contentment surrounded her, as if she’d just eaten a hearty soup, drunk some wine, and listened to music.

There was no soup, no wine, and no music.

But something seemed different. The furniture certainly seemed different. And the room shape. And those pink drapes on the bed...Portia would have remembered those.

And that breathing...Was that her? Portia held her breath. No, the breath remained.

And then she remembered.

Heavens.

Was she in the same bedroom as a duke? Had she told a duke and duchess she was married to the same duke? And had she then told the duke to spend the same night as her in the bed? As if four feet of space between them was not sufficient, he then had to sleep a foot apart from her?

Fiddlesticks.

What must the man think? She turned around carefully. The last thing she wanted to do was to wake him. Perhaps if she managed to sneak out of the bed, dress herself, she could pretend that she'd never made such an audacious statement.

Was he still sleeping? She hoped he was still sleeping. Because if he wasn't sleeping, she didn't want to slip out of bed with only her night rail. She rather wished she'd packed her heavy flannel one instead of this cotton one which was more becoming underneath dresses, but also more revealing.

She finished turning around.

Heavens.

The man was handsome.

His eyes were shut. That was a good thing. She waited for her heart to slow from relief, but instead it ratcheted up, as if bewildered at being in the presence of so much beauty. No doubt Michelangelo would have pulled her from the bed if he'd seen both of them, and he'd make Colin his new David. No man could possibly exude more perfection, and her heartbeat quickened.

She wasn't supposed to be in this room. This was the domain of other, prettier, worldly women.

Colin's eyes opened, and he stared at her drowsily.

"You're awake," Portia whispered.

"Yes." Colin's voice sounded husky, and something jolted near her heart, as if her heart had had a mad idea to disentangle itself from her ribs and muscles, blood and skin, to join him.

"You're not supposed to be awake," she said.

Colin frowned, and Portia's skin heated. Heavens, why must the man be handsome even when he contorted his face into such an expression?

"I mean—not that you were *supposed* to be dead or anything," she said. "I didn't mean that."

He scrunched his face into another dubious expression. It didn't matter how unsymmetrical he made his face, as if he were doing his best to imitate the gargoyles that lined certain cathedrals, the man remained handsome.

"You didn't want me to be dead?" Colin's eyes sparkled.

"I prefer you alive."

"Ah." Colin nodded knowledgeably, then tossed his blond locks. They glinted under the sunlight spreading from the window, only somewhat hampered by the drapes. "Then it must have been because of my handsome visage. All the women note it."

She rolled her eyes. "That wasn't the reason."

"Then it must have been because of my wonderful conversation."

"Indeed?"

"You seem dubious. I'll have to work on my jokes and my pontifications about Renaissance artwork."

"Renaissance paintings?"

He shrugged. "It's my specialty. Every good house is bound to have a Titian somewhere, and women find me rattling off facts about foreign artwork appealing."

Portia raised an eyebrow.

"Something about broadening their minds." He leaned nearer her. "I also find it conducive to future seductions to spend time before a half-nude goddess or nymph."

She snorted. "How rakish of you."

He grinned nonchalantly, and a dimple formed on his cheek. She resisted the urge to touch it.

"I withdraw my statement," Portia said. "Perhaps it wouldn't be entirely inconvenient if you were

dead.”

Colin sputtered. “Oh?”

“It would give Niles the opportunity to tie a mathematical cravat on you. Think of the joy that would give him. And the lengthy procedure would not inconvenience you.”

He eyed her suspiciously, then rolled onto his side. “Is that so?”

“Oh, yes,” she lied. “You would be a most magnificent corpse. Dressed in a mathematical cravat for eternity.”

Colin grinned and took her wrist in his hands. “Take that back.”

“I-I didn’t mean it,” she giggled. “I don’t want you to be dead. Just—er—not—”

“—living?” Colin suggested with a growl.

“That would do,” she said, between giggles.

“That’s not good enough,” Colin said. “Apologize!”

“N-no,” she exclaimed. “You know I didn’t mean anything.”

Colin pulled her toward him, and she was suddenly conscious of hard muscles, not truly obscured by his shirt. His shirt couldn’t obscure the firmness of his chest, or the strength with which he held her in his arms, as if she didn’t need to worry about anything in the world.

“I believe the word you were seeking was sleeping,” Colin said.

“Er—yes.”

“Then say it.”

“I was hoping you were still sleeping,” she said.

“Not dead.”

“Not dead,” she said, but an odd wistfulness came over her, and her voice trembled.

Then she noticed something else. Something that seemed to be growing from his side of the bed.

“What is that?” she asked.

Colin’s face reddened. “That’s—er—not important.”

She frowned, and Colin inched away from her. He dropped his arms from her, and she shivered at the newfound coldness.

Clearly, she’d said something wrong. She glanced at him. The man’s smile had vanished.

