All hell breaks loose when the devil falls in love with an angel.
LIANA LefeY

THE DEVIL'S OWN
The Wicked Waywards Series

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Content Warning

*The Devil’s Own* is a fun historical romance full of secrets and seduction. However, there are scenes depicting the consumption of alcohol and drunkenness, and scenes that include explicit sex, so readers who may be sensitive to these elements, please take note.
For Sonia. I don’t know how I would have gotten through the last several years without you, chica.

You’ve kept me sane. Mostly. ;-)
Prologue

Berkshire, England 1811

It was perfectly acceptable to stare at the man she’d selected to become her husband. After all, wasn’t she supposed to pay attention when the vicar spoke? Close attention, according to her mother. But, though Reverend Wayward spoke with his usual calm authority on matters moral this morning, the words failed to register with Mary. She heard nothing of his praise of self-discipline or his admonishment to resist temptation.

That was, perhaps, because temptation had already taken full possession of her.

Her palms itched to touch the high cheekbones and shadowed planes of his strong jaw. Her fingers longed to trace the dimple at the corner of his mouth and the cleft in his chin, to learn the texture of his hair. Thick, wavy, and so dark as to appear coal black in all but the brightest sunlight—would it be as soft as it looked?

The good reverend’s features were painted on the canvas of Mary’s mind in the most carefully detailed strokes, right down to the exact color of his eyes, which recalled the deep blue larkspur growing in her garden. But it was more than his fine form and countenance that drew her. In the five months since her family’s arrival in Harper’s Grove, she’d watched the reverend closely enough to deem him a man of both good breeding and excellent character.

Unlike the last man I thought to marry. Her stomach knotted at the memory of how close she’d come to disaster, lured to the very brink of ruination by a handsome face and false promises. Never again.

Unfortunately, she wasn’t the reverend’s only admirer. No female with a beating heart could think him anything but attractive, and every unwed woman in the village doubtless imagined herself as his wife. But, like her, they’d been unsuccessful in capturing his attention. The man was, to the frustration of all, charmingly oblivious to flirtation.

Glancing at her friend, Augusta, whose head was bowed over her hymnal, she revised her assertion concerning females with beating hearts. Augie was in love with the unimpressive Mr. May, whose raucous laughter and vaguely suggestive jokes detracted—at least in Mary’s opinion—from his rough good looks. She much preferred Reverend Wayward’s gentle manners and soft speech.

Her eyes fixed once more on the man behind the pulpit as someone’s baby cooed loudly, interrupting his recitation. A tender smile broke across his face, and longing tightened Mary’s chest. What a fine husband and father he’ll make! Once more, she closed her eyes, committing the sight to memory for later recall.

An elbow dug into her shoulder, and Mary, opening her eyes, realized that everyone else was rising. Mortified, she did likewise and turned the page in her hymnal to match that of the one in Augie’s hand.

Drawing a deep breath, she added her soprano to the chorus, deliberately singing in harmony with the vicar’s smooth baritone. But though years of vocal lessons and rigorous daily practice ensured her voice made the sweetest counterpart, he spared her not the smallest glance.

There must be a way to make him see me!
Chapter One

London, England 1811

“Bloody hell, that was too damned close.” Lord Devlin Wayward pinched the bridge of his nose and fought down panic as he leaned against the door of his office. For the first time in years, he prayed—that St. Peters would leave quickly and take his daughter, who’d just tried to pretend she was a barnacle and he the hull of a ship.

Olivia St. Peters, the unwed daughter of his prospective new business partner, was a cunning little vixen, make no mistake. The bloodhound had waited until her father was well occupied before seeking out her quarry today. Had it not been for the timely intrusion of Hensley, Devlin knew he’d be in serious trouble right now. Hensley would be receiving a hefty raise for coming to his rescue before anything disastrous could happen and for keeping his mouth shut.

Annoyance made him let out a long sigh as—once he was certain it was safe—he made his way down to his carriage. Trust the nouveau riche to know no better than to bring an unwed female to a gentlemen’s club.

Even if it had been closed, it was still highly inappropriate. Had her mother been alive, she’d never have permitted it. If only he didn’t need this deal so bloody badly in order to keep up with the competition, he’d have said something to that effect.

St. Peters was so determined to emulate his betters, and yet so ignorant of the refinements that distinguished them as such. One could buy one’s way into the upper echelons of Society—money was always welcome—but no amount of gold could make a sow’s ear into a silk purse. Or the motherless daughter of a privateer into a lady.

Devlin knew partnering with St. Peters to expand his empire was a risk, but risk was his specialty. For all St. Peters’s rough background, the man was highly successful at what he did. Devlin was confident it would pay off well in the end and that together they’d run out the competition and make London their oyster.

Sudden weariness assaulted him as he boarded his carriage and settled back against the squabs to watch London’s filth pass by his window. I have to get away from here—at least for a little while. But where to go? Bath held no appeal. Frankly, there just wasn’t anywhere for a man like him but London.

The sting of freezing rain greeted him when he finally disembarked. It really is a grim business here in winter. Inside was much better. Warm and dry once more, he sipped a brandy before the fire and sorted through the day’s post. Letters from solicitors and clients were laid aside in favor of the expected missive bearing his twin brother’s familiar scrawl.

A grin broke across his face as he scanned the cramped lines. Daniel was always full of what he considered “news” about Harper’s Grove, the quiet village in which he served as vicar. Skipping down, Devlin looked for items of greater interest.

Ah. Here we are...

David, who’d inherited the dukedom after their eldest brother Drake’s untimely death, was apparently unhappy with how their family had been torn apart by Devlin’s disownment, and wanted the family made whole again.

Father had never forgiven him for rejecting an honest life as a clergyman in favor of becoming a rake, and Drake, who’d supported his removal from the family tree, had refused to rescind his
banishment upon assuming the title. Now that both were gone, however, David was inviting everyone, including Devlin, to join him at Winterbourne to celebrate the Christmas season together.

The thought of seeing his siblings outside of a funeral setting elicited a wave of longing.

All the “Ds” gathered in one place again... A fond smile tugged at the corners of his mouth as he privately blessed his sporting ancestor for honoring the ridiculous wager that had resulted in their Christian names all beginning with the letter. Not only had it pleased a king enough to bring their family into the highest circle of Society, but being required to observe the odd tradition had annoyed the hell out of Father.

Winterbourne. Deep inside, Devlin felt the pull of his childhood home. The gentle green hills and quiet villages of Berkshire were a far cry from London’s ever-present soot and noise.

His head snapped up. Of course! Letting out a bark of laughter, he rose and strode over to his writing desk. Enthusiasm rendered his writing somewhat less tidy than his usual elegant script as he penned acceptance, but no matter. Sanding the parchment, he laid it on the blotter to dry, satisfied. He’d send it off first thing in the morning, and by this time next week he’d be on his way.

He’d stay a month. Just one short month during which he’d strategize and revitalize. It would be a welcome respite, by the end of which he’d doubtless be dying to get back to London. And if David couldn’t tolerate him that long, Saint Danny would certainly put him up at the rectory.

St. Peters could manage the clubs while he was away. He’d call it a trial period. If he did well, they’d enter into a formal partnership upon Devlin’s return. And with any luck, he’d come back to find Miss St. Peters in pursuit of some other poor sod. A month apart would surely be long enough for her interest in him to wane.

Out of sight, out of mind.

Raising his glass of brandy, he offered himself a silent toast. Yes. He would leave behind his highly profitable gaming hells, along with London’s numerous other delights and diversions, and visit dull little Harper’s Grove. And he’d enjoy every bloody minute of peace and quiet.

“Heck,” he chuckled to himself. “I may just stay at Winterbourne until Easter.”

Snow had just begun to fall as the coach rounded the final curve and Winterbourne was revealed. Devlin was surprised to find himself so eager for the sight of his boyhood home. Memories flooded back, mostly good, a few not. But he felt joy at the prospect of being once more in the embrace of his large and betimes boisterous family.

He allowed himself a regretful sigh. For all that his eldest brother had been a prudish pain in the arse, he’d be missed. Drake must be rolling in his grave over me being welcomed back into the fold. In all truth, he’d probably just rolled back to his original position. The first roll had no doubt occurred when David had inherited the dukedom.

The thought made him grin in spite of his melancholy. David, once the forgotten “spare,” had spent most of his young adult life as the sort of man Devlin was now, only worse: he’d been an artist. Even so, almost the moment he’d inherited, his brother had undergone a drastic transformation, shouldering the responsibilities of the dukedom with alarming ease. Part of this he attributed to David being married.

Women—or wives, rather—seemed to have that sort of effect on men. A grimace pulled at his mouth. I won’t be so easy to tame.

Unwilling to wait for the driver to come around when the coach stopped, he opened his own door. The smell of home assailed him, and he closed his eyes, inhaling deeply. Sounds of the driver pulling
down luggage intruded, ending his reverie, and Devlin busied himself with gathering his things from the coach’s interior.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” drawled a sardonic voice behind him. “The prodigal has returned.”

Turning, Devlin grinned and clasped arms with his older sibling, Lord Dean Wayward. “It’s been too long,” he laughed, concealing his shock at the sight of the silver strands peeking out from his brother’s dark hair.

“It did not have to be,” grumbled Dean, giving him a meaningful look.

Devlin felt his eyes begin to burn. He truly hadn’t expected such a warm greeting. Slapping Dean’s shoulder, he turned to look up at the house. “But where is my hoyden of a half sister? I’m surprised she did not come running out to meet the carriage.”

“Diana did not know you were coming.”

A frown pulled at his mouth. “I wrote ahead.”

“Daniel wanted to tell her, but her mother made us promise to keep it a secret in—”

“In case I decided not to show,” Devlin finished flatly.

Dean’s face remained impassive. “We did not wish to raise her expectations.”

It stung, but Devlin knew he’d been right to keep it from her. “In your place, I suppose I’d have done the same.”

“She’s missed you terribly,” his brother went on. “Daniel tries to make up for your absence, but you were always closer to her than any of us. It’s been hard on her. She has few friends out here where Society is so limited.”

Guilt assaulted him. According to Daniel, their sister had been devastated when he’d left. His letters to her had been sparse, though in all fairness, what could someone like him discuss with a gently raised young lady of delicate sensibilities? He’d been lucky to have enough benign material to fill half a page once every few months. “She’ll make plenty of friends when she goes to London to find a husband,” he murmured.

Dean made a noise of disgust and glared pointedly. “She’d be better off marrying someone from around here, but the Dowager insists on what she calls a ‘proper’ Season.”

“Now, now.” Devlin laughed. “They’re not all devils like me in the big city.”

His brother’s lips twisted in a wry smile. “No one is like you. Not even David at his worst.”

“Where is David, by the bye?” It boded ill that the new head of their family hadn’t even come to greet him upon his arrival.

“Settling a farmers’ dispute. He should return soon.” He waved, and Devlin turned to see a groom leading a horse toward them. “In the meantime, I’ve been sent on an errand to see if the pond has frozen—Diana wants to go skating.” He clapped Devlin on the shoulder. “Go on in. We’ll catch up later.”

Devlin turned toward the house to see Daniel coming down the stairs, face alight with a bright, guileless smile as he rushed to close the gap between them. Despite having his rib cage nearly cracked by his twin’s surprisingly strong embrace, he managed to laugh. “Damn, but it’s good to see you!” he wheezed, thumping Daniel’s back.

His brother pulled away and looked him square in the face with all sobriety. “Goodness, what a handsome devil you are.”

It was an old joke, but one Devlin never tired of. “As are you—even in these widow’s weeds,” he teased, referring to the long, black cassock his brother wore.

Daniel didn’t even try to hide his joyful tears as he laughed. “Come, Diana will murder us where we stand if she finds out you’re here and I’ve kept you from her.”
Devlin’s head felt strangely light as he followed his twin. It was surreal, walking these halls again after being forbidden entry for so long. Soft, feminine voices reached him as they approached the salon. How many times had he and Daniel slipped down this very hall on cats’ feet to eavesdrop or play naughty pranks on their elders?

He wasn’t the only one remembering those times, it seemed—as they neared the doorway, Daniel hung back and waved him ahead.

Grinning, Devlin strode in, picked up a book, and sat down without comment. The ladies glanced at him, but their conversation suffered no pause. Her Grace the Duchess of Winterbourne—Evangeline—was nattering on about raising funds for some charity while young Lady Diana poured tea for her mama, the Dowager Duchess of Winterbourne. He pretended to read, surreptitiously filling his eyes with the sight of them.

“You changed clothes,” remarked his half sister at last. “Are you planning to go riding later?”

Looking at her over the top of the book, he uttered a noncommittal grunt.

She frowned. “Don’t make pig noises at me.” When he failed to acknowledge her, she squinted at him suspiciously. “You were in high spirits not an hour ago. What happened to alter your mood?”

Before he could answer, Daniel said from out in the hall, “The long, cold ride from London, I expect.”

Eyebrows flew skyward as Daniel poked his head in, and then complete chaos followed as both women rose and assaulted Devlin with a barrage of happy exclamations and insincere admonishments.

Diana shook a finger at him, but her scolding was tempered by a broad smile. “You’re as rotten as ever!” She turned to purse her lips at Daniel. “I would have thought you more mature, at least.”

Devlin submitted to her embrace and to having his cheek kissed first by her and then by his sister-in-law and stepmother. Part of him squirmed with discomfort over all this feminine fuss, but another part of him took great comfort in the fact that he was being welcomed rather than rejected. Mingled with this was a sharp pang of regret that he hadn’t come back sooner.

He’d missed this, missed being close to him not for his money or what he could do for them, but because they loved him. Inside, a tightly coiled spring began to relax, relieved of a constant tension he hadn’t known was there until its absence.


Two days later

The blank walls of her still-undecorated bedroom stared back at Mary. In her hand rested a silver-backed brush, but she couldn’t seem to make herself move.

“What’s wrong with me that he continues to be so utterly blind?” she whispered aloud to the empty room. Other men regarded her with admiration. Why not him?

Last week, the handsome vicar had attended a public dance in the village. At first, her spirits had risen. She’d find a way to make him dance with her—he couldn’t fail to notice his dancing partner! But all such hopes had been quickly dashed on learning he’d come only to serve as a chaperone for his sister, Lady Diana.

Though others had been disgruntled over the fact that the Duke of Winterbourne’s substantially dowered half sister had drawn the bulk of the male attention, Mary hadn’t cared. She’d suffered no lack of dance partners, but Reverend Wayward had not been among them. To be fair, he’d disappointed all the other hopefuls, as well. When he wasn’t actively ushering his sister about, he
was talking to the men and matrons of the village.

Papa had spoken with him for at least ten minutes that night concerning delays in the construction of the bridge he’d designed. Having already been introduced, Mary had stood right beside him throughout the conversation, hoping he’d ask her to dance at the end.

No such luck. Just as he’d done every Sunday, he’d acknowledged her with a cordial nod and no more.

Just thinking about it made her want to fling something breakable at a wall.

*At this rate, Augie will be married before I am, and at a year younger, too.* With a snort of discontent, she continued brushing out her hair. Handsome the reverend might be, but his good looks did no one any good as long as he refused to marry.

At one point during the ball, she’d heard one disgruntled lady comment rather shockingly to another that she suspected him of being attracted to other men. But Mary had already concluded he was not. His eyes never lingered on anyone unless it was during a conversation, and then his gaze never wandered from that lucky person’s face.

How she longed to be the one to make those blue eyes stray! But it seemed nothing, save perhaps nakedness, might attract his notice.

In her mind’s eye, she envisioned them happily married. She’d greet her husband for dinner dressed in naught but her robe and shift. His beautiful eyes would widen as she let slip the robe from her shoulders, the dinner forgotten, and she’d step into his open arms—

“Mary?”

Flinching, she dropped the brush and bent to retrieve it, her face afire. “Y-yes, Mama?”

“Good heavens,” said her mother with a frown. “Has Ginny not yet come up to fix your hair?”

Mary shook her head, struggling to hide her discomfiture.

Mumbling about the shiftless nature of certain servants, her mother bustled in, plucked the brush from her daughter’s numb fingers, and began the business of detangling the heavy mass of her hair.

“You know, it’s been several months now. You could hang a painting or two in here to cheer it up a bit.”

“What’s the point?” answered Mary. “We’ll be leaving as soon as the Season begins.” And once Papa’s bridge was finished being built, there would be no reason to come back. They’d go to London for the Season, and if she didn’t marry while there, they’d settle afterward in whatever town Papa’s next project was located.

Her mother didn’t acknowledge the old complaint. “Mrs. Barnes will be coming by later for tea,” she informed Mary. “You remember her son, Anthony?”

She barely refrained from groaning. Anthony’s father owned the local brickworks and had become fast friends with Papa. She was not fond of the ham-handed young man. “Yes, of course,” she answered dutifully, wincing as her mother pulled on a hank of hair. “Will he be accompanying her?”

She held her breath in dread.

“No, but I believe she may be coming to represent his interest in you.”

Oh, merciful heaven! “What makes you think such is her intent?”

A triumphant little smile lifted the corners of her mother’s mouth. “Earlier this week, we chanced to meet in the village while selecting fabric. Some little way into our conversation, she told me that her son admires you a great deal.”

The thought brought her no pleasure and more than a little worry. “I cannot see why I should be anything special to him.”

The brush stilled. “You dislike him?”
“No,” she lied. “But…” She met her mother’s eyes in the mirror. “Oh, Mama. I’m sure he’d make someone a fine husband, but I’m afraid it cannot be me.”

Her mother seemed to gather herself for a moment before speaking. “I know you think yourself skilled at keeping your thoughts to yourself, Mary, and I hate to destroy that illusion, but…your chances of marrying the Reverend Wayward are at best slim, if not nonexistent.”

The heart in Mary’s chest all but stopped beating.

“Oh, my child,” murmured her mother sympathetically. “Your liking for that particular gentleman is quite transparent.” Her gray eyes, so like Mary’s own, were sad and gentle. “Unfortunately, my dear, he is a man already wed—to his vocation. His mind is set on a higher purpose.” She held up a hand as Mary made to protest. “Such men have little interest in marriage.”

“Surely he must want a family someday? He’s taken no vow of celibacy to prevent his marrying.”

Her mother’s cheeks reddened. “Perhaps not, but you are not to go making a fool of yourself over the man when he has given you no encouragement. The Season is not that far off, and you don’t want people gossiping about you before we even get to London.”

“Of course, Mama,” she said meekly, bowing her head so her mother could start plaiting her hair into a chignon. As if anyone else from the vicinity but Lady Diana is expected to make that trip! The thought elicited a wave of disappointment. Reverend Wayward would, of course, remain here.

If only my parents could be persuaded to forego London this Season! But even now the dressmakers were plying their needles to sew her gowns, and Papa had already secured lodgings.

“You’re not getting any younger, you know,” her mother commented drily. “It’s time to put aside wishful thinking and focus on what is actually possible.”

Mary bit her tongue. At twenty-one, she was expected to end this Season engaged. Unlike her mother, she saw her age not as a detriment, but rather an advantage. Reverend Wayward seemed the sort of man to prefer the company of an intelligent, serious-minded woman over some giggly girl straight out of the schoolroom, but thus far she’d been unable to get his attention.

There has to be a way… The scrape of the comb’s tines sliding against her scalp, securing the top of her coiffure, brought her back to the present. Her hair was done. “Thank you, Mama.”

“Finish dressing and then come down for breakfast. Be quick. You know how your father dislikes tardiness.”

An hour later, Mary’s stomach was tight with nerves as she and her family walked the short distance to church. Her breath caught as she spied the reverend off to the side of the front door, meeting all comers with his typically sunny smile.

She thrust her shoulders back and made ready. Look at me. See me.

The corners of his eyes crinkled with genuine warmth as he greeted her family. His deep blue gaze, however, met hers for only the briefest instant before continuing its journey.

Damn. Guilt assailed her as she passed beneath the archway. Entering the house of the Lord with a curse, albeit an unspoken one, was hardly the way to win His favor when she planned to beg for His servant to fall in love with her.

She smiled and nodded to all she met, but their cordial greetings only made her more heartsore. Their faces were friendly enough, but there was no real warmth in their eyes. No joyful recognition. She and her family had been accepted in Harper’s Grove, but as guests, not as members of the community.

And they were right to be so guarded. Newcomers were an unknown quantity. Time was required to establish trust and intimacy. Of all the young women she’d met here, only Augie, who’d been in Harper’s Grove less than a year, had extended to her the hand of true friendship.
And I’ll be leaving her behind in a few months. Just as she’d done every friend she’d ever managed to make during her short stints in various towns across England. Maintaining contact through letters was all well and good, but after a time the letters tended to become fewer and farther between. Eventually, they stopped.

She wanted a home. A real home. And she wanted it to be in Harper’s Grove. Of all the places she and her family had lived, this was her favorite. London held no appeal for her whatsoever. It was too big, too impersonal. She wanted to walk through the village and have people draw her aside to talk about their lives, share their secrets, or show off their babies. She wanted to be inside, enjoying the warmth and camaraderie with everyone, instead of always peering in through windows.

After the service, Mary stayed behind to offer up a few more fervent pleas to the Almighty while the townsfolk gathered outside. Just as she was preparing to rise, the answer to her prayers reentered the sanctuary—unaccompanied.

Hope leaped inside her like a startled rabbit as Reverend Wayward came to a halt beside her pew, his brow furrowed with concern. “Miss Tomblin, is it not?”

“Yes,” she breathed, gazing up into his eyes.

The frown deepened. “Your parents are outside. Should you not join them?”

She wanted to look down, to pretend shyness, but she couldn’t bear to break the spell. He was seeing her. Actually seeing her. “I…I was praying.”

Nodding solemnly, he lowered his voice. “Prayer is always a good way to begin solving any problem. If something is troubling you and you need to talk, I’m happy to provide counsel.”

Thoughts jumbled, one atop the other, piling up on the tip of her tongue. But she couldn’t speak. “Miss Tomblin?”

“Say something! “You are all that is good and kind in this world,” she blurted, feeling her face heat. “I’ve wanted to tell you for ages that I—”

“Mary?” called her mother’s voice from the door. “Oh, Reverend. My apologies. I did not know I was interrupting a private consult.” Her eyes flicked between the two of them and then narrowed as they came to rest again on her daughter. “Mary, your father and I are ready to depart.”

Damn, damn, damn! She shot to her feet. “I was just telling Reverend Wayward about the…” She reached for words, but all vocabulary seemed to have fled her mind.

“About your family’s participation in the upcoming charity bazaar,” he finished for her smoothly. His blue gaze, now full of caution, shifted to her mother. “I cannot begin to express my gratitude for your time and generosity.”

The tension left her mother’s face as she answered, “It is our pleasure, of course.”

Mary, relief washing over her, watched as he went over to her mother and continued to converse, leaving her standing alone at the end of her pew. Her heart withered in the fires of mortification and failure. Because of her impiety and ill-handling of her own sentiments, she’d been rejected. Though he’d not said anything to that effect, she knew it for a certainty. The object of her affection now regarded her with naught but wariness.

Begging the Almighty would do no good now. He’d provided her with an opportunity to form a rapport, and she’d flubbed it. The good reverend would certainly never allow himself to be alone with her again.

Devlin gave himself over to laughter, tilting his head back to lean against the trunk of the tree in which they’d made their second home as boys. Now he wished he’d attended church this morning instead of
claiming a headache to get out of it. “You really think she was about to make a declaration?”

“I fail to see the humor in this situation,” bit out Daniel, flushing scarlet to the roots of his hair. “I told a falsehood to spare the poor girl any embarrassment, but now I must find a way to gently yet unequivocally let her know her affections are misplaced.” His hands raked through his hair, leaving it standing on end in places. He looked a complete madman.

“I could do it for you.”

His brother’s head snapped up. “What?”

He grinned. “We used to do it all the time, remember? And we still can—Diana and Evangeline could not tell us apart, and they see you every week.” But his brother was already shaking his head in denial. “Oh, go on! Think about it! Your Miss Tomblin is merely infatuated. I’ll set her straight, and next Sunday all will be back to normal.”

“She’s not ‘my’ Miss Tomblin, and the answer is—”

“I can ensure that she’s once and for all disabused of the idea,” Devlin tempted, giving his best “trust me” smile. “Once I’m done, she’ll never even look at y—”

“Devlin…” His brother’s voice had lowered ominously.

“I’d do it gently. She’ll never know the difference. You remember how good I was at it.”

“We are not children anymore,” said Daniel, all tolerance vanishing in favor of the stern demeanor he usually reserved for delivering moral admonishments. “This is my problem to deal with, and deal with it, I shall. In my own way.” His frown deepened. “Besides, even if I were to allow such a deceit, there’s no way anyone would ever believe you are me. Not anymore. You’re a man of the world, saturated with its carnality and steeped in its avarice. You use your God-given gifts for your own personal gain and consort with gamblers and…others utterly lacking in morals. You would not fool a child, much less the people of this parish, who know me well. You’d be found out in an instant, and then I would be called upon to answer for the deception. No. Absolutely not.”

Raising his hands, Devlin conceded. “Fine. Fine. I understand. I was only offering to help.” Letting out a long-suffering sigh, he shoved off from the tree’s support and dusted bits of bark off his rump. “You coming?”

Daniel didn’t move. “Actually, I think I might stay out here a while longer. Alone,” he added. “I need to think about things. Pray for guidance. Tell the others I’ll be a few hours.”

A few hours? He was going to pray for a few hours? A wicked idea began to form in Devlin’s mind. It was pure mischief—which of course meant it was completely irresistible. Making a sour face, he wiggled his fingers in farewell. “Have fun with that, then. I’ll see you at dinner.”

Turning, he strode down the orchard path with purpose. If his twin doubted his ability to still mimic him convincingly, then he would prove his skill. And if he happened to run into Miss Tomblin, he’d do Daniel a favor.

It wasn’t that he didn’t think his brother capable of taking care of it on his own, but he knew how shy and awkward Danny was when it came to women. He was a gifted orator and could preach to a congregation with utter confidence, but he was a tongue-tied disaster when confronted with a flirtatious woman. Had his twin expressed any liking for the girl, he’d never consider intervening on his behalf, but it was clear she needed to be dissuaded. So, if the opportunity presented itself…

His brother’s situation was a grim reminder of his own troubles. In little more than a week he was due to board a coach and return to London. If Miss St. Peters had not found a new target for her matrimonial machinations by the time he arrived, he’d have to find a way to evade her pursuit without ruining his business relationship with her father.

He’d been wracking his brain for a solution that wouldn’t put him on the wrong side of things with
St. Peters. The man’s daughter was pampered and spoiled, given everything she wanted. He only hoped she hadn’t told her father he’d been added to her wish list. He’d figure it out sooner or later. In the meantime, he had other pursuits to attend to.

Slipping into his brother’s room, he disrobed with all haste and stowed his clothes under the bed. Danny’s cassock fit a bit more loosely than he expected, especially around the shoulders, but the overcoat would conceal that just fine. Getting out of the house and borrowing his brother’s horse without being discovered proved a bit more of a challenge, but he managed and was soon making his way to the village.
Mary’s lips formed words as she strolled down the street beside Augie, but her heart and mind weren’t in the conversation. She hadn’t been able to bring herself to tell her friend about the humiliation she’d suffered this morning. She didn’t think she’d be able to tell anyone about it.

He would never fall in love with her now. He probably wouldn’t even look at her again. And it was her fault. She should have approached him more tactfully, eased him into awareness of her tender sentiments. Instead, fool that she was, she’d all but thrown herself at him.

If the opportunity presented itself, she would apologize and ask his forgiveness. It was doubtful he’d ever give her such a chance, but she was prepared in the event. It was the mature thing to do, and she at least wanted to leave him with that impression.

“Oh, look!” whispered Augie excitedly as they rounded a corner. “There’s the vicar. Let’s go and say hello.”

Mary’s heart sank to her toes as she spied Reverend Wayward talking to Mrs. Grierson outside the apothecary. “He looks busy,” she whispered back, desperate to avoid him. She’d changed her mind. It was too soon. She wasn’t ready. “We should visit the mercantile. You must help me find an appropriate gift for your sister’s birthday.” Hopefully by the time they emerged, he’d be gone.

“Nonsense! We can look for that later.” Augie, seemingly determined to facilitate an encounter, linked arms with Mary and practically dragged her the remainder of the way. By the time they reached him, Mrs. Grierson had turned to leave. “Reverend Wayward, how lovely to see you,” said her friend with over-bright cheer. “We were just talking about how exciting it is to be helping with the church’s upcoming bazaar.”

“Your generosity is truly a blessing to this village,” said he, mildly.

An awkward silence fell, and Mary squirmed, knowing she was being rude. Hauling her gaze up from the ground was like being dragged naked over a path littered with rusted nails and broken glass, but she did it. What a shock it was to see his benevolent smile and dark eyes full of neither contempt nor wariness but rather intense curiosity and something else, something that made her suddenly warm all over.

“The world needs more such kindness,” he was saying, his smile broadening.

She forgot how to breathe, and for a moment found herself unable to form words. “I… It’s my pleasure to serve the Lord in whatever manner possible,” she finally managed. “I am, as you said in this morning’s sermon, His instrument.”

“Indeed,” he said, his gaze traveling over her face as if memorizing her features, like he was seeing her for the first time.

Her middle tightened, and her knees suddenly felt a bit wobbly. Perhaps not all hope is lost. She ventured the tiniest of smiles. “I do hope you’ll forgive me for being so outspoken this morning,” she said carefully. “Truly, I meant no offense, and I’m glad you helped clarify the matter. For us both.”

His countenance froze for an instant, and then his smile faded into a more sober expression. “No offense was taken, Miss Tomblin,” he said in a monotone.

Her heart leaped for joy, and it was all she could do not to let it show. Her apology had been accepted! “Thank you,” she said, relieved beyond measure that he’d decided to forgive her for having made him so uncomfortable.

But he wasn’t quite finished. “Certainty is always preferable to ignorance, which can lead to so
many tragically avoidable mistakes, don’t you think?” he went on, his light, conversant tone belied by the intensity of his gaze. “One of the many satisfactions granted me through my holy commission is to be able to give certainty to parishioners seeking truth. The knowledge that you no longer labor under a burden of confusion or misunderstanding lightens my own yoke considerably.”

Mary had no doubts whatsoever as to his meaning. All the warmth and pleasure she’d felt at his forgiveness and attentions bled out, and her eyes began to ache the way they always did just before she cried.

Well, at least he’s gentlemanly enough to convey his disinterest in a manner that leaves me some dignity. It was time to go before said dignity took flight in an unseemly show of tears.