“I don’t understand,” Portia said.

“Dash it, it’s morning.”

She blinked. “What does that have to do with anything?”

He stared at her. “You don’t know.”

“Know what?”

The man was silent. He was being most odd.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Heavens. She didn't know.

"I'm sorry," he said. "But you're obviously a very attractive woman."

She frowned, as if she might debate that point. Of all the things for her to have arguments about, that was certainly not a viable topic.

"I mean your bosom," he said, conscious his voice was hoarser than he would have liked.

She glanced at her chest quickly. "Is my night rail too revealing?"

"Not in the least."

She scrunched her face together in a skeptical manner.

"It should be far more revealing," he said. "That night rail doesn't reveal any skin."

"It's not supposed to," she said.

It did reveal the curve of her bosom, and it was easy to imagine how it might feel in his hands. His manhood strained further.

Blast.

Weren't people supposed to be less lovely in the morning, before their maids had wrangled their hair, tightened their corsets, and dressed them in fine clothes designed by a Parisian expert?

Obviously, Portia wasn't aware of that particular point.

Because, dash it, she was lovely.

Absolutely lovely.

"I want to kiss you," he said.

She tilted her head. "You almost kissed me on the ship."

"Ah." He smiled at the memory. "That would have been a good kiss."

"Aren't all kisses good?"

"No." Colin shook his head firmly. "They absolutely are not."

Portia stared at him. "I suppose you could kiss me."

"Unless you want to wait for Mr. Andrews to kiss you," Colin said. "He's bound to give you lots of kisses."

"Er—yes."

Portia was silent for a moment, and the back of Colin's neck heated. "I shouldn't have brought up the kiss."

"N-no, that's fine," she said. "I think it would have been a good kiss too."

"Even though you slapped me?"

"Well." She shrugged. "That was because of the sailors watching."

"There are no sailors here." Colin stretched his arms over his head, and she averted her eyes from his forearms. Muscles rippled deliciously, the outline clear even underneath his nightshirt.

"And no manservants."

"And no maids."

"And no captains."

"Just kiss me," Portia ordered.

And then Colin did.

And did.

And did.

He kissed her like he'd never kissed anyone. Their tongues melded, and then their bodies, and then he was certain his manhood was touching her, but she didn't seem to mind.

She only moaned deliciously.

Colin touched her silky locks. They were every bit as luscious as he'd imagined. He wanted to bury himself in them. Well, he wanted to bury himself in various parts of her body. Portia's body seemed ideal for just that.

It curved in all sorts of appealing manners, and Colin decided he had to kiss every portion of her body. He kissed the spot underneath her ears, then he kissed the spot between her collar bones. Finally, he kissed her entire neck, sucking on the delicate skin as he listened to her moan and writhe beneath him.

"Please," she said. "Please."

"You like that?"

"Yes," she said.

"I know more places to kiss," he said triumphantly.

"My whole body," she said.

He grinned. He could do that.

So he kept on kissing her. He kissed her belly, he kissed her bosom, and then he kissed her deliciously curved thighs.

And then he slipped a finger inside her, marveling at her wetness.

"More," she murmured. "More, more."

He added a second finger rapidly.

"You're so lovely," he murmured.

She glanced at his manhood. "I believe that part is supposed to be involved in the process."

He widened his eyes. "How did you know?"

"I'm not without any intelligence," she pouted.

"Very true, sweetheart." He rapidly raised his nightshirt and delved into her hot, wet, slickness. Everything was tight and marvelous, and she clutched hold of him. The feel of her hands pulled tightly about his back shot waves of pleasure through him.

"Portia," he gasped.

"Am I doing it right?" she asked.

"You're perfect! You're a goddess! An angel! Aphrodite returned!"

She gave him a wry smile and arched an eyebrow over her now sweat prickled forehead. "I don't think anyone could confuse Aphrodite with an angel."

"Well, perhaps not," he amended, his voice husky as pleasure jolted through him. "Then you're absolutely not an angel."

Her eyes widened.

"In the absolutely best sense," he rushed to say. "I want you to be my wife. My duchess."

And with that, Colin remembered to pull out, and his seed spilled over her belly.

"What did you say?" she said weakly.

"One moment." Colin dived between her lovely long legs and moved his tongue over her intimate part. Ripples moved through her, and she moaned in the marvelous manner again.

He lifted his head up.

"That was—" She was silent.

"Incredible? Fabulous? Fantastic?" he suggested.

She nodded weakly.

He smiled. They made a good pair. He could do the talking, and she could do the nodding.

"Come now," he said. "We have to get ready."

“Right,” she said. “I suppose Jonesie and Niles will probably be here soon.”

He nodded.

She turned to him. “But what were you saying...” She pointed in the general direction of the bed.

“About your beauty? Your luscious lips? Your bulging bosom?”

She raised a hand to her bosom in a horrified manner.

“Bulging in only the best manner,” he said, his tone more serious. “You’re beautiful.”

“Well, you could have just said that,” she grumbled.

“I’ll note it for next time,” he said lightly.

“Next time?” Her eyes widened, and he shifted his feet. “Er—yes. I thought it would be good if there was a next time. Many next times. Many, many next times.”

She blinked.

He scratched the back of his neck. “I thought perhaps we could get married this afternoon, just like Georgiana suggested. They’ll think it’s our second wedding, of course.”

She nodded, but this was an odd situation.

“I know you want to marry Mr. Andrews, and I know I’m not him, but perhaps we can still try to be happy,” he asked, despising the hopeful sound in his voice.

“You want to marry me?” Her face paled.

He looked down. “I’m not sure we can get to London in time for you to marry Mr. Andrews before the New Year. The weather is worse than before.”

“You wouldn’t mind marrying me?” Portia’s voice was small.

“I would love it.” He squeezed her hands. “Now say yes.”

She said yes.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



PORTIA WAITED OUTSIDE the drawing room and waited for the music to begin. Jonesie had clothed her in a white muslin gown that she declared appropriate for weddings, arranged her hair in artful curls, and given her a beautiful bouquet procured with the help of the housekeeper.

Murmurings sounded from the guests. Even her guardian and the magistrate were present.

Portia was going to marry Colin. Portia's heart soared. This wasn't what she'd expected, but perhaps the very best parts of life couldn't be planned.

A knock sounded at the door, and Portia glanced toward the closed drawing room door. The butler was inside. Charlotte and her husband had invited all the servants to the wedding.

Well, Portia certainly knew how to answer a door. She certainly wasn't going to poke her head into the drawing room to tell the butler to open the door. She'd seen Cranston perform the task multiple times. Portia strode toward the entry, then opened the door.

A man stared at her through spectacles perched on his nose. Her heart fell.

"Mr. Andrews?" Portia's voice trembled.

"Yes." Mr. Andrews narrowed the distance between them. "I'm terribly sorry I wasn't here sooner."

"I-I didn't expect to see you at all," Portia said.

Mr. Andrews raked his hand through his hair. His fingers trembled. "I'm dashed sorry. I was late to the ship, and it took off without me."

"I know."

"I expect you do," Mr. Andrews said. "You must have been dreadfully worried when I never showed up. Not the gentlemanly thing at all."

"It's fine," she said, conscious she hadn't felt mournful of that fact lately. "I understand."

"That's jolly decent of you," Mr. Andrews said. "Now. Shall we get this wedding thing done with?"

"Wedding thing?" Her throat closed, and she forced herself not to bolt into the drawing room.

"Yes, yes," Mr. Andrews said. "It's not the end of the year yet, is it? I wouldn't want you to lose your inheritance now. Not when you were counting on me."

"You want me to marry you." Portia continued to stare at him, and she had the dreadful feeling her jaw might just have lowered to an unladylike depth.

"Quite," Mr. Andrews said. "Daisy made it quite clear you needed to marry someone."

"Yes," Portia said faintly. Her heart trembled oddly. But then her fingers were also trembling, as were her knees.

"I need to sit down," she said, then settled into a chair in the foyer.

"I'm terribly sorry about being late," Mr. Andrews said. "You wouldn't believe the trouble I had to come here."

Her eyes prickled.

She hadn't expected this. She'd planned to marry Colin. Heavens, she'd been so happy about the prospect of marrying him this morning. She'd had so much joy, more than she'd ever had before, more than she'd deserved to have.

Because Sir Vincent was correct: Portia wasn't the sort of woman who married a duke. Certainly, Cranston seemed perpetually amazed she was any relation of Sir Vincent. No, Portia was the sort of

woman who would be terribly, utterly grateful to end up with someone as nice as Mr. Andrews. She wasn't supposed to marry the duke, and Colin had said he hadn't even been searching for a woman to marry. He was going to marry her...because he felt sorry for her.

A small voice in her head insisted that wasn't the case, but Portia dismissed it. Perhaps Colin had bedded her this morning, but no doubt he'd bedded multitudes of women. She'd be wrong to attach too much sentiment to the process. It hadn't mattered how much her heart had soared, or how nice it had felt to lie in his arms...that was what all women felt. Wasn't that the reason why everyone warned not to bed men without marriage? Because it made one think feelings existed that didn't?

She frowned.

Colin had seemed kind, but he was a kind person. That didn't mean she should take away his freedom. He'd agreed to marry when he'd blamed himself for Mr. Andrews' absence. How would he feel if he knew that she'd married him even though Mr. Andrews was here? Even though Colin didn't need to marry her?

Her mouth dried, and her heart pitched.

"You don't look well." Mr. Andrews' eyes filled with concern. He didn't seem like a horrible man. He wasn't Colin, but what man could be? And Portia had made him a promise too. It seemed wrong to suddenly declare she was marrying someone else.