Swallowing her upset, she gave him as much of a smile as she could muster. “I’m so glad for you, and shall be ever grateful for your patient instruction,” she managed with false brightness, clutching Augie’s arm. “Well, we won’t keep you—we were just on our way to the mercantile.”

“Ladies, it was my pleasure,” he said at once, stepping to the side to allow them to pass, his gaze never leaving her face.

Tearing her eyes off him, she forced her legs to move. Just walk. Don’t think about it, and whatever you do, don’t be foolish enough to say anything more. You’ll only make matters worse. Just keep walking.

She made the mistake of glancing up at him. A terrible ache blossomed in her chest as their eyes met, threatening to steal her breath and let loose the tears she’d been holding back. Why she should feel such longing after such a definitive rejection was unfathomable, but she couldn’t deny it was there. Oh, how she wanted him to love her back! The tightness in her belly ratcheted up another notch and her heart skipped as he continued to hold her gaze.

Alarm flashed in his eyes, and he moved back another half step, as if she bore some vile contagion. It hurt. Enough that she was able to break the spell and look away.

From the corner of her eye as she moved past, she saw it happen. The stumble as his heel caught on the raised corner of a flagstone. The graceless hop-twist as he tried to right himself. The fall as he came crashing to the ground with a hard grunt followed by a sharp crack and an agonized outcry.

Aghast, she stared down at the unnatural bend of his lower leg as he lay there groaning, the color bleeding from his pain-contorted visage.

Beside her, Augie let out a long, faint moan.

The sound galvanized Mary. “Augusta Benfield, don’t you dare faint!” she snapped, jolting her friend out of an imminent collapse. “Go and get help!” The reverend let out another pained sound, and she fell to her knees beside him, taking his head and pillowing it on her lap. “Quickly! Go!” she urged, shooing Augie on.

As her friend hiked her skirts and ran, yelling, into the apothecary, Mary looked down at the reverend. Even as she worried for him, she couldn’t help acknowledging the irony of her situation. She’d wanted to be close to him for a long time, but despite countless daydreams envisioning him in her arms, this particular scenario had escaped even her imagination.

Despite his rebuff, she was helpless against the feelings elicited by holding him like this. Her skin felt branded by the softness of his coal-black hair between her fingers as she cradled his head and crooned nonsense words of comfort. Even now, after everything—she still wanted him.

She thought back over their exchange. He’d clearly been caught off guard and flustered by her expression of sentiment this morning, but had just now looked at her with definite interest before again retreating.

Hope rekindled in her heart. Whether it was shyness or some other impediment that held him back,
it was imperative that she learn why he resisted and then figure out how to overcome that obstacle.

Later that night...

Devlin lay back against the pillows on his brother’s hard bed, sweat beading his brow as he fought the urge to vomit. Again. The doctor had come and gone in a huff after the bonesetter had put his leg to rights—without the benefit of laudanum, which he’d adamantly refused due to the need to maintain the secret of his true identity. Now, all he could do was suffer in agony as Daniel, who’d eventually discovered his missing clothes, figured it out, and had come to the rectory to look for him, gave him a well-earned tongue-lashing.

“How could you do it?” The vein on Daniel’s temple stood out like a pulsing purple caterpillar against his brick-red face. “Do you know how long I stayed out there in the cold on my knees praying for guidance? Three hours?” he bellowed. “While you stole my clothes and impersonated me to members of my own flock! And now, here you are with a broken leg, in my house, in my bed, with everyone thinking you’re me!”

“I deserve every bit of your wrath,” Devlin gasped. “I should not have done it. I know that now.”

“Well, I’m so glad you’ve learned your lesson,” his brother deadpanned. Dropping into the chair beside the bed, he buried his face in his hands. “What are we going to do?”

Devlin stared at him. “What do you mean? You’ll tell everyone what I did, that it was a thoughtless prank, and—”

“And you’ll never be allowed to cross Winterbourne’s threshold again.”

He hadn’t thought of that. Putting on a brave face, he dismissed the idea with a wave. “Nonsense. David will understand it was merely high spirits that inspired me, and that I harbored no malicious intent.”

“David is the head of our family now,” said Daniel soberly. “He has responsibilities, and our baby sister is one of them. Word of this gets out and it will damage our entire family’s reputation and ruin her prospects this Season. He would disown you in a blink to protect her.”

He felt the blood drain from his face at the thought of losing his family again after just having been welcomed back. “I did not even think of—”

“No, you did not,” cut in Daniel, eyes ablaze. “And there are other things to consider, too, such as my reputation. The people you spoke with today, you said they could not tell the difference. How many of them would wonder whether or not this was really the first time you and I had switched places? How many might wonder if we’d often played such a game at their expense for our own amusement?”

“Surely they would never think such a thing of you,” he reasoned. But despite his bravado, misgiving began to creep in.

“How would they know for certain?” asked his brother. “This incident could cast doubt on my character and everything I’ve ever said or done here. All the years I’ve spent cultivating relationships with these people, building their trust in me, their earthly shepherd—all gone, or at best irreparably damaged.” He pinched the bridge of his nose, closed his eyes, and shook his head. “You’ve quite possibly just ruined my life.”

Pain spiked in Devlin’s lower leg again. “You’re not the only one suffering here,” he snapped. “I’m supposed to leave for London next week to seal a deal that will guarantee my future. Without it, my rivals will move in and I’ll lose everything I’ve invested—though I hardly expect any sympathy from
you over that prospect."

“You’re a bloody selfish bastard, Dev,” muttered Daniel thickly, rising to go and stand before the hearth.

The shock of hearing his saintly twin use such language brought Devlin up short, and the anger drained out of him as he spied Daniel surreptitiously wiping his eyes. Falling back, he heaved a sigh. “You’re right. I am. And, unlike you, I deserve whatever happens. I suppose this is God punishing me for my many sins. And you along with me, unfortunately.”

“You’re wrong,” said his brother softly. “I don’t believe God works that way.” Crossing his arms, he began to pace the room. “I know you meant no harm, Dev, and that it was just a silly prank to you. But now we have to deal with the consequences. I don’t want to lose the faith the people here have placed in me, and I don’t want you to lose your family again.” His mouth compressed, and he fell silent.

Devlin sat up a little. “You’re not going to tell them, are you?” he breathed, wondering if this was a fever dream induced by his broken leg. “But how can—”

“You’re going to take my place here until you recover enough to return to London,” replied Daniel, holding up a hand for silence. “I’ll write out all my sermons, which you will deliver. I know you’ll remember the words, but do you still remember how to deliver the worship serv—”

“Yes. Absolutely,” cut in Devlin. He hadn’t felt the call to ministry but hadn’t been able to bear the thought of being parted from Danny, so they’d attended seminary together. Both had graduated with high honors, largely due to their ability to recall everything they read in perfect detail, but he’d decided at the last minute not to be ordained. That had been the beginning of the end for him and the duke. “I remember all of it.”

“Good.” His brother’s face remained unreadable. “We’ll go over it again this week, and you’ll deliver the Christmas sermon. I’ll attend in disguise to observe.” He took a shaky breath. “You won’t be expected to return to your—my—other duties for a while yet. When you do, you’ll have plenty of offers of help.”

That sounded reasonable enough.

“I’ll list those duties out for you,” continued Daniel in clipped tones. “Under the circumstances, you will not be expected to casually socialize. If anyone comes to you needing counsel, you will dispense no personal advice, but will direct them to an appropriate Bible verse and tell them to pray. Hopefully, things will remain uneventful until we can exchange places again, but if, heaven forbid, a situation arises, you’ll have to be careful to act as I would.” He paused and pointed a trembling finger at him. “And, after tonight, no drinking.”

Now that was a sore blow, especially considering how much pain he was in at the moment. He accepted it, however, as part of his penance. “Danny, when Father disowned me, you were the only one who stood by me. I cannot ever forget it. I swear to you I can do this and no one will ever be the wiser.”

“Good, because if you fail, it will be the ruin of me and very likely our entire family. Which will, as you know, be in attendance at the Christmas Eve service.”

Devlin’s mouth went bone dry as the weight of his brother’s world settled on his shoulders. He nodded.

“Now,” said Daniel, going over to his writing desk. “While you are healing and seeing to matters here, I will go to London and temporarily take your place. You’ll need to instruct me on how to convincingly behave like you and give me all the particulars on what must be done to preserve your livelihood. I suggest you send letters ahead to—”
“Yes, I’ll prearrange everything, of course,” Devlin assured him. “I’ll write my managers and clear my schedule until the end of February.” His brother’s face blanched. “We cannot exchange places until I’m able to walk again—with a cane, at the very least,” he reasoned. Despite his throbbing leg, he managed a wry smile. “You may be a holy man, but if you suddenly start walking normally before it’s realistically possible, you’ll either incur suspicion or have people flocking to Harper’s Grove in search of a miracle.”

Daniel’s expression remained stoic and utterly without humor as he nodded. “Agreed. Now, regarding your social commitments, I must assume you cannot simply disappear for so long a time, so I’ll fulfill at least some of your obligations—whatever invitations you have already accepted, at the least. But be warned, Devlin. While I’m in London acting on your behalf, I will not commit any unethical act. I may be quite literally walking in your shoes, but I will not live your life of sin and vice.”

A fresh round of sweat broke across Devlin’s brow, but he nodded. His brother knew he ran gaming hells, but it was doubtful his pious sibling understood everything that went on behind those doors. Provided he instructed his managers thoroughly in his letters, God willing, he’d never find out.

As for the contract with St. Peters, it had already been drawn up prior to his leaving. All Daniel had to do was sign it and then have St. Peters add his signature in the presence of their solicitors and witnesses.

Now he just had to force his sinful self to behave in a pious manner that, apparently, allowed for no fun whatsoever while living a life of drudgery and servitude…for the next two months. And school a vicar in how to behave convincingly like a rake.

Devlin knew his brother could do it, just as he knew himself capable of flawlessly playing Daniel’s part. Before Danny had felt the call to serve the Church, he’d been just as mischievous, just as full of devilry as he. And he’d been a bloody good actor, too. There hadn’t been a soul in the whole of the county they hadn’t been able to fool.

Soul. A sinking sensation settled in his gut as he thought about what his twin was about to do in order to save them both. It was one thing for him to lie industriously, but to ask Daniel to do it...

_It’s not as if I’m corrupting him._ Such was the strength of his brother’s religious conviction that he would doubtless easily withstand London’s temptations. If anyone was capable of coming away from that magnificent cesspool of vice untainted, it was surely Saint Danny.

He put it out of his mind.

For the next week, Daniel hid in the rectory after having sent word to their family of the accident, which he made out to be far less serious than it was, and saying that Devlin had come to stay and care for him. David couldn’t drag himself away from his duties, but he sent Dean a couple of times in his stead, along with the ladies, all bearing gifts meant to make the invalid comfortable throughout his convalescence.

Devlin, for his part, made a show of feeling far too poorly to entertain company for more than a few minutes at a time, and his twin shooed them away so the “invalid” could rest.

Hour after hour, Devlin listened as Daniel brought him up to date on changes in ecclesiastical practices, shared intimate knowledge concerning the goings-on in the villagers’ private lives, and instructed him on his own personal habits.

Christmas Eve came. Knowing it was a wrench for his twin to give up his favorite service, Devlin took extra care in his preparation.

It had to be perfect.

Donning his brother’s cassock, surplice, and tippet was surreal, but nowhere near as strange as then
leading a worship service on one of the highest holidays of the year—from a chair and using crutches. He’d never thought to lead any church service and felt a right hypocrite preaching about the Lord who, out of love for sinful man, had chosen to become flesh and blood to walk among them and teach them the ways of righteousness. There was a reason he’d decided not to accept ordination. It just wasn’t in him to be saintly.

His gaze kept straying to where Daniel stood at the back, concealed in the darkest corner beneath the choir loft with his head bowed. The simple farmers’ clothes he wore and the dense black shadow about his jaw from a week’s unshaven growth helped conceal his identity, as did the thick scarf he wore wound about his neck and chin, but if anyone looked closely...

Several times, he found himself glancing at Miss Tomblin, who sat in the second pew with her family. Her enraptured stare never left his face, and it became abundantly clear the girl truly fancied herself in love.

It was hard to believe his twin didn’t reciprocate, but he knew Danny. His brother was practically an ascetic and had never been prone to passion. At times, it was difficult to comprehend how the two of them, looking so very alike, could be so opposite in nature.

The thought brought a brief smile to his face as he considered the effect that difference would likely have on Miss St. Peters. He’d warned Daniel about her, if only in the vaguest of terms, and Danny had merely shrugged and told him it was of no import. Doubtless, his naturally aloof demeanor where women were concerned would put her off in no time.

His gaze was again drawn to Miss Tomblin. He’d done nothing but cause his brother grief. If nothing else, he could take care of this small matter for him. By the time Danny returned to Harper’s Grove, Miss Tomblin would no longer be a problem.
Chapter Three

Mary had long ago determined that Reverend Wayward was a man of many contradictions. Handsome, but humble. Keen of mind, yet never patronizing. Mild-mannered, but strong in his convictions. Over the last two weeks, however, he’d undergone so many contradictory changes in temperament that she hardly knew what to think.

He’d unquestionably rejected her, but then had given her implicit encouragement, only to return a few days later to wariness and avoidance. Now, however, she saw in his eyes—which kept returning to her with happily increasing frequency as he delivered his sermon—something that looked suspiciously like regret.

*Will I never understand him?* She comforted herself with the thought that understanding would come with time. Once they were married, she’d have all the time in the world to unravel the mysteries of his mind and heart. For the moment, however, she was content to bask in the warmth of his occasional glances and know that she was in his thoughts.

The many candles surrounding the altar cast a bright nimbus of light around him, making him appear saintly—for all that he was seated with a pair of crutches leaning against the pulpit beside him. As he expounded on the Lord’s great love for mankind, she thought heaven could have crafted no better orator for today’s message, even if his rich, commanding voice sounded a bit rougher than usual, as if he hadn’t slept well. She supposed his leg must be paining him greatly. Poor thing.

While she waited with her parents to exit the church, she marked the reverend’s half sister, Lady Diana, standing close by. *Opportunity knocks*... Her chance of success would improve greatly if his family liked her. Since they’d already been introduced, it would be appropriate to offer holiday cheer. “Happy Christmas, my lady,” she said softly.

The dark-haired woman regarded her with intense eyes the same startling blue as her brother’s. “Happy Christmas—Miss Tomblin, is it not?” “Indeed. Your brother’s sermon was beautiful and most inspiring. Please convey to him my appreciation.” “Why not tell him yourself? I’m sure he would love to hear it directly from your own lips.” Lady Diana’s stare was just as penetrating as her sibling’s.

Heat stole into Mary’s cheeks. “Later, perhaps. When he is not so busy.” “I doubt he’d mind such a complimentary interruption,” said Lady Diana, smiling. She paused, as if hesitant to speak further, but then seemed to arrive at a decision. “I could not help noticing that his attention seemed to settle on you quite often today.”

Mary’s gentle blush gave way to a face-prickling flood of heat. “Oh? I had not noticed,” she lied. “I doubt he would mind such a complimentary interruption,” Lady Diana, smiling. She paused, as if hesitant to speak further, but then seemed to arrive at a decision. “I could not help noticing that his attention seemed to settle on you quite often today.”