"How did you find me?"

"Oh, I got a fishing boat to take me."

Her eyes widened. "Wasn't that dangerous?"

"I suppose so. But the boat was going to Guernsey anyway. When I discovered the inn was closed, some passers-by told me that this house was the finest on the island and the place where a fine lady might be. I wasn't confident you knew anyone here, but it was true." He beamed. "I suppose that's why you chose Guernsey to elope to."

"Something like that," she said faintly.

The drawing room door opened. Was it Colin? Portia's heart hammered, as if unsure whether the prospect of seeing him would be good or not.

Instead, Jonesie stepped out. "There you are, Miss. I thought there might have been a problem with your dress."

"My dress is perfect," Portia said, giving Jonesie a tight smile.

Jonesie turned to Mr. Andrews skeptically. "Who is this gentleman?"

"Mr. Andrews, this is my maid, Jonesie."

"Pleased to meet you," Mr. Andrews said. "I suppose I'll be seeing more of you."

Jonesie's eyes rounded. "Mr. Andrews?"

Portia's heart ached, but she gave a strained nod. "Yes. Yes."

"Should I fetch the duke?" Jonesie whispered.

"I don't know," Portia said miserably.

"I think I should." Jonesie turned to Mr. Andrews. "He'll want to meet you."

Mr. Andrews beamed. "Oh, you are well-connected, Miss Tate."

"Wait—" Portia said.

If Colin came here and saw Mr. Andrews, she knew what he would say. He would say he still wanted to marry her. He was a gentleman, after all, and this morning he'd been intimate with her.

She didn't want to force him to be noble. Not when being noble required a lifelong commitment. Colin deserved someone else, someone better. Someone who didn't have a difficult guardian. Someone who had a family and was loved. Someone who could easily fit into his life in Devon.

Portia rose. Colin had always acted honorably toward her. Now, she needed to act honorably toward him.

She turned to Mr. Andrews. "I believe they do elopements in the town."

"Miss Tate!" Jonesie widened her eyes. "You mustn't!"

"It's fine," Portia said. "Please prepare our luggage. We'll pick them up before we leave."

"Are you certain?" Jonesie pleaded. "This isn't necessary."

"Of course it is. Now will you do that?"

Jonesie nodded and gave a tight smile.

Portia looked about the hallway. "I believe the butler put my coat in here."

"It's a bit odd he's not here now, isn't it?" Mr. Andrews mused.

Portia thought about the drawing room, filled with so many people, including the servants.

"I suppose it's Christmas," she lied.

She put on her greatcoat, took Mr. Andrews' arm, and stepped into the icy wind.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



THE DUKE AND DUCHESS of Vernon's drawing room might not be holy, but at this moment, it felt every bit as special as a church. This moment was special. Soon, Portia would become his wife.

Colin's heart soared.

He hadn't realized how much he'd looked forward to this.

Vernon stood beside him. "I'm happy for you."

"I'm happy for myself."

Vernon chuckled.

"Where do you suppose she is?" Colin asked.

"No doubt, she wants to look perfect."

"She always looks perfect."

"I saw her maid duck out," Vernon said. "She should be here soon. Perhaps there was a hair emergency."

Charlotte and her sister were playing duets on the piano, and the room was filled with happiness.

Portia's lady's maid appeared. Her face looked rather more tense than normal. She glanced at her seat, then at Colin, then at Niles. Finally, she marched up to Niles and nearly dragged him from the room.

"I was wrong," Vernon said. "It must be a clothes emergency if she asked your valet for assistance."

"I wouldn't be surprised if Niles could also do chignons," Colin said. "He seems to know how to do everything."

"Well, if it's a serious issue, she can always borrow a dress from Charlotte."

"Thank you."

Colin watched Niles and Jonesie exit the room. Niles soon reappeared and gestured frantically to Colin.

"Excuse me," Colin said.

He moved quickly through the room and exited, his mind pondering the various emergencies that might occur.

Niles shut the door firmly behind him. The sound groaned in the corridor. The *empty* corridor.

Colin looked around. "Where's Portia?"

Niles and Jonesie looked at each other. Dash it, why were they looking at each other? And why were they looking at each other with sorrowful expressions?

"I'm afraid," Jonesie said finally, "that she's gone."

"Gone?"

"She didn't want to tell you at once, but I—we—thought you should know."

Colin's heart quaked.

She was gone.

She wasn't supposed to be gone.

"I-I don't understand," Colin said.

"I'm sorry," Jonesie said.

"Did her guardian get her?" He scowled. There seemed nothing that Sir Vincent wouldn't do. He wasn't going to allow Sir Vincent to run off with her.

“Sir Vincent’s in the drawing room,” Niles said.

“Er—right.”