Mary’s gentle blush gave way to a face-prickling flood of heat. “Oh? I had not noticed,” she lied. “I’m sorry. I did not mean for my observation to make you uncomfortable.” Lady Diana’s smile turned wry. “My brothers tell me I’m far too direct. I merely wondered at his behavior—it’s unusual for him to be so distracted.”

*Don’t I know it!* Maintaining her placid expression, she waited, unsure how to proceed.

“In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever seen him as preoccupied as he has been of late,” continued Lady Diana. “At the risk of causing you further discomfort, I’ll share with you something few people outside our family know. For all that he speaks from the pulpit every week, Daniel is quite introspective and shy. He has always preferred to listen rather than venture his own opinions—a good quality for a vicar, but a potential obstacle in the pursuit of, shall we say, personal contentment?”
Stunned, Mary had to make an effort not to let her jaw drop. Direct, indeed! “I can see how that might be so,” she at last managed.

Lady Diana’s eyes lit with amusement. “A lady would hardly be able to discern such a gentleman’s interest in her.”

She took up the thread, hope pounding in her chest with every heartbeat. “And…how would a lady go about encouraging the attentions of…such a gentleman?”

Her companion’s smile broadened another increment. “One might offer to assist him with a task for which few others are willing to volunteer, thus creating an opportunity to build a rapport. For instance, my brother recently bemoaned the fact that so few help him in seeing to the needs of the village’s elders.”

It was a brilliant idea. She’d never minded helping Mama care for her grandparents. In fact, she’d often found it thoroughly enjoyable. They’d told some of the most fascinating stories about their youth. She would show Reverend Wayward what an excellent wife she’d be by working at his side.

So absorbed by the thought was Mary that she didn’t realize they’d been joined by another person until she caught movement from the corner of her eye. Her heart very nearly stopped when she turned to see Reverend Wayward standing there, hunched over his crutches.

“Daniel,” said his sister, a conspiratorial twinkle in her eye as she looked at Mary. “Miss Tomblin was just telling me how much she enjoyed your sermon.”

Stinging heat again rose in Mary’s face at the unexpected prompt. Calm. Be calm. She forced sound from a suddenly dry throat. “Indeed, I was.” Fool! “I found it most moving.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

Lady Diana chimed in again. “She also mentioned something about being inspired to volunteer her time. What was it you were saying a moment ago?” she asked Mary.

Sweet Lord above! Pulse whooshing in her ears, Mary turned to him and again struggled for words. “I thought perhaps to assist you when you visit the older folk of the village.” His brows knit, and her mind raced. A snippet of overheard conversation rose to the fore of her memory. “I heard Mrs. Mickelby say last night that she’s been terribly lonely now that Mr. Mickelby is gone and her daughter has moved to Ireland. She has no family here to keep her company.”

Midnight-blue eyes caught and held hers, and Mary could almost feel him peeling back the layers of her facade, searching for the truth. Lifting her chin a fraction, she met his steady gaze, daring him to find a lie. If her motives for wanting to help weren’t entirely altruistic, well, she was sure the Lord understood.

Again, his sister intervened. “Did you not just last month complain of needing an extra pair of hands? And now, especially with your leg…”

Mary felt an almost tangible weight lift from her when he again focused his attention on his sister. “Indeed,” he finally responded, ducking his head. “And the elders are of special concern, as many become isolated during the colder months. I don’t get around to them as often as I would like.”

A flicker of surprise crossed Lady Diana’s face, but it passed so quickly it might have been imagined. “Then, I think you have your extra hands right here,” she said crisply, gesturing toward Mary.

Heart pounding so hard she thought he must surely hear it, Mary waited for his reply. What if he declined? Breathe…

“Happy am I to see another soul answering the call to serve the Lord,” he said a moment later with a smile that was cool but not unfriendly. “I shall be glad of your help, Miss Tomblin. See me next Sunday after service, and be ready to assist.”
Relief mingled with excitement, but she maintained composure. “I thank you for the opportunity to do some good in our community.”

With a cordial nod, he excused himself and hobbled on to speak to another parishioner.

“That went well,” said Lady Diana. “Now we shall see if my dear brother can be liberated from his self-imposed isolation.” Her eyes were hard as she stared at her sibling, as if she were annoyed with him. Those eyes softened a bit as she again regarded Mary. “He has spent far too long in his own company. Your presence at his side will be good for him.”

Mary certainly hoped so.

…

He’d been caught. Diana had somehow managed to trick him into revealing himself. And yet she hadn’t unmasked him. Why?

It was all he could do not to turn around and try to see what she was doing over there with the troublesome Miss Tomblin. That Diana would try to foist her off on Daniel like that was an unforeseen snag—one he would turn to his advantage, of course.

He looked for Daniel, but his twin was nowhere to be seen. Most likely, he’d slipped into the vestibule as the final hymn was being sung. Impatience gnawed at him as he continued to chat with the lingerers, slowly ushering them toward the doors. Some people just couldn’t take a hint and leave. It was nearly an hour before everyone had gone, and his leg was hurting something awful, especially where the splint dug in.

Locking the front door, he breathed a sigh of relief. So far, so good. They’d have to deal with Diana, but she’d be easy to persuade into cooperating. In fact, she might even be of help.

“Hello?” he called, opening the vestibule door a crack.

“I’m here.” Daniel emerged from behind the door.

“Well?” he said, sitting with a groan and propping his leg up on the pew. “How did I do?”

“Congratulations,” said Daniel, taking the crutches from him and setting them aside. “You made a far more convincing vicar than I expected.”

“I told you I could do it,” Devlin replied, grinning. He sobered immediately, however. “We do have one slight problem.” He told him about their sister. “I’m not sure where I went wrong, but something I said or did gave me away.”

His brother’s face paled several shades. “I’m ashamed to say the fault is mine. In a moment of exasperation, I complained to her after having visited Mrs. Small.”

“The old woman you described as ‘querulous and sometimes difficult to endure’?”

“Just so,” answered Daniel with a look of chagrin. “In a moment of selfishness, I told Diana I wished the children of the elderly paid them more mind so I would be less burdened with their care. It was not my best moment. Mrs. Small had been particularly biting in her commentary that day, and I could do nothing to please her.”

Devlin chuckled ruefully. “And I just told Diana—I—you—felt badly about not visiting the elderly more often.” He sighed. “Well, now at least I know why I was discovered. My God, I cannot imagine what David will do when he finds out about this.”

“He won’t.” Taking a deep breath, Daniel squared his shoulders. “I know our sister. She’ll keep our secret—even if she’s angry—at least until she knows why we’re doing this. And she’ll never betray us, especially after she understands what’s at stake. When I visit Winterbourne tomorrow for dinner, I’ll make her understand why this ruse is necessary.”

“Agreed. But must you go there? I don’t like risking more of our family learning about our little
charade should you not—"

“Don’t worry. They’ll think I’m you,” said Daniel with a grimace. “You were away so long they hardly know you anymore, so I’ll simply act sullen and make some excuse—I’ll say it’s about my London affairs. Nobody will want to talk about that. What of her playing matchmaker with Miss Tomblin?” His nervousness was evident in the way his fingers twisted in the hem of his borrowed coat. “How will you handle that? I don’t want her hurt, and neither will Diana.”

“I’m well aware. You ought to have seen the look on her face when she realized her error,” Devlin said, shaking his head. “Assure her that Miss Tomblin will be handled with the utmost delicacy and tact.”

His twin sighed and ran his hands over his stubbly cheeks. “I greatly fear this will end in disaster no matter how we go about it. By accepting Miss Tomblin’s help, you’ve practically told her to send out wedding invitations.”

“I disagree,” Devlin answered with aplomb. “And for good reason—I have a plan, you see. I’m going to turn this mistake into an opportunity to make your Miss Tomblin see the truth: that the life of a vicar’s wife is much harder work than she desires. A week of changing infants’ diapers, spooning broth into hungry mouths, wiping runny noses, and emptying elders’ chamber pots will surely dampen her enthusiasm.” He winked.

It was good to see Daniel smile, even if it was only a little. But his look quickly sobered. “Don’t be too hard on her. Her only real error lies in having become smitten with the wrong man.”

As his brother put away the paraments, Devlin recalled the way Miss Tomblin’s face had shone as she’d watched him. Were Daniel any less vehement in his rejection of the girl, he’d have tried to convince him to at least give her a chance.

There is no accounting for taste, I suppose. If his brother ever did marry, it would probably be some saintly, drab little mouse and not a vibrant beauty like Miss Tomblin.

Snuffing the last of the candles, Daniel locked up and then helped him make his slow, clumsy way across the blessedly short distance to the vicarage. His breath froze in a cloud as his brother fumbled with the door and they slipped inside.

Gifts of food from the people of Harper’s Grove, all delivered with heartfelt wishes of Christmas cheer and a speedy recovery, lay on every surface. My brother is well-loved by everyone here.

The thought elicited a rather surprising pang of envy. London was a different world. Unless someone knew you, they kept to themselves. It also renewed his sense of guilt with a vengeance. Even now, his tomfoolery was jeopardizing what Danny had here.

He could not fail his brother—again. Their sister’s meddling today was his fault. Diana had undoubtedly picked up on his nervousness and had attributed it to Miss Tomblin’s presence—but for the wrong reasons. He hoped Daniel could indeed convince her to play along.

As if he’d heard the thought, Daniel turned back to him after building up the fire. “Much as I would like to put off being berated by our sister, I think it’s better to deal with her sooner rather than later. The longer we wait, the angrier she’ll be.”

“No doubt,” Devlin grunted, grimacing as he gingerly propped his aching leg on the hassock.

“I’ll go first thing in the morning rather than waiting until dinner,” his brother muttered, “and tell them I cannot stay because I’m coming back here to share Christmas dinner with you.”

“I just hope you can get her to yourself long enough to explain.”

“I’ll manage it.”

They spent the rest of that evening discussing things Daniel had noticed about his performance that needed adjustment, as well as exchanging extra bits of helpful information.
Mrs. Tidwell had a large black-and-white cat that adored her but despised everyone else—with the exception of Daniel. Devlin would bribe it with a bit of fish on his first call.

Mr. Cotsworth liked to loan—or rather press upon Daniel—books he felt one ought to read, and always interrogated him on their contents at their next meeting.

Though he understood the necessity, Devlin’s head spun at the volume of minutiae he was expected to retain.

Christmas morning, Daniel, freshly shaven and dressed in layman’s clothes, including a thick scarf that obscured the lower half of his face and a hat that left only his eyes visible, set out for Winterbourne.

All day, on pins and needles, Devlin waited, growing ever more apprehensive. When the door handle rattled just before suppertime, he all but forgot his leg, so urgent was the impulse to leap to his feet in anticipation of the news, whether it be good or bad.

In stumped Daniel, bearing a covered basket. Setting it down, he shook off the snow and at once went to the fire to begin peeling off layers.

“Well?” Devlin prompted, impatient.

“At least she’s learned some impulse control,” his brother answered drily. “I thought she was going to slap me at first. I tell you, her basilisk gaze belongs on a jaded matron of at least fifty years of age. I shudder to think of her going to London to catch a husband with such a demeanor.”

Devlin bit his tongue and resigned himself to the torment of waiting until his twin was good and ready to reveal the outcome, though surely it must have been favorable, given his lack of panic.

When the last of the sodden layers had come away, Daniel finally faced him. “She’ll keep quiet.” Relief washed over him, cool and welcome. “Thank God for that!”

Daniel’s mouth twisted, but he held his peace. “It was not easy to convince her—I’ve never seen her so angry—but in the end, she saw reason. As for Miss Tomblin, Diana has agreed not to attempt to dissuade her, as it would appear suspicious after her encouragement. I told her you would handle it. She asked me to tell you, and I was instructed to deliver this message verbatim, that if you hurt the girl or muck this up, she’ll have your entrails served for Easter luncheon.”

For the first time since the stupid misstep that had started all this, good humor made Devlin laugh. It was short-lived. “I hope she can forgive me. I hope you can, too,” he added earnestly, realizing that he hadn’t yet asked.

His twin’s face softened in a way he’d never seen his own do. “Of course I forgive you. No matter the outcome. You’re still my brother even if you are an idiot.” Clearing his throat, he gathered up the damp coat and scarf to hang them up. “I’ll go set out the supper Evangeline sent back with me, and then you can continue teaching me how to behave like a rogue,” he said, the old, familiar twinkle back in his eye.

Devlin let out the breath he’d been holding. All would be well. For his brother’s sake, he’d make certain of it.
Two weeks later...

Mary could hardly believe it. Only a few weeks ago she’d had no hope at all, and now here she was about to work side by side with the man she intended to one day call husband. It was an opportunity to be close to him, to learn his likes and dislikes, and to show him what an excellent wife she’d make.

She’d dressed with thought to the sort of tasks she might be asked to carry out today. Not for her the sweeping, lace-trimmed gowns of Sundays prior. No, indeed. Today she wore a modest, practical dress of sturdy amber twill with minimal lace and lacking in any ostentation beyond the shiny brass buttons that marched down the front of her dark blue pelisse. It was simple but elegant, just the sort of thing a reverend’s wife would wear.

And it would be warm, too. Mama had made her put on three woolen petticoats in addition to her thickest stockings and high boots. With her heavy cloak and felt-lined gloves, she’d likely never even notice the cold.

Though she’d last week disapproved of her daughter’s ploys to catch the good vicar’s eye, Mama had been cooperative, even genial about it this morning. Her reasoning—that it would be best to have this nonsense over and done before getting down to business in London—was somewhat flawed, in Mary’s opinion, but for now it worked in her favor.

Listening with only half an ear to Reverend Wayward’s sermon, she contemplated a bright future. As a vicar’s wife, she’d always have extra responsibilities, but they’d be nothing compared to what she would receive in return: a real home with a gentle and considerate husband. Sharing a house with him would be no imposition, she was sure.

And as handsome as he is, sharing his bed will be a pleasure rather than a chore.

As if he’d heard the naughty thought, the good vicar looked up from his Bible and caught her eye. Mary bowed her head to hide her guilty blush. The very tips of her ears tingled as she stood and opened her hymnal.

For shame, Mary, and during the sermon, too! Again, she was truly thankful for the Lord’s forgiveness.

In addition to being happy and blessed in her marriage, she’d finally be able to put down some roots and have real friends for a change. Augie would come over for tea every day. They’d share the village gossip—though never with malicious intent, of course. Their children would be raised together and become lifelong friends. Never again would she be considered an interloper or be shunned by other women who feared for their beaux. As the vicar’s wife, she’d be a respected member of the community and loved by all.

“Go in peace to love and serve the Lord,” intoned Reverend Wayward, dismissing the congregation and interrupting her woolgathering.

She fully intended to obey that command, starting right now.

Her parents went out with the rest of the parishioners, leaving her behind in their pew to await the reverend’s leisure. Mary remained seated, unsure what to do with herself. She didn’t have to guess very long. A noise behind made her turn to see Reverend Wayward making his way toward her on his crutches.

“Good morning, Miss Tomblin. Your parents informed me that you’re ready to serve today.”

“Indeed I am.” It was with the greatest effort that she refrained from beaming with pride.
“Good,” he replied with a solemn nod. “If you’ll give me a few minutes in the vestry to prepare, we’ll get started.”

“Of course.” Forcing herself to remain seated, she folded her hands in her lap. “I’ll pray our work today is blessed.” She felt his presence withdraw, and then did indeed bow her head in prayer. Please don’t let me make a fool of myself again! He was wary of her, but he’d forgiven her indiscretion and had offered her another chance. Don’t let me waste it by giving in to any rash impulses...

Today, she would serve alongside him with enthusiasm, no matter how dull or menial the task. If all he wanted was for her to carry a basket of biscuits for him or pour tea while he visited with his parishioners, then so be it. She wouldn’t complain. And there’d be no talk of love. No staring at him with calf eyes, either.

When the vicar rejoined her a few minutes later, he bade her follow him. “We’ll be seeing Mrs. Small first, and then Mr. Messingham, who lives nearby. I’ll need you to carry supplies to and from the cart—nothing too heavy, of course, but it will be an enormous help.”

She marched behind him to the vicarage, curious to see inside.

He took her to the back kitchen entrance and stopped. “I laid out everything we’ll need this morning just inside the door. I’ll hand it out to you.”

Disappointment threatened to cast a shadow over her good mood as he slipped inside and did not invite her in.

It’s only temporary. Soon, he’d forget her undignified behavior. Soon, he’d see she was a woman with self-discipline and poise, a worthy helpmeet. One day, her rash conduct would be nothing more than a fond memory they’d both laugh about as they shared a pot of tea over breakfast.

A large covered basket was thrust out through the doorway a moment later and plunked down on the cobblestone, followed immediately by another. “Just a bit more,” he said, poking his head out and throwing her a quick grin that at once buoyed her flagging spirits. This time, one, then two big, unwieldy bundles appeared. “Now we’re ready,” he said cheerily. “If you’ll just take these to the cart, we’ll be on our way.”

She stared in dismay at it all for an instant, but then squared her shoulders. One basket was surprisingly light. The scent of bread wafted from beneath its cloth covering. The other basket, though smaller, was decidedly less light. She opted to load them one at a time so she could carry each with both hands.

“It’s not too heavy for you, is it?” called the vicar.

“No, not at all,” she lied brightly, lugging the heavier one over the lip of the cart and depositing it. A few minutes later, she hauled the last bundle over the side and was beginning to perspire in spite of the chilly weather. By the time she was done, he’d hauled himself up into the driver’s seat with his crutches propped up beside him…leaving no room for her.

She stared askance at him, confused, until he jerked his chin over his shoulder.

“There are blankets in the back for you,” he said with another sunny smile. “Diana adjured me to be mindful of your comfort.”

“Oh, how thoughtful of her.” It was hard not to scowl as she clambered onto the sideboard and stepped in. Her arse had hardly touched the folded blanket before he snapped the reins and the cart lurched into motion, threatening to pitch her over headfirst. Scooting around carefully amid the rolling bundles and shifting baskets, she faced the front…and was given a perfect view of his back. That, along with the occasional glimpse of his profile as he looked from side to side at crossroads, was all she saw of him for a long while.
They didn't speak. Instead of engaging her in lively conversation as expected, the man seemed inclined to whistle—which would have been fine, pleasant even, had he followed any sort of melody. After listening to his tuneless meanderings for what seemed an eternity, she finally gave up hope and gloomily watched the trees and fields pass.

Time, which she'd anticipated flying by in all the excitement of being with him, dragged interminably on the longest, slowest cart ride in history.

"Not much farther now," called Reverend Wayward over his shoulder just as she was starting to nod off to the gentle swaying of the cart. A few moments later, he drew to a halt beside a side path.

*Thank heaven!* Careful of her skirts, she climbed down, intending to assist him, but was waved back by the tip of a crutch.

"Fetch out one of the loaves and a pot of jam," he said, nodding toward the back of the cart. "Be sure to keep the bread wrapped up so it stays warm. Inside one of those bundles is a quilt. Bring them with you."

Steeling her spine against his brusque demeanor, she quickly did as told, stuffing the pot of jam into the rolled-up quilt so she could carry it all. By the time she was done, he'd managed to get himself down and was already on his way. She hurried to catch up.

The path led to a rusty wicket propped open by overgrown brambles. As she brushed past him, she again felt her insides tighten. He was so close that, had she a free hand, she could have reached up and touched his cheek to feel its texture.

"This way," he rasped.

Something in his voice sounded different—tense. His manner was stiff as he moved to the fore again, his bad leg swinging between the crutches. The path was rife with stones and weeds, forcing her to have a care where she put her feet. She didn’t know how he was able to navigate it without falling, but he somehow managed.

As they rounded a bend and the trees grew sparser, she spied a tiny cottage with a thatched roof from which poked a crooked chimney. A thin stream of smoke issued from it, letting them know the house’s occupant was home.

The vicar clambered his way up to the door and knocked. "Mrs. Small? It’s Reverend Wayward."

There was a sound of someone moving about inside, and then the scrape of wood against wood. The door cracked an inch, and a wizened face peered out. "I thought I told ye I needed none o’ your charity?" groused the old woman, clearly annoyed at having been disturbed. "Why do ye keep coming ’round for?"

"Because it is my holy charge to care for the people of this parish, madam," he said, giving her an easy smile. "May we come in?"

Mrs. Small’s frown deepened, but the door opened wide nonetheless. "Don’t see why ye have to keep coming ’round here bothering the likes o’ me an’ all. I was quite happy in front o’ me hearth. Wakened me from me nap, ye did, to have to stir me old bones an’ let in the cold an’ all when I could still be—lawks, man!" she exclaimed on seeing his leg. "What on earth happened to ye?"

"I’m so sorry for waking you, Mrs. Small," he said, setting down his bundles inside the door and standing aside for Mary. "It’s nothing, really. I’m fine. And, as you can see, I have help today."

The sight that greeted Mary’s eyes was one of complete chaos. Things—there was no better term for them—were laid about everywhere, suspended by pieces of yarn, string, and twine from the rafters, cluttering every available surface. It was at once apparent that the old woman was a collector of cast-off odds and ends. What she wanted with it all was anybody’s guess.

As she stepped farther inside, a fusty smell assailed her nostrils, making her nose wrinkle
involuntarily. Unfortunately, before she could master herself, the reverend noticed and shot her a reproachful look that made her burn with shame. Ducking her head to hide her mortification, she determined to do better. By the time he got around to introducing her, she was smiling sweetly at their hostess.

“Miss Tomblin is accompanying me today and kindly providing assistance,” explained the reverend. “We’ve brought some bread and preserves for you to enjoy, and a new quilt for your bed.” He glanced at Mary and said pointedly, “Now the snows have started, the long nights have become bitter and the days hardly any warmer. Even as cozy as yours is, every home is susceptible to the odd draft, and fires sometimes burn themselves out in the night.”

Again, Mary felt the sting of his subtle recrimination even as comprehension dawned. The old woman could hardly air out her rooms in such weather. Not only would it be hard on her health to let the cold in, but it would eat up her supply of firewood to reheat the rooms afterward. For the poor, conserving heat was a higher priority than making one’s home smell pleasant.

Despite having given them a chilly reception, the old woman didn’t object as Mary handed her the gifts. “Ooh. ’Tis quite nice, that,” she said, shaking out the quilt. “Is it eiderdown?”

“It is,” he answered.

“Not that I need it, mind,” the crone said proudly, her glare softening a little as she draped it across her shoulders. “But ’tis nice to have summat new every now and again.”

“Miss Tomblin, if you would be so kind as to lay out the loaf and preserves for Mrs. Small?”

“Of course.” Mary moved to do so at once. It was so crowded in the rooms that it was impossible to keep from brushing against the woman’s dust-coated furnishings—if they could be called such—as she made her way through the tiny cottage to the kitchen in search of a plate. This time, however, she managed to refrain from showing distaste.

Even her mother’s warnings about what she might encounter on these visits to the rural poor hadn’t prepared her for the reality. The squalor in which Mrs. Small lived was quite simply appalling. She couldn’t for the life of her understand why the old crone had reacted to the reverend’s greeting in so haughty a manner when she so clearly had nothing to boast about!

Unless, of course, one counted the number of cobwebs present in the house. She surmised there must be scores of rodents in the place, too. Steeling herself, she jerked open the cupboard with every expectation of seeing beady little eyes staring back out at her. To her immense relief, however, it was devoid of any living creatures.

Gathering what she needed, she brought the loaded plate to Reverend Wayward, hoping he wouldn’t ask her to make tea. There was a kettle on the hob, but damned if she knew where to look for tea or cups in this place. Not that she’d want to drink anything made here. In fact, she could hardly wait to leave.

“Thank you, Miss Tomblin,” he said, taking it.

Their fingers brushed in the exchange, sending lightning sensations racing along every nerve on its way up her arm and down into the pit of her stomach.

Feeling rather unsteady, she avoided his eyes and took a seat as Mrs. Small attacked the loaf and preserves with near-childlike anticipation.

The look on her face as she sank her few remaining teeth into the soft, white bread and sweet strawberries a moment later was one of utter bliss.

Mary blinked suddenly smarting eyes and chastised herself for her earlier thoughts. This woman had once been someone’s daughter, someone’s sweetheart, someone’s wife. Perhaps she was someone’s mother or grandmother. And here she was out at the edge of town, all by herself with no
one to care for her or help her keep house, and no one but herself for company.

Mary had felt like an outsider at times, but she’d always had her family. And now she had Augie and other friends. And she had the excuse of actually being from somewhere else to account for her being treated like an outsider. Mrs. Small was far more alone, yet all her life she’d lived here, in the Harper’s Grove Mary so coveted for herself.

*Never again will I pity myself.*

“Mrs. Small?” she ventured, speaking up for the first time. “May I offer my help? Tell me what needs doing, and I’ll be happy to do it.”

The old woman paused in her chewing and looked at her as if she’d spoken in a foreign tongue. So did Reverend Wayward, she noted with gratification.

“Well, I suppose ye could give a hand with me washing.” She nodded up at the clothes hung over lines strung between hooks in the wooden beams that held up the roof of the cottage.

“Of course,” Mary responded, moving at once. As she took down the threadbare garments and folded them, she noticed that many of the items she’d taken for “junk” lying about the place were merely old and worn, but still useful.

Once all were folded, she quietly went to the kitchen basin and began washing the few dishes in it, laying them on the sideboard to dry. Without bothering to ask, she then went about sweeping the ashes from the hearth and unobtrusively straightening things here and there as her hostess and the reverend talked. Among these was a small portrait of a man, a woman, and two children, both girls. The woman in the painting was beautiful. After a moment, Mary recognized her as Mrs. Small—she had the same face, only without so very many lines in it.

*The little girls must be her daughters.* She wiped the dust off the frame and set it gently back in its place.

“They’re all gone now,” said Mrs. Small, her voice wistful. “Me husband, me girls. I’m the only one left. Just waiting for the angels to come for me.”

Mary then noticed that Reverend Wayward was gone. “Tell me about your family,” she said, coming to sit on the tattered hassock beside Mrs. Small’s chair. In the silence that followed her request, she heard voices outside the cottage—his and someone else’s—and the dull *thud* of an axe smiting wood.

“Not much to tell,” responded the old woman softly. “I was once like ye, young and full o’ life. Lived that life, I did. I’ve loved, I’ve had me children and watched them have theirs. I’ve buried all but two o’ me family, and those two—me granddaughters—are off living their own lives—as they should be.”

“Do they not come and visit you?”

Mrs. Small pulled a face. “Why should they be troubled by an old woman they’ve met only once or twice when they were babes? They’ve gone and made families o’ their own. I’ve no wish to burden them.”

Mary wondered if they even knew she was still alive but felt it too rude a question to ask. “Well, I’m here. And you’re no burden to me.” She picked at the moth-eaten doily draped over the arm of the chair, neatening it. “I never knew my grandparents. My parents are both orphans. Papa was raised by the church. Mama was taken in by relatives, but I’ve never met them. They sent her to a girls’ school almost as soon as she arrived, and the only time she ever saw them after that was on holidays.”

“Poor mite,” said Mrs. Small, shaking her head. “‘Tis a shame, that. Me family might have been poor, but we always ate well—and we had love. I miss them, I do. Ye remind me o’ me youngest, Anna. She was a sweet thing, too. Always loved to sit at me side and listen to me tales while I knitted
pretties for the market days.”

The smile that curved Mary’s mouth was genuine. “My mother is not one for telling tales.” Rheumy green eyes lit. “Would ye like to hear me Anna’s favorite?”
Chapter Five

Content that Mrs. Small now had enough wood to keep her cottage warm for at least a week, Devlin made his slow way back. For a few pennies, he’d managed to have one of the local boys meet him here to split the kindling, since he couldn’t do it himself. Tomorrow, he’d send that boy back out with a jar of lamp oil for her, as it had looked like she was running low, and another loaf of bread. Daniel had told him the townsfolk all took turns keeping her fed, sending their older children out with extra portions to leave on her doorstep, so he knew she had enough to eat, but it wouldn’t hurt. He still had a surplus of food gifted to his brother by the townsfolk.

According to his twin, he was the only person, other than the doctor, ever to be allowed inside the cottage. Now it looked as though another person was to be added to that elite list. Miss Tomblin hadn’t even noticed his return. He stood by the door, quiet as a mouse, and watched as she sat, rapt, listening to a children’s tale about a mischievous fairy and a goose girl.

His eyes took in the place. Much to his surprise, she’d made an effort to neaten it a bit more while he’d been outside. And now the troublesome girl had beguiled the sharp-tongued crone who was supposed to have helped drive her away. To be fair, Mrs. Small seemed to be in an unusually good mood today, if his brother was to be believed.

He cleared his throat, alerting the women to his presence.

Miss Tomblin’s startled, rain-gray eyes swung around to meet his. “Oh,” she gasped, guilt flooding her face as she rose. “I’m so sorry—here I am idling when I ought to have been working—”

“Working?” snapped Mrs. Small, turning a fierce glare on him. “And here I thought ye brought her along to keep an old woman company!”

Uh-oh. “We are here to serve in whatever capacity you’ll allow, dear Mrs. Small. If that be only to bring you good cheer, then so be it.” He motioned to Mary to sit back down.

This seemed to mollify the crone somewhat, but the fire in her old rheumy eyes didn’t die down entirely. “Ye can best serve me now by letting me sleep in peace.” She turned back to Miss Tomblin. “I’m afraid I’ve tired meself. Ye’ll have to come back next Sunday to hear the rest.”

Perfect. Now she’s got a bloody invitation.

“Thank you, Mrs. Small,” said Miss Tomblin, beaming. “I shall most definitely return. Tell me, is there anything special I can bring you when I come?”

The old woman’s eyes gleamed. “Well, since ye asked, me old hands get bored o’ idleness. ’Tis a powerful long while since I had any yarn to busy them. If ye’ve any to spare—just the bits nobody wants, mind ye—I would not have it go to waste.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

If the look on his assistant’s face was any indication, she’d bring a whole bloody basketful. He’d have to tell her not to overdo it, lest the gift be rejected out of pride. He decided to leave before any further damage could be done. “I’m afraid we must be getting on, Mrs. Small. Thank you for the pleasure of your company.”

“The pleasure was mine, Father Wayward,” replied Mrs. Small, using the old, formal form of address.

Their hostess continued to natter on a bit while his assistant put on her outdoor garments, and he again marked her cheerful demeanor. Daniel had called her a right curmudgeon, warning him to be as quick as possible in his tasks so as not to have to endure her constant criticism any longer than
necessary.