Niles and Jonesie glanced at each other. It was one of those glances from couples that Colin despised. One of those glances that told the world they didn’t require words to communicate, that they simply knew each other so well, that words were superfluous, things best left to novels and newspapers.

“There was a man,” Niles said slowly.

Colin gazed at his manservant. Niles wasn’t prone to halting language, and when he spoke, he normally didn’t stare at the walls.

“Mr. Andrews arrived,” Niles said.

“They’re getting married in the town,” Jonesie said. “I’m so sorry.”

Married.

And then Colin did more than blink. His heart twisted and ached, and his legs wobbled, as if he were standing on the deck of a ship during a vicious thunderstorm.

There was no ship, and there was no thunderstorm. There was also no Portia.

“Excuse me,” Niles said abruptly, then entered the drawing room.

He soon returned with Vernon and Charlotte. Vernon and Charlotte assessed the situation at once, with the speed honed by parents of active children prone to mishaps.

“Perhaps you should sit down,” Vernon said.

Colin stared at his legs. “I don’t think I can move.”

“Come,” Vernon said matter-of-factly, leading Colin to a chair.

“I’ll have the housekeeper make you some tea,” Charlotte said.

“Tea won’t bring her back,” Colin said miserably.

“No, I’m afraid it won’t,” Charlotte said.

People murmured in the drawing room. The children were chattering, no doubt mystified why the ceremony was postponed.

Colin’s chest ached.

“Now, are you going to explain why she had a fiancé?” Charlotte asked.

“I’d rather not.”

“And if you’re married, why would she go off with this other man?” Vernon asked.

“Because we’re not married,” Colin said miserably. “We were never married.” He turned to Vernon. “I’m afraid I lied to you. I’m afraid I brought scandal onto your house.”

“Heavens,” Charlotte exclaimed.

Colin attempted to muster some dignity into his voice. “If she wants to leave, I’ll let her leave.”

“You mustn’t do that,” Portia’s maid exclaimed.

“I doubt that would be wise,” Niles concurred.

Colin shook his head.

Perhaps he would lead a life of misery and torment, but Portia would be happy, and that was the most important thing. He wouldn’t inconvenience her elopement with his presence.

Charlotte glanced at Portia’s maid with a thoughtful expression, then addressed Colin. “Why on earth would she want to leave you?”

Colin shot her a horrified glance. “You want me to catalog my flaws?”

“I believe my wife meant you don’t seem to have many flaws,” Vernon said.

Oh.

Colin’s shoulders relaxed. “Well, my chief flaw is not being Mr. Rupert Andrews, the man she

apparently adores.”

“She seemed to adore you,” Charlotte observed.

“She is a great actress,” Colin said. “One of her many extraordinary qualities.”

“You love her very much, don’t you?” Charlotte asked.

“Oh, rub it in!” Colin grumbled, conscious he should be resigning himself to the fact that Portia was gone. “You think I’m a fool.”

“No,” Charlotte said. “Not that.”

“An idiot,” Vernon declared.

“Vernon!” Charlotte exclaimed. “You mustn’t say that!”

“Well, he is,” Vernon said staunchly, and his chin inched forward in an aristocratic manner.

“That’s not the sort of thing you’re supposed to say about anyone, even behind their back,”

Charlotte said.

“I’m saying it because it’s true and because he needs to hear it.”

“No one needs to hear that,” Charlotte said. “Besides, you might make him cry.”

“I’m not going to cry,” Colin said.

“Even though you lost your one true love and are being subjected to my husband’s criticisms?”

Colin’s jaw trembled, but he forced it upward. “Despite even that.”

“Hmph.”

“Look,” Vernon said. “I don’t mean to insult you.”

“Well, then you should change your vocabulary,” Charlotte said. “There are many nicer words in the dictionary.”

“I’m using the word that best describes him. Even you wouldn’t argue with the importance of that.”

Charlotte blinked. “No, I suppose not.”

Vernon glanced at Colin. “Now just why did you come here and announce that this woman was your wife? And how is it that you’re not actually married?”

“Even though you did share a room,” Charlotte added.

Memories of their bedtime activity inundated Colin’s mind, and he shook his head, as if the action might dispel the memories. He changed the subject.

“Portia was supposed to elope to Guernsey with Mr. Rupert Andrews.”

“That title is not nearly impressive as yours,” Charlotte said.

“The Honorable Rupert Andrews,” Colin amended. “And I’m certain he must have all sorts of wonderful qualities.”

“Well, if she chose him over you,” Charlotte agreed.

“Not helpful, dearest,” Vernon said.

“I’m only being logical.”

“I’m afraid logic might be the problem in this situation,” Vernon said.

“Anyway,” Colin continued, conscious he wanted to tell the story quickly so he could forget it forever. “They were supposed to elope to Guernsey, but I—er—took his cabin on the ship.”

“How did you manage that?”