“I’m ready,” said Miss Tomblin, eyes alight with eagerness.

Devlin kept his face neutral and led the way out. An uncomfortable sensation settled in his gut, and he recognized it as remorse.

He’d thought to admonish her for her initial reaction to Mrs. Small’s humble circumstances, but she’d quickly gotten over her distaste—an involuntary response for which he couldn’t, in all honesty, fault her—and had comported herself well. And she’d made the old woman genuinely happy.

His companion’s face practically glowed as she trudged alongside him. “Where does Mr. Messingham live? I’d never even heard of him until your mention this morning.”

“That’s because he prefers solitude. He’s a writer.”

“Oh? How exciting. What does he write?”

“Poems, mainly,” he recalled his brother telling him.

“A real poet,” she murmured, her lips curving up again. “I knew this would be a good day.”

He suppressed a twinge of misgiving as he again struggled his way up into the driver’s seat and waited for her to climb in back. She thought she was about to have another pleasant visit, but he knew better. Mr. Messingham might not be as vocal in his complaints as Mrs. Small was supposed to have been, but he was troublesome in a different way. He positively loathed females and made no bones about expressing his dislike. “He lives not too far from here. He and Mrs. Small are neighbors of a sort.”

The quarreling sort. He despised her, and she him. They’d known each other since their youth and had never gotten along. Daniel hadn’t been sure what had started their feud, but according to him its embers still burned hot.

Snowflakes began to meander down from the leaden sky as they wended their way farther down the road. He wondered how long they had before the weather put a halt to their journey. This time when he stopped, it was beside a clear path neatly bordered by smooth river stones.

Getting down, he marked how his leg was beginning to ache already. “Quilt, loaf, and jam, Miss Tomblin,” he called back carelessly over his shoulder.

But she was already coming to join him, a loaf in one hand, a quilt-wrapped jar in the other, and an anticipatory smile on her face.

Again, that twinge of conscience. Bloody hell. Shoving it aside, he continued toward the house. He was on a mission to liberate his brother from her infatuation, and nothing must deter him.

A red gate blocked the path, and on it hung a small sign that said, DO NOT DISTURB. Ignoring it, he opened the gate and pressed on toward a neat little cottage just visible between the trees. It was tidy but had clearly seen better days. The door opened before he set his crutch on the first step.

“What business have you bringing that here?” said the white-haired old man who’d emerged to block the way. He pointed rudely at Miss Tomblin. “I won’t have curious female fingers poking about in my house, prying into my private things. The girl will have to wait outside.”

For a moment, shock held Devlin speechless. From the corner of his eye, he watched the happy smile fade from Miss Tomblin’s face. He’d known Messingham was a misogynist and might be unwelcoming, but this went beyond the pale. There were societal strictures to which even the worst woman haters were expected to adhere—one simply did not speak to a lady in such a manner or refuse to offer her shelter from inclement weather.

Awkward silence stretched. His original plan to expose her to the harsher attitudes of some of the village’s nastier residents now seemed unappealing. He found no amusement whatsoever in Mr. Messingham’s hostile reception.
Say something. “I beg your pardon, Mr. Messingham, but it’s very cold. I could not in good conscience leave my assistant outside in such conditions while enjoying your fireside hospitality. We came only to deliver your New Year’s gift from the church.” Turning, he addressed his companion as he tucked his crutches under one arm and balanced on one foot. “If you’ll just hand them to me, Miss Tomblin, I’ll give them to Mr. Messingham, and we’ll be on our way.”

“Of course,” she said crisply, doing as asked. Though her mouth was a hard, disapproving line, her eyes were dry and her voice steady as she passed him the items one at a time.

Again, not what he’d expected. Most gently raised ladies would have at least expressed shock over such treatment and quite possibly even teared up, but not Miss Tomblin. Unable to dredge up a smile for what was, arguably, his brother’s most unpleasant parishioner, Devlin extended the items toward the man. “Happy New Year, Mr. Messingham. May the peace of our Lord be upon you.”

The old man’s frown eased into a look of uncertainty as he took the gifts. “You won’t come in, then?”

“I think not,” Devlin responded evenly, holding his gaze.

“Well,” said the old man, visibly upset at this turn. Beneath the edges of his white beard, his cheeks colored. “Well, perhaps I was a bit hasty with my words, at that.” His chin jerked up. “Surprised me, you did, that’s all. I was not expecting company today.”

Devlin continued to stare at him without speaking.

Mr. Messingham glanced at Miss Tomblin with clear ambivalence. “Still, I did promise last week to show you my latest accomplishment. I suppose she can come in—provided she sits quiet and keeps her hands to herself.”

He was about to refuse when Miss Tomblin spoke for herself. “I assure you, Mr. Messingham, that I’ve no interest in violating your privacy. If you and Reverend Wayward have business to discuss, please don’t let my presence prevent it. I shall be content to remain quiet at your hearth and confine my feminine curiosity to your fire.”

The old fellow’s white brows shot up. “Well, now. You don’t like me much, do you, girl?”

Her chin rose, and she met his gaze unflinchingly. “Our Lord requires me to extend to you Christ-like love, but I’m not required to like you any more than you are required to like me.”

A bark of laughter burst from Mr. Messingham’s now-smiling mouth. “Now there is something one does not see every day: a female who neither dissembles nor cries over a perceived slight. I could perhaps learn to tolerate such a one—briefly.” He stepped back and held open his door. “Come in, then, and warm yourself by the fire. Don’t touch anything.”

Devlin watched, dumbfounded, as Miss Tomblin marched past him into the house.

“Cup of tea, Reverend?” offered his host as he struggled up the final step and in.

“No, thank you.” They still had a long way to go today, and his bladder’s capacity was finite.

“What was it you wished to show me?”

The old man’s eyes lit. “Ah! Let me fetch it.” Shuffling off, he disappeared into another room, returning a moment later with a small book in his hands. “See here? It finally came.”

Taking the book, Devlin peered at its title: Love Once Spurned by Johnathan Messingham.

Its author leaned close to whisper, “It’s all about the inherently fickle nature of… them.” He jerked his chin toward the hearth, where stood Miss Tomblin warming her hands by the fire. “Call it a friendly warning to my fellow man, if you will. May it save many good ones—including yourself—from a lot of unnecessary travail.” He pressed the small book into Devlin’s hands. “For you.”

“Oh, thank you, but I could not possibly take your only—”

“I’ve another copy, never you fear. This one is for you.” His gaze narrowed and slid toward Miss
Tomblin once more. "Don’t think I’ve not noticed how they pursue you. Every time I’m in town, I see the bloodhounds nipping at your heels—though I suspect you don’t. Consider it a gift in return for your many kindnesses."

Given no other choice, Devlin accepted it with a nod of thanks. “Your thoughtfulness is most appreciated.” He glanced at Miss Tomblin, whose face remained impassive, though he was sure she’d overheard. “I’m afraid we cannot stay longer. The weather is turning, and we’ve still several people to visit.”

“Yes, of course, of course,” said the old man. But instead of standing aside, he grasped Devlin by the shoulders, hard, and drew him close. “Watch yourself,” he breathed, filling the air with the scent of smoked fish and cheese. “She’s crafty, that one, hiding her feelings. Her sort are the most dangerous of all.” His voice lowered yet more. “You never know what they’re thinking.”

Now that, he could agree with. And he did—privately. On being released, he collected Miss Tomblin and hastened to leave Mr. Messingham’s strangeness behind. An oppressive weight settled on his spirit as he ushered her through the red gate. Unable to bear it, he called out, “Miss Tomblin?”

She stopped but did not turn. He caught up and awkwardly maneuvered around to face her. “Please accept my apology for the manner in which Mr. Messingham conducted himself just now.”

A crease momentarily marred the perfection of her brow. “The fault was not yours,” she reasoned. “You cannot be held responsible for another man’s words.”

“No, but I knew the sort of man he was,” he admitted, ashamed. “As such, I ought not to have brought you here. He was not only rude, but unkind. And you are undeserving of such unkindness. Please forgive me.”

So, he had chosen the worst personages in Harper’s Grove to visit first! She’d thought nothing of Mrs. Small’s cantankerous attitude, but on facing Mr. Messingham’s blatant venom, she’d begun to suspect herself the target of a deliberate effort to frighten her away. It hadn’t worked. It wouldn’t work. And now she had the advantage.

“There is nothing to forgive,” she answered with as much solemnity as she could muster, given that she felt like crowing in triumph. “I suppose after…” She’d sworn not to bring it up, but the air between them needed clearing, and now was the perfect time. They were alone, and he was feeling guilty. “After my impulsive words the other day, you must feel awkward in my company.”

His face remained utterly devoid of any clue as to what he might be thinking.

“I’ve thought about what happened,” she continued, choosing her words carefully. “About why I said what I said to you.” A flush heated her cheeks. This was going to be uncomfortable, but she needed to start building a foundation of trust between them, and that meant revealing certain truths. Even if they were embarrassing ones.

As he seemed either unwilling or unable to speak, she forged ahead. “You see, I once loved someone, but he proved both cruel and false,” she told him, surprised to find the memory still pained her. “Shortly after privately declaring his devotion to me, he eloped with someone else. I was deeply affected by his betrayal but consider myself fortunate to have learned the truth before it was too late.”

Still, he remained frozen, like an animal poised for flight should a suspected threat prove real.

Damn. There was no way he would ever trust her if he thought she was still in love with him. Tension stretched her every nerve to the point of agony. She tried to break it with a smile, but it was weak and shaky. Best to simply get on with it, then.
“As I said that day, you are everything he was not,” she went on. “I admit that I became quite enamored of you for it—but I know now that it was not love I felt. Love requires time spent together, and with one embarrassing exception, this is the first time we’ve spoken more than a simple greeting to each other.”

The wariness faded from his eyes, and he appeared to relax a little. “Then you’re…not…”

“I was infatuated,” she finished for him firmly, startled to find that the words—intended merely to placate—rang as true inside as they did out. The revelation gave her serious pause. But if I’m not in love with him, then what is it I feel? Why am I so drawn to him? “I’m fond of you, of course, and I respect you,” she added quickly, mind racing. “But there is a great difference between fondness and the sort of attachment one feels for a spouse.”

Some distant part of her was impressed that she’d somehow produced what sounded like a perfectly rational explanation, while desperately trying to parse her own conflicting emotions.

Later. Figuring out her own feelings would have to wait. Right now, the relief she observed easing the tension in his face took precedence.

“Indeed, there is,” he agreed with a vigorous nod.

She floundered for a moment, searching for the words that would further allay his unease, and again thought back to her blunder. Embarrassing truths, indeed. “You must understand, I was feeling so overwhelmed that morning,” she went on awkwardly, forcing herself not to look at him to gauge his response. “Papa had just announced his plans for us to go to London for the Season, along with his express desire that I should be married by its end. I prayed for a miracle. When you came in but a moment later, I thought…”

She let it hang there, hoping…

At last, he cleared his throat. “Yes, I can see how you might have mistaken the coincidence for a divine answer. The Lord does respond to our prayers,” he added hastily, “but usually in a less obvious manner and rarely with such immediacy.”

“The Lord works in mysterious ways?” she replied, risking a glance and offering up a wry smile. “Thank you, by the by, for not revealing the depth of my folly to my mother.”

The corners of his mouth twitched promisingly. “Are we not all impetuous at some point?”

Now laughter came easily. “Some of us rather more often than others, I fear.” The sensation that swept over her when his soft laugh joined with hers was one of supreme contentment. With no conflict between them now, it was like being with a friend. A question that had been nagging at the back of her mind now rose to the fore and popped out of her mouth before prudence could prevent its escape. “You seemed so shocked that day. Has no one ever said such a thing to you?”

The color in his cheeks deepened a shade. “I can honestly say no, never. At least, not like that.”

Her bewilderment was genuine. “I find that surprising, considering the way some of the women look at you. Not that you’ll have noticed,” she couldn’t help adding.

A sheepish smile tilted his lips. “I’m not blind, Miss Tomblin. You are certainly not the first lady to become enamored of a clergyman. At seminary, we were warned against encouraging such attachments, as they are invariably founded on a lie.”

Her face formed a frown before she could stop it. “A lie?”

“Indeed. A most dangerous lie. People generally assume clergy to be better than other men. They see a clerical collar or tie, and they think the one wearing it infallible. Naturally, we are held to a much higher standard than other men—and in truth we ought to be, for we set the example for our parish. But the fact is, we are no less human than anyone else, and are subject to the same worldly influences. We make mistakes.” A strange look entered his dark eyes. “I made one today.”
Mary’s heart began to gallop, seemingly unaware of her recent decision to take a step back from her pursuit. “How so?”

“I tried to influence you indirectly, when it’s clear now I could have simply talked to you about what happened.” He shot her a piercing glance. “You speak more plainly than any other woman I’ve ever met.”

She didn’t know whether to take that as a compliment or not. “According to my mother, I’m too outspoken for my own good.”

“I find your candor surprisingly refreshing,” he said drily.

Now it was her turn to be wry. “As Mr. Messingham said, I’m ‘a female who neither dissembles nor cries over a perceived slight.’” It wasn’t entirely true. She’d cried plenty of times, hurt by the things people said. But having been the “new girl” so many times over the course of her life, she’d learned to hide her vulnerability.

They continued chatting as they made their way through lazily drifting snowflakes to the cart. This time when they boarded, he let her ride up on the box—the crutches were still propped between them like a fence, but it was a vast improvement.

As they traveled on to the next house on the circuit, she asked how he’d come to be a vicar and was told he’d first gotten the idea at the age of eight. “So young! Did you never think to become anything else?”

“I considered piracy for a while,” he replied, his deep blue eyes sparkling with good humor. “But I was dissuaded by the thought of my ear being pierced and my tender hide getting tattooed.”

Their mingled laughter echoed down the lane. A different sort of warmth enveloped her at the sound of it. One that reached inside her and settled into her bones.

The next house belonged to Mrs. Mickelby, the elderly widow she’d referenced when trying to convince him to make this joint excursion. The silver-haired matron welcomed them with a scolding. “Out in such weather? Madness! Come in at once and get warm, both of you, before you catch your deaths of cold and damp.”

It was a nice change. Mrs. Mickelby’s circumstances were somewhat better than those she’d seen thus far. Mary could tell the lady had sunk into genteel poverty in recent years. Her cottage was impeccably neat and clean, but like Mrs. Small’s, her furnishings were worn and beginning to grow threadbare in places.

Nevertheless, their hostess made them tea and served it with pride in delicate china cups hand-painted with violets. It was a pleasant call, filled by cheerful conversation, the occasional laugh, and the satisfaction of salving a lonely heart.

They visited two more houses on the village’s outskirts before turning back to finish up in the village proper. Both the elderly cottagers seemed to be dealing tolerably well with the weather and their declining circumstances, but Reverend Wayward warned her the family they were to visit next was in far worse straits.

“The remaining blankets and food are for Mrs. Stone,” he told her as they drew up to a dilapidated old house in the shabbiest part of the village. “She is caring for two young grandchildren, a girl aged three and a boy of five. They were orphaned last year.” He paused, a pained look flitting across his face. “Mary, I’m afraid I must ask you not to offer to do any work while here. Mrs. Stone would not welcome it.”

Glancing at the house, she marveled that its mistress would be so proud as to reject any assistance offered, but nevertheless nodded.

The gifts they’d brought were received with humble gratitude that made Mary’s heart ache. It also
deepened her curiosity concerning the reverend’s command to do nothing. Of all the people they’d visited today, it was clear that Mrs. Stone was most in need of help.

The house was in a terrible state of disrepair, and while the children weren’t starving, they were awfully thin. Their clothes, all clearly castoffs, were either too large or too tight, and the soles of their shoes were worn through in places. Mary wriggled her toes, snug inside their warm woolen stockings and leather boots. She’d have given them the cloak off her back this instant but for the reverend’s warning.

How privileged am I to live in a state of ease and plenty! She couldn’t help making the comparison between their humble circumstances and her own life. Her family wasn’t wealthy, but they were quite comfortable. Enough that, though she considered herself no spendthrift, she’d never been concerned over the cost of a new gown or trifle.

In that moment, she resolved to do something meaningful for the poor of the parish as soon as possible. Starting with this family. She eyed the children’s shoes and surreptitiously measured their height, even as she felt a draft snake across her face and neck.

No child should be cold or hungry in this prosperous village. It wasn’t Mrs. Stone’s fault they were in this situation. It was simply fate. But she could do something about that, at least while she was still in Harper’s Grove. The trick with Mrs. Stone would be getting her to accept help.

The reverend, it seemed, had found a way around the lady’s pride. As unobtrusively as possible, she observed him in his ministrations. Though he’d come specifically to provide aid and succor, he appeared otherwise oblivious to his parishioners’ plight, giving no sign that he’d even noticed the sad state of their dwelling. Indeed, he appeared solely focused on being good company and bringing cheer. They might have been sitting in a duchess’s salon instead of a drafty hovel.

The incongruity of it struck her, and it suddenly registered that their hostess’s comportment and speech were indicative of good breeding, and that her manners were not at all those of a simple farmer’s widow, but every bit as refined as Mary’s own. Curiosity burned, but she would never be so rude as to inquire concerning the lady’s origins. If what she suspected was true, however, then it was odd that, rather than being ashamed of her poverty, Mrs. Stone seemed nothing less than delighted to receive company.

Like raindrops gathering, her thoughts pooled and coalesced into clarity as she and the vicar later clambered back aboard the cart.

“You’ve given me a great deal to contemplate today,” she said softly as they lurched into motion. His deep blue gaze flicked over her face. “Oh?”

“Indeed. You brought those poor people aid today, but your manner with them was that of an honored guest rather than someone handing out largesse. I confess that at first I did not understand it.”

He tossed her a wry look. “And you do now?”

“I believe so. As well, I believe I know why you bade me do no work while we were at Mrs. Stone’s.”


Her cheeks heated, and she fought to maintain composure. “You did it because Mrs. Stone was once a lady of rank,” she explained. “Having to accept charity is likely a sore blow to her pride. You preserved her dignity. In fact, you did more than that. You made her feel like a gracious hostess again. You did that with all of them.”

For the barest instant, surprise flashed in his eyes. Then, clearing his throat, he looked away and said, “Yes, well… The Lord looks on the poor of His flock no differently than He does the rich. I but
strive to emulate His good example."

“Papa says true kindness neither desires gratitude nor expects a show of humility from its recipient,” she murmured, earning another startled look. “I never really understood what that meant until now, either. I’m ashamed for ever having fancied myself above the people we visited today. Being poor does not mean one is less worthy of respect.”

His expression softened, and for a long moment it looked as if he were struggling to find words. Eventually, he replied, his voice oddly gentle, “I’m glad you gained a new perspective, Miss Tomblin. Indeed, in the sight of the Lord, we are all equal.”

With new eyes, she observed the vicar. No, she was not in love with him. But she genuinely liked him. Enough to want to spend more time in his company, to know more about him. And there was something else, too. Every time his eyes met hers, every time he smiled or drew near, something happened inside her. Something intriguingly physical—an empty sort of feeling just beneath her navel.

His presence elicited other reactions, too. Hot, tingly ones. She supposed it must be a lingering effect of her earlier infatuation, but despite having dismissed such foolishness, the disturbing sensations still persisted.

Desire didn’t require love to exist, but she’d thought only women of loose morals experienced it outside the bonds of marriage—or for the man they intended to wed. She had fully intended to marry the vicar. She still did, provided things worked out satisfactorily between them. Perhaps it was merely the carryover of that intent?

Whatever the reason, it was a terrible distraction.

With effort, she pushed away all such thoughts and instead tried to think about the people she’d visited today and all she’d discovered about Harper’s Grove. She’d been part of this community for some time now, but had never even known they lived here.

She liked them. Well, most of them. Mr. Messingham could use a bit of polishing up, but other than him, they were generally quite friendly. Even feisty old Mrs. Small who, in truth, she rather liked best.

Harper’s Grove was a good, wholesome place, and its people were genuine. She regretted not having made more of an effort to know those beyond her parents’ limited social sphere, here. Perhaps if she had, Reverend Wayward might have taken notice of her, and things might be different now.

Still, there was time. Not a lot, but perhaps enough.

She vowed to get the most possible from it. Every moment spent together was a chance to learn about him as well as show him her quality. As they resumed chatting amiably, she couldn’t help noticing that he seemed awfully curious for a man who’d not so long ago rebuffed her.
Devlin knew he ought not to have done it. He should have ended the conversation as soon as she’d mentioned “the incident,” but he’d been caught off guard by her forthright approach. The explanation she’d given for her behavior toward Daniel hadn’t been at all what he’d expected.

What sort of woman was this Miss Tomblin? Certainly, she was unlike any other female he’d known. Most—all the ones he knew personally—would rather swallow a live hedgehog than examine their own motives after making a fool of themselves. Especially over a man. Yet she’d done just that, and then she’d taken full ownership of her error.

The way she’d handled herself today throughout their visits had been admirable, too. Grouchy Mrs. Small had practically adopted her. Even that old misogynist, Messingham, had admired her fortitude, albeit grudgingly. And she’d been unerringly kind to everyone. Well, everyone who’d allowed it.

He’d intended to have her emptying chamber pots and such, but he’d never had an opportunity to put her to work—she’d done that on her own without waiting to be asked. And she’d worked hard, too, without protest, right through to the end. Even now she offered no complaint, though the weary slant of her shoulders told him she was tired.

Arriving at the vicarage, he had her set the baskets just inside the door and then turned back to bid her farewell. The sight of her standing there struck him like a blow to the gut, and he suddenly thought her the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

It wasn’t her outward appearance. At the moment she looked utterly bedraggled, a real fright with her soot-smudged face and disheveled hair escaping its pins on all sides. It wasn’t that she was “good,” either. Lots of women were “good,” yet possessed not the least bit of appeal in his opinion. It was that she’d been willing to acknowledge her own imperfections and try to overcome them rather than hiding behind a facade as so many chose to do. That took courage.

Just as it had taken courage to face down the possibility of another rejection from him. You mean from Daniel... Warning bells clamored in his mind. You’re here for one reason, Dev. Don’t get distracted. Even so, he couldn’t just leave her standing there. “Come, I cannot allow you to walk back alone in this weather. I’ll drive you home.”

Together they trudged back to the cart through the now inch-deep snow in companionable silence. That silence stretched as they boarded and began their journey. The longer it lasted, the worse Devlin felt. Finally, he could stand it no more. “I know today was difficult for you, Miss Tomblin. You don’t have to accompany me again, if you don’t wish it.”

All at once, he realized his mistake. Fool! You could have simply relieved her of further obligation without leaving room for a refusal. But he hadn’t. He’d left it open. The question of why he’d done it was something he refused to explore. Dread built in the pit of his stomach as he waited for her reply. No. Say no...

“Of course I’ll come again,” she said, denying his silent plea. “I promised Mrs. Small I would bring her some yarn, and Mrs. Mickelby that I would visit her again. I would love to do something for Mrs. Stone and her grandchildren, too.”

Damn. Bad enough he had to do this once a week in his brother’s stead, but to have to do it while fighting attraction was almost too much to ask. Have a spine, man. You’ve denied yourself before.

The irony of his predicament nearly made him laugh aloud. Of course he’d be intrigued by the one woman in all of Christendom who was strictly off-limits! Had they met under any other
circumstances, he’d likely have done his best to persuade her down the primrose path. And that knowledge, too, gave him pause.

She’d been wounded before by a man just like him—a rogue. Her words came back to haunt him. *You are everything he was not...*

But she’d been speaking of Daniel. Devlin knew that even had he met her as himself, the moment Miss Tomblin learned the truth about the sort of man he was, she’d have run as fast as her legs could carry her and never looked back. He’d have had to lie to win her heart, and she deserved better than to be deceived.

She deserved better than him.

As Miss Tomblin continued expounding on her plans to help the less fortunate of Harper’s Grove, he wondered how Daniel was faring with Miss St. Peters. Hopefully, his brother was more successful in repelling her affections than he’d been with Miss Tomblin today. For both their sakes.

He regretted having proposed they switch places. Guilt, remorse, shame—they gnawed at him. At least he hadn’t had to deal with such inconvenient feelings with Miss St. Peters.

He believed Miss Tomblin had meant it when she’d denied being in love with him—or, rather, Daniel. Her logic had been perfectly sound. But that didn’t mean the danger was over. Now he could see she wanted to be “friends,” and a woman who wanted to be “friends” with a man was but one step away from wanting to take on his surname.

As much as he hated it, there had to be a way to make her dislike him. Without ruining his brother’s reputation.

“Mrs. Stone needs to have someone in to seal the cracks around her door, or possibly even replace it,” his companion was saying. “It looked riddled with rot, and I felt a terrible draft. I worry for their health with the cold able to get in so easily. Who in Harper’s Grove would best be able to do such a thing?”

Quite deliberately, he frowned and sharpened his tone. “You simply cannot resist the impulse to meddle, can you? Did you not just laud my efforts to preserve that lady’s dignity?”

Her rain-gray eyes, so expressive and open, went from bewildered hurt to defiant ire in a flash. “Indeed, but that does not mean she should not receive help if there is any way to give it without injuring her pride. Surely *you* can find some means of persuading her. After all, if it comes from you—from the church—then she won’t feel beholden to any one person.”

Anger brought color into her cheeks, which only further brightened her lovely eyes. Her breath came unevenly, her lips parted and trembling as she drew herself up to deliver another salvo should he answer wrongly. He could not take his eyes off her. In her passion she was, quite simply, glorious.

Swallowing hard, he felt the starched white collar scrape against his Adam’s apple. The reminder was a timely one. *You’re Saint Daniel, not devilish Devlin. Start behaving like a priest and not a rascal.* Mastering himself, he again softened his tone to one of humility. “You’re right, of course. Perhaps I can convince her for the children’s sakes. I’ll have a look at the poor box tonight and see what can be done.”

Mollified, she let her chin down, but she wasn’t quite done yet. “Very well. I shall make a donation next Sunday, then—and hope it is enough to satisfy the need for which I was moved to make it.”

Dread overtook his momentary flare of desire. Miss Tomblin might be sweet-spirited and generous, but she also had a stubborn streak as broad as the bloody Thames.

Now he could see *precisely* why his brother had panicked. The force of that determination focused on matrimony was worthy of healthy respect. It was time to get a little “holier than thou” and see if he couldn’t take some of the wind out of her sails.
“Any gift is welcome, of course, as long as it is made to please the Lord and not intended to force
the fulfillment of one’s own will,” he said, conjuring a beatific smile sure to get under her skin and
incite wrath. He ought to know. Daniel had used it on him plenty of times to such effect. “I can assure
you it will be put to good use. Whether for Mrs. Stone or someone else, someone you might not have
met today, remains to be determined. There are other needs in this parish of which you have no
knowledge, and I will not be influenced to ignore them in favor of another, lesser need, simply
because the donor desires it.”

Oh, he’d definitely tweaked her nose. If her fierce glare and the return of the red flags in her cheeks
were any indication, an explosion was imminent.

But instead, she merely pressed her lips together and looked down. “You’re right,” she said thickly.
“I, who have been here less than a year, should not presume to know the needs of this community
better than you. Please accept my apology. I will, of course, still make the donation, in full awareness
that how it is used is out of my hands the moment it leaves them. I must trust in the Lord to see that it
reaches those who need it most.”

Had Devlin’s chin been less firmly connected to the rest of his face, he’d have had to retrieve it
from the floorboards. As it was, he had to consciously close his mouth. Given the exhibition of iron
self-discipline he’d just witnessed, he could only reason that Miss Tomblin’s “slip” that day in the
sanctuary must have been born of an incredibly powerful emotion. One far too potent to be
extinguished so quickly.

_I was right not to trust that she’s over it._ Even though she’d said it wasn’t love—and he believed
she believed it—there were still strong sentiments beneath the surface here. “I know you meant well,”
he said softly. _And the road to Hell, as they say, is paved with good intentions._ He shoved the
uncharitable thought aside. “Apology accepted. Ah, just one more turn and we’ll be there.”

Her gaze remained trained on the road. “I just wish there was something I could do, some way to
make a difference on my own.”

*What would Daniel say?*_ “Buy a bit of yarn for Mrs. Small and some treats for the children, if you
like. But avoid ostentation. Let the church, and thus the community as a whole, make the larger gifts,
as is appropriate.”

“I understand,” she said glumly.

Seeing her unhappy grieved him. He much preferred her smiles and laughter. But for Daniel’s sake,
it was for the best that she be annoyed with him, that she feel humbled. They stopped in front of her
house in awkward silence, and despite his crutches and aching leg, he insisted on disembarking to
walk her to the door, as Daniel surely would have done.

Just as they were passing through the gate, she paused and turned to meet his gaze squarely. They
were scarcely a foot apart. The scent of lavender assailed him, recalling the warmth of summer,
despite the chill in the air. His loins tightened with almost painful urgency as he looked into her
smoke-gray eyes.

“I will be better prepared for our next outing, Reverend,” she meekly murmured, her thick lashes
sweeping down as she cast her gaze earthward. “Both in dress and attitude. And I promise you’ll hear
no more from me regarding what’s best for your parishioners.”

How was it possible for a woman with ashes on her face to be so breathtaking? It took everything
in him not to reach out and gently thumb the offending soot from her chin and cheeks. If he touched
her, he knew he’d kiss her. And that simply wouldn’t do. Clearing his throat to alleviate the lump in
it, he nodded. “I thank you for your confidence, Miss Tomblin.”

*Grateful for the long cassock and coat that concealed the uncomfortable stiffness between his legs,*
Devlin accompanied her to the steps and remained at their bottom while she went in, lest he be invited inside. She didn’t turn back to look at him which, if he admitted it, rather disappointed him. When the door closed, he found it hard to move. Everything inside him resisted departure.

The sound of her mother’s voice exclaiming—doubtless over her daughter’s untidy state—broke the spell, and he hastened away as best he could on his crutches, his stomach tight and his mind a tumult. He was in trouble. Deep trouble.

_Bloody hell._

What he really needed right now was a pint, a pipe, and a few hours to himself to find a way out of this mess.Unfortunately, none of the three were viable options, as he was, to all appearances, a man of the cloth, an eschewer of tobacco, and had the evening sermon to deliver in an hour.

Mary put up with her mother’s haranguing for five solid minutes before she finally snapped. “I’ve had an exceedingly trying day, Mama. All I want is a hot bath and some peace!” To her mortification, tears pricked at the backs of her eyelids.

_I will not cry!_ But it was too late. Furious, she swiped at her watering eyes.

“I told you it was a mistake setting your cap for that man,” fussed her mother, her tone softening. “At least now you understand something of the life you’d have had if you’d continued down this nonsensical course and actually managed to bag him.”

A tiny, rather strangled-sounding laugh escaped Mary’s throat. “You think I’ve decided to abandon my hopes over such insignificant obstacles?”

Her mother’s brows shot up. “You mean to persist in this madness? Have you no pride, to allow yourself to be treated with such indifference?”

“He is many things, but ‘indifferent’ is not among them,” she retorted, fully believing it. “Yes, I’m cold and tired, and my pride has been injured—deservedly so—but nonetheless today felt…right. I was humbled by the experience of caring for those less fortunate, and I learned a great deal about the world and myself.” The smile that tugged at her mouth was full of rue. “I’m not nearly as clever or wise as I once thought.”

“My dear child, we never are,” replied her mother, caressing her cheek. “Your skin is like ice. Come. We can talk of this later, but first we must get you out of your damp things and warmed up. I’ve had the kitchen heating water for the last hour in anticipation of your arrival.”

While her mother and Ginny helped her undress, Mary thought back over the day. Truly, Reverend Wayward had taught her the meaning of humility. But she’d learned other things, as well. She’d seen the man beneath the white collar. Yes, he was gentle, kind, and honorable—not once had he conducted himself in a manner unbefitting a gentleman—but he was also imperfect.

_Beautifully imperfect._

He was patient, but his patience wasn’t infinite. She’d brushed against its limit today, and found it quite a bit lower than she’d imagined for a clergyman. He wasn’t as meek-spirited as she’d thought, either. He could be hard, even a bit cynical. He believed in humanity’s capacity for good, but wasn’t blind to its foibles. He acknowledged them in both his fellow man and himself, admitting that he wasn’t above “worldly influences”—or, as she preferred to call it more plainly, temptation.

All of these observations rendered down into one clear thought. While she still felt he was better than most of his sex, he wasn’t the high, unrealistic ideal she’d made him out to be. He was human. He was accessible. And today, she’d managed to get her toe in the door.

Closing her eyes, she contemplated her next move while Mama took down her hair. She _would_ be
better prepared for their next outing. Not just physically, but mentally. He had, as he’d said, been warned against women who idolized him because of his vocation. Which meant she needed to stop treating him like a priest and start treating him like a man.

A blanket was draped over her shoulders. “I’ll tell them to start bringing up the water,” said her mother. “And I think some mulled cider is in order, as well.”

As soon as the women left, Mary rose and stretched, answering the strange restlessness that had overtaken her. She looked down at the gown she’d worn today, at its wet, muddied hem, the pulls in the fabric, and the spatter of tallow across the once-fine skirt where she’d accidentally tipped candle wax onto it. A shame, really. The outfit had been so simple and elegant—but completely impractical.

Opening her wardrobe, she fingered several of her older gowns. Though a bit faded and behind the current fashion, they were still pretty and had plenty of good wear left in them. And a woman could appear alluring even in rags if she knew how.

Her lips curled in a slow smile. She’d caught the good vicar sneaking peeks at her when he’d thought she wasn’t looking. More than curiosity had been in his eyes. The memory of how flustered he’d become whenever they were in close quarters drove away the last of the chill in her bones.

Her woolgathering was interrupted by her mother’s return.

Mary stepped back as footmen and maids entered with steaming buckets full of blessedly hot water. In short order, the wooden tub was ready to receive. She sank down into the bath with a satisfied sigh and let the girl wash her hair. As soon as she was done, Mary dismissed her.

Her thoughts returned to Reverend Wayward. He seemed a completely different man from the vicar she’d known—or, rather, thought she’d known, these past months. Now that he’d finally noticed her, things were changing.

Taking the sweet-smelling bar of lavender soap, Mary began to wash away the minor aches caused by today’s labors. But she couldn’t wash away the empty, almost hungry feeling she experienced every time she thought about the good reverend.

Beneath the water’s surface, tiny currents swirled around her body, caressing her. Would his touch feel like this? She let herself imagine…

“Mary?”

Jerking upright, she sent water sloshing over the side of the tub.

“Goodness!” said her mother, bustling in and setting down a stack of fresh drying sheets. She used one to soak up the spill. “Did you fall asleep, child?”

“Yes, I—I must have nodded off,” Mary lied, splashing water on her face and rubbing it to help account for the flush in her cheeks.

“Dark circles, flushed face, acute exhaustion…” She put a hand to Mary’s brow. “No fever, thank heaven.” Her lips pursed. “I should think a duke’s gently raised son would be more understanding of a lady’s delicate nature. He ought to have had better sense than to treat you like a maid-of-all-work, and I’m of a good mind to tell him so.”

“What? No, Mama! Please!” Mary pleaded. “It was my fault for not saying anything. I could have told him no—and he did ask—but in my pride I said nothing.”

Her mother’s look softened only a tiny bit. “Very well. I’ll hold my tongue for now—but I don’t approve. He ought not to abuse those who volunteer their time and service to aid him.”

“His burdens were far greater than mine, given the pain his leg must be giving him,” she reasoned. “And the work we did was good.” To distract her mother, she began telling her about their visits. “Truly, it was one of my best days despite the difficulties.” She bowed her head to hide her eagerness. “Given the chance, I would do it all again and change nothing.”
“Well, I still don’t like it, but I understand how you feel. When I first met your father, I would have endured any hardship to be with him.” Her mother sighed and changed the subject. “Why don’t you have a lie-down before dinner? It won’t be ready for another hour. In fact, I’ll just have Ginny bring it up for you on a tray tonight. That way you won’t have to dress.”

“That would be most appreciated,” Mary conceded, embarrassed at being made such a fuss over, but glad her mother seemed content to let the matter rest. “And I promise I’ll go to bed early tonight.”

“Good.” Gathering up the wet towels, Mama fixed her with a glare. “Don’t shrivel your skin by staying in too long. And be sure to get out before it gets cold.”

“Yes, Mama.”

“On second thought, I’ll send Ginny up in a few minutes to fetch you out in case you fall asleep again. She has to bring up the cider anyway.”

“Thank you, Mama.” Keeping her head bowed, Mary waited for her to leave. When the door clicked shut, she covered her face with her hands and let out a low, exasperated groan. _I’m twenty-one years old, yet she still treats me like a child!_

Then she remembered the people she’d visited today, how lonely some of them were, how neglected. They had no family to care for them. No one to fuss over their well-being. They do now.

When she woke the next morning, Mary stretched and grimaced. If anything, she felt worse after nearly ten hours of disappointingly dreamless sleep. Nevertheless, there was much to be done, and she could ill afford to wait.

Dressing, she went downstairs to join her parents for breakfast. When Mama inquired of her, she said nothing of her soreness and insisted that she felt marvelous. She then informed her parents of her intent to visit Augie.

“After the way you nearly fainted with exhaustion yesterday?” exclaimed her mother. “It snowed half a foot last night, and you’ve only just recovered. I’ll not have it.”

“Oh, let her go,” said Papa from behind his paper, surprising Mary. “If she feels well enough to walk a bit, I say she should. It’s not snowing now.” He lowered the paper and eyed the window, through which their frozen back garden could be seen. “In fact, I may go for a walk myself while the sun is out.”

Mary sipped her tea and quietly nibbled her toast while her parents debated. At last, her mother capitulated, though grudgingly. Her spirits high with anticipation, Mary ate a hearty breakfast to prove to her watching mother she was fit and then hurried back upstairs.

She bundled herself well, not wishing to invite illness when she had next Sunday to look forward to. Going to the kitchen, she took up an empty basket and let herself out. The air was brisk, but the sun shone bright in an azure sky, making the melting snow sparkle like diamonds. She picked her way with a care to keeping her feet dry, thinking that perhaps she ought to have taken her mare. But it would have been difficult to visit Augie and shop in the village with a horse in tow.

When she arrived, Augie demanded to hear everything concerning the day prior. Though immensely gratified to have a friend who was so enthusiastic and positive concerning her choice of husband, Mary was careful to leave out certain details. When she informed Augie of her plans for the day, she was delighted to find in her a willing accomplice.

“We’ll visit the shops first,” she declared as her friend donned a scarf and pulled on mittens. There was a goodly amount of money in her reticule, and she intended to spend it.
Chapter Seven

Bleary-eyed and yawning, Devlin leaned on one crutch to hobble into the kitchen to make himself a cup of tea. A few minutes later, the absentminded act of grasping the kettle’s scalding hot handle without the benefit of having something between it and his bare skin resulted in a stream of expletives shattering the morning’s peace. Looking down at his hand, he frowned at the angry red welts forming along his fingers.

This was the second time he’d done that.

“Bloody hell,” he muttered, going to the window and cooling his fingers on the blessedly frigid glass. Later, as he finished his tea, he decided a bath was in order. He could smell himself, and it wouldn’t do for the town’s vicar to reek.

Unfortunately, if he wanted one, he’d have to heat the water himself. Careful of his hand, he dragged the oaken tub closer to the hearth. To fill it with even lukewarm water would take the better part of an hour even with two good legs, so he opted for a quick, shallow bath now and to have someone help him fill it all the way later in the week for a proper bath.

Frowning, he shook his head in frustration as he made the preparations. If only Daniel would hire some bloody servants! Again, he determined to persuade his twin to take on some help. The thought was reinforced on finding the pump outside frozen stuck. After he’d melted some snow and loosened it, the water that came out once he got it working might as well have been ice itself.

“Blast!” he yelped as he lost his grip on the bucket’s handle, and cold water splashed his foot. He longed for his house in London more than he’d ever thought possible.

“Reverend?” It was Tom, the young man who’d offered to help take care of Daniel’s horse while his leg healed. The strapping youth had come by to feed the beast and must have overheard his complaint. “Can I help you in any way?”

Thank God! “Yes, please!” It humbled him to have to accept help, but bloody hell if it wasn’t welcome.

Every pot his brother possessed was filled and put on the stove or over the fire to heat. It felt like forever before they had enough to fill the tub, but once it was ready, he was glad to have gone to the trouble. Feeling clean was sublime, but even better was the roaring fire he’d laid in the hearth to warm the room. After a nice long soak, he got out, dragged a padded chair close, and plonked down to bask in the heat, letting it dry his bare skin.

A chuckle escaped his throat. His brother didn’t live like a complete savage, but wearing his shoes was giving him a whole new appreciation for the relative splendor in which he lived in London.

He contemplated for a moment the idea of buying a feather mattress and hiring a couple of servants while he was here. But Daniel would disapprove, and he didn’t want to do anything that might make the villagers suspicious. For the moment, at least, he had what help he needed. And Tom wouldn’t be back until this evening to feed the horse and help dispose of the bathwater, so there was time to relax. Leaning his head back, he closed his eyes and let out a long, contented sigh.

Rap, rap, rap! The sound of knocking jolted him from his doze. Rising, he took up his crutch and made for the door—and realized he was stark naked. Yelling for his visitor to wait a moment, he mounted the stairs, using the handrail to secure himself on one side and one crutch on the other. Every step was accompanied by a muttered curse, especially whenever he didn’t keep his bad leg raised high enough to prevent his toes from knocking on the next step up.
There wasn’t time to fully dress, so he merely threw on a robe and made his way back down, hollering at the halfway point that he was on his way. So help him, if they’d left by the time he got to the door…

Blast people and their compulsion to be “neighborly”! Why can they not leave a man in peace in the morning? But a vicar must always be available. That’s what Daniel had said. So here he was, fumbling his way across the room to answer duty’s call.

When he at last opened the door, it was to find Miss Tomblin and her friend, Miss Benfield, standing before it. Two pairs of eyes, one the color of heavy rain clouds, the other mud-brown, grew round as saucers as they took in his state of undress.

Heat seared the tips of his ears. Bollocks! “My…ah, my apologies, ladies. I’m… I…was not expecting callers today.”

“Apologies for disturbing you,” said a furiously blushing Miss Tomblin, still staring. “I j-just—I wanted to leave some things I picked up for Mrs. Stone and the children. After our discussion yesterday, I thought you should be the one to deliver them. On behalf of the church,” she babbled, her color deepening as she averted her eyes. “I-I can come back later. Or tomorrow. Again, please forgive my intrusion.” She grabbed her friend’s elbow. “Come, Augie.”

“Wait!” It slipped out without thought, driven by God knows what impulse, and he berated himself all over again for lacking good sense. As the women paused and again turned to him in anticipation of receiving further instruction, his tongue seemed to forget all vocabulary.

“Yes?” Miss Tomblin finally prompted.

He cleared his throat. “You—you’ve come all this way, you may as well leave it here.”

She stared at him, wide-eyed, for a long moment before abruptly extending a large covered basket.

Reaching out, he took it from her and received a sharp reminder from his burn blisters. Whatever she had in there, it was heavy. “Thank you. I’ll return your basket tomorrow—or, if you need it back now, I can empty it. It won’t take a moment.”

“I’ve no immediate need for it,” she said quickly. “Keep it here, and I’ll use it next Sunday.”

“Very well,” he agreed. Awkward silence fell for a few heartbeats. Say something, dolt! “Thank you, Miss Tomblin. Your generosity is much appreciated.”

“It’s my pleasure,” she answered faintly, her eyes now trained on the ground.

He was saved from further discomfort by her friend. “Come, Mary,” said Miss Benfield. “We must be off.”

“Until Sunday, then,” Devlin said, bowing automatically. His crutch clattered to the floor, forcing him to grip the doorjamb for support, and the hastily secured sash at his waist came loose. A blast of icy air hit his bare legs and traveled in an instant all the way up to his nethers. Straightening, he clutched the basket tight against his navel to stop the robe opening any farther, and winced as his blisters again pained him.

Oh, God…

Miss Tomblin’s gaze jerked up to fix on a point somewhere above his head. Her cheeks were aflame, and her mouth worked soundlessly for a moment before she at last choked out, “Y-yes—until Sunday, then! Good day!” Tugging her open-mouthed friend’s arm, she fled.

Shutting the door, Devlin let out a long stream of invective. “What idiot masquerading as a bloody vicar answers the damned door in naught but a robe?” he asked the empty room. Disgusted with himself, he went back over to the fire to warm up again. At least he’d managed to prevent complete exposure—and humiliation. Frigid air was no man’s friend.

On second thought, Devlin blessed the cold, north wind that had reached inside the robe’s opening.
to shrivel him. Had it been warm out, his nethers might have reacted quite differently to Miss Tomblin’s presence. Her reaction to that didn’t bear imagining.

Sitting down, he perused the basket’s contents. There were three knitted scarves, one gray, one blue, and one red. Two sturdy-looking pairs of shoes, a girl’s and a boy’s, lay tucked beneath them. Stuffed along the sides were packets of sugared nuts and stick candy, several small apples, three pairs of woolen socks, and two wooden ball-and-cup toys.

In spite of his chagrin, a smile broke across his face. Miss Tomblin was not only courageous, but thoughtful and observant. If she couldn’t make the house warmer, she’d make sure its occupants didn’t feel the cold as much. And the sweets would be a welcome treat for all.

She had to have spent at least half a pound, if not more—most of it on the shoes. Such an expense was nothing to someone like him, but for a young woman with only her slipper money to spare, it was no miserly sum.

Guilt swamped him. Daniel would never have allowed it. Or would he? The poor box could stretch only so far. And, according to his brother, the parish