“I told the porter my name was Rupert Andrews, then the ship sailed.”

“That sounds unlike you.”

Colin shrugged. “I’m carrying some important documents for Sandridge. It was vital that I leave London at once.”

“Well, Mr. Andrews must have been late.” Charlotte looked at her husband. “It’s very important

not to be late.”

“Evidently, Mr. Andrews did not feel that way,” Vernon said. “He couldn’t have expected someone to pretend to be him.”

“A duke, no less,” Charlotte exclaimed.

Colin hung his head. “It was not my best moment.”

“So you were trying to stop her wedding then?” Vernon asked.

“Oh, I didn’t even know she would be on the ship,” Colin said. “But she needed to marry someone, so I—er—volunteered.”

Puzzlement shone over Charlotte’s and Vernon’s faces.

“It’s a more complicated story,” Colin said defensively.

“She’s eloping in the town,” Charlotte said finally. “Does she know you love her?”

“We haven’t said the words.”

“You have to tell her,” Vernon said.

“Because she loves you,” Charlotte said.

“No she doesn’t. She’s eloping—”

“She’s not marrying you *because* she loves you,” Charlotte said. “She doesn’t want to trap you into a marriage.”

“Precisely,” Portia’s maid said.

“I would venture the same hypothesis,” Niles said.

“Oh.” Colin stared at them. “You might be right.”

“Of course,” Vernon said gallantly. “My wife is always right.”

Colin rose. “I need to get to the town.”

Vernon nodded. “I suggest you run.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



EVERYTHING WILL BE fine.

Perhaps she wasn't marrying Colin, perhaps her heart would never be the same, but this was the way things should be.

Besides, Mr. Andrews didn't expect her to love him. He simply expected her to have money, and she would. Everything was as it should be.

If she glanced back at the manor house from time to time, that only meant she had enjoyed her time there. That didn't mean she had to change her life and Colin's forever.

No.

This was the correct thing to do.

Snowflakes soared down, with a speed she associated with warships, not fluffy, beautiful bits of snow.

She forced herself to stride in the direction of the town, even though the wind was blowing fiercely, and the surfaces were slippery.

"If you like this, you'll love Staffordshire?"

"Staffordshire?" she asked.

"Near Stoke," he said.

"Stoke?" She jerked her head toward him. She'd heard stories about Stoke. Everyone had.

He beamed. "Best town in the world."

Well.

Perhaps everyone had been wrong.

"Is it like this in winter?" she asked.

"No, no. You needn't worry about that."

"Good."

"Much more snow," Mr. Andrews declared. "More Christmasy."

"How appropriate," Portia said faintly, even though it seemed like this was sufficient snow.

"This is simply a few centimeters," Mr. Andrews said. "Practically insignificant."

"Ah. Do you spend much time in Staffordshire?"

"All the time I can have," Mr. Andrews said. "Do you like the country?"

"I-I don't know. I've never truly lived in the country. I was raised in Bath, then moved to London."

"You poor thing," Mr. Andrews said with a sympathetic expression on his face. "Well, we will fix that straight away."

"How lovely," Portia said faintly.

Mr. Andrews beamed. "We're almost in the town."

"How nice." Portia gave a tight smile.

The town *was* nice. But somehow it had seemed nicer before.

The pastel-colored buildings poked out of the snow in an aesthetically appealing manner, but right now, Portia didn't think she particularly cared about the aesthetically appealing.

"Perhaps there's no vicar who can do the ceremony," Portia said. "Since it's Christmas and everything."

"I've already arranged it, my dear," Mr. Andrews said. "Besides, they've already given sermons

today. They're in the mood to do more."

"How nice."

"Yes, my dear."

Portia didn't particularly like how he called her 'my dear', as if they'd already been married a long time, but then, perhaps it was simply good to marry a husband who would call her my dear.

Everything was wonderful, she reminded herself.

She continued to remind herself of this as they strode into the town, and she repeated the words like a mantra as they entered the church.

For a moment, she wondered if there wasn't a vicar here after all, but then a man wearing a white collar popped up from a pew.

"Ah, you've arrived," the vicar said.

"I'm sorry to take up your time," Portia said.

"Oh, it won't take any time at all," the vicar said. "No ceremony is as quick as a wedding. And none as happy."

"Well, thank you," Portia said.

"Think nothing of it," the vicar said. "I enjoy performing elopements."

"You don't object to them?"

"They're romantic." The vicar gave a broad smile. "It's one of the many ways we feel Christ's spirit."

"Ah." Portia looked warily at Mr. Andrews, as if she might see Christ's spirit before him.

"Just a pity you can't have more guests," the vicar said.

"It's the nature of elopements," Mr. Andrews said.

"Quite. Quite."

Portia had a pang as she thought about the people in Charlotte and Vernon's drawing room. They must have realized that she was missing now.

Guilt moved through her. She didn't want to ponder what Colin was thinking. She hoped he was not too embarrassed and could see that this truly was what was better for him.

"You look thoughtful," Mr. Andrews said.

"Because she's in a church," the vicar exclaimed. "That's what you're supposed to do in a church. Think!"

"You're right," Portia said.



COLIN RUSHED THROUGH the snow, snowflakes prickling his face. He slipped and slid but refused to slow down. Not if it meant being too late to stop Portia's wedding.

Finally, he arrived in the town. He said a silent prayer of gratitude that churches possessed steeples. It made finding them so much easier, and he sprinted toward the church, falling onto the icy ground only once.

A few nearby children giggled at his tumble, before quickly returning to their games. Colin was glad they found him less interesting than the likely new Christmas toys, even if his breeches were soaked with snow and likely marked with tears from his stumblings. With Portia's imminent wedding, this was no time for fabric inspection, so he'd have to worry about Niles's chastising later.

He rushed into the church, thankful it was open.

He looked around. Colin was fairly certain that the couple getting wed generally stood at the aisle, perhaps even kneeling at the altar, but this aisle was devoid of anyone.

“Portia?” he called into the church uncertainly.

No one answered, and his heart sank.

He was too late.

Then footsteps sounded, and Colin turned to see a vicar.

“Was a couple here?” Colin shouted, cringing at the way his voice boomed in the church.

“Yes,” the vicar said. “But they’ve left already.”

Colin’s stomach plummeted. Still, he’d expected this, and he raised his chin. “Where were they going?”

“They’re sailing back to England.”

“In this weather?”

“There’s a fishing boat that will take them. It’s not terribly large, compared to a ship, but it’s not terribly small either.”

“Forgive me,” Colin said, whirling around. “I have to go.”

“There’s something else you should know,” the vicar called after him.

“I haven’t got time,” Colin yelled, then pounded from the church.

He forgot about the snowy exterior, that had only become snowier and icier and more foreboding. Colin promptly fell onto the ice again. Pain moved through him, but he hobbled up and headed in the direction of the port. One would think the streets were paved with banana peels.

He scanned the port. A boat *was* leaving, and Colin hurried toward it.

“Stop!” he screamed. “Halt!”

A head poked from a door in the ship. A head he recognized. The most beautiful head in the world. Portia’s head. Long brunette hair swept about her, and her eyes widened.

“Stop!” Colin screamed.

She gestured to the captain, and Colin waited as men did complicated things with the sails.

Finally, the ship slowed, and Colin rushed down the dock toward it.

Then he remembered Portia might be here, but she was newly married...to someone else.

It didn’t matter that he’d stopped the boat.

Nothing mattered.

He’d been too late.

Perhaps there was no reason to run after them. Perhaps he should only withdraw, only resign himself to a life of dullness devoid of her.

“Colin?” Portia asked, moving toward him.

Another man was beside her. *Mr. Rupert Andrews.*

Colin decided that he instantly despised him.

“What are you doing here?” Portia asked.

“I wanted to stop the wedding,” Colin said. “I didn’t want you to marry anyone else. I wanted to see you again and haul you back to the church and get the vicar to tear up the marriage certificate.”

Portia gave him a sad smile. “That’s very gallant of you.”

“Gallant?” Anger moved through Colin, and he clenched his fists. “I’m not being gallant. I’ve run after you, I’ve fallen—multiple times, I’ve humiliated myself...”

Portia’s smile broadened.

“Well at least it brings you some joy,” he grumbled. He did like to see Portia smile, even if the pain in his bottom might not agree.

The fishermen helped Mr. Andrews from the boat, and he assisted Portia.

“Colin, this is Mr. Andrews,” Portia said.

Colin scowled. "Good afternoon, Mr. Andrews."

"Good afternoon, Your Grace. It's a great honor to meet you."

"Ha! Then why did you ruin my life?"

Mr. Andrews wrinkled his brow. "Ruin your life?"

"Ruin your life?" Portia echoed.

Blast. They were already sounding like an old married couple. Colin supposed marriage worked its way quickly. Colin scowled toward the heavens.

Portia turned to Mr. Andrews. "I believe he thinks..."

"Ah," Mr. Andrews nodded.

And now they were finishing each other's sentences. Unbelievable. Quite unbelievable.

"I'm afraid you've made a mistake, Your Grace," Mr. Andrews said.

"I never make mistakes," Colin growled. He turned to Portia. "When I proposed to you, I meant it. I bloody well meant it. And when you proposed to me—"

Mr. Andrews raised his eyebrows. *Well.* Let his eyebrows get some exercise.

"When you proposed to me, and I said yes, I meant it then too. I never make mistakes."

For some horrible reason, his comments made both of them smile. They must think him a veritable court jester. Well, he felt like one now. Even court jesters didn't spend so much time injuring themselves over slippery surfaces.

Mr. Andrews cleared his throat. "Miss Tate is trying to tell you—"

"Well, I'm trying to tell *her* some things." Colin halted abruptly. "Miss Tate?"

Portia nodded.

"Not Mrs. Andrews?" Colin pressed.

Portia shook her head.

Colin growled at Mr. Andrews. "Then why were you in this fishing boat together?" Heat surged through his veins, and he tightened his fists. "Were you planning not to make her an honest woman?"

"She didn't want to marry me," Mr. Andrews asked. "I believe she wants to marry you."

Colin turned to Portia. "Is that true?"

"I believe she wasn't certain you wanted to marry her," Mr. Andrews added.

"Well, that's a dashed foolish thing for her to think," Colin said.

"I told her that too," Mr. Andrews said.

"Why were you sailing back to England? I was waiting for you in the drawing room."

"I wanted to give you your freedom," Portia said.

"But what about your money?"

"I'd rather be a companion to someone than marry someone I didn't love." She turned to Mr. Andrews. "I'm sorry."

He shrugged. "You needn't worry. After all, we barely know each other."

"So you love me?" Colin asked Portia.

Portia nodded slowly.

"Well that's bloody brilliant," Colin exclaimed, "because I love you."

The fishermen applauded.

Portia giggled.

"You're a dashed idiot though," Colin said. "But you're my dashed idiot, and I don't want to live a life without you." With that, Colin hoisted Portia over his shoulder.

"What are you doing?" Portia squealed.

"We've got a wedding to go to," Colin said, "and I don't fancy waiting any longer for it."

“Oh!”

He turned to Mr. Andrews. “You better come too. This isn’t weather for traveling.” He nodded to the fishermen. “And you’re welcome to attend too.”

Soon, Portia and Colin, Mr. Andrews and the fishermen, were striding back to Vernon and Charlotte’s manor house. Snow pummeled their faces, and the wind gnawed at the openings of their sleeves and collars. Their ears turned to ice, their feet became numb, they struggled to maneuver up the slippery hill, and Colin knew everything would be wonderful. Forever and ever and ever.



EPILOGUE



ONE YEAR LATER

Garlands of greenery adorned the ceiling, draping down in elegant, perfectly arranged curves. Red ribbons were tied around each candelabra and candlestick, imbuing the room with a festive sense Colin hadn't thought could be improved upon, given the ample gilding one of his ancestors had evidently insisted upon. But now the room didn't only sparkle, didn't only shimmer—it exuded everything Christmas.

And though Colin had once thought he didn't like Christmas, that had been *before*.

Before he'd met Portia.

Before he went to Guernsey.

Before he married his lovely wife.

"It looks incredible," Colin said.

A delightful aroma filled the air, and Colin sniffed. "What is that?"

"Ah, that is the Christmas punch." Portia looked both ways in a conspiratorial manner that made Colin chuckle and want to hug her and kiss her and do an array of other things with her.

They were both well acquainted with those other things. They'd recently spent a portion of the morning on those very things.

Portia grabbed a crystal tumbler. "Would you care for a drink?"

"Oh, yes."

"Don't tell Niles," she said.

Colin smiled. "Never."

He'd promoted Niles to the position of butler, and Niles was enjoying his new tasks, even if he still frequently ruminated over the advantages of the mathematical cravat knot. Niles and Jonesie had even married and were living in a nearby cottage.

Portia scooped some orange liquid into his tumbler. Orange slices bobbed in the cinnamon-scented liquid, and Portia pressed it against his hands.

Energy shot through him, as it always did in Portia's presence, as if she were the very sun.

He poured her a drink and handed it to her, and she giggled.

"I was supposed to be spoiling you," she said.

They clinked their glasses together, and he sipped the drink. Heat moved through him, and he drew her closer to him.

Carriage wheels ground on the pebbled road outside.

"I think the first guests are here," Portia said.

High-pitched voices sounded.

"My brother's family," Colin said.

"Then let's go to meet them."

"First, I require a kiss," Colin said.

"Is that so?"

"Most definitely."

Then Colin swept Portia in his arms, and everything in the world was wonderful. Their lips touched, their tongues touched, and dash it, he could feel her magnificent bosom pressing against his chest.

She drew back. “I’m surprised you don’t tire of that.”

Colin grinned. “Not in the least.”

And he never would.



THANK YOU FOR READING *The Duke Before Christmas*. I hope you enjoyed Portia’s and Colin’s story.

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MEET THE AUTHOR



BORN IN TEXAS, BIANCA Blythe spent four years in England. She worked in a fifteenth-century castle, though sadly that didn't actually involve spotting dukes and earls strutting about in Hessians.

She credits British weather for forcing her into a library, where she discovered her first Julia Quinn novel. Thank goodness for blustery downpours.

Bianca now lives in California with her husband.



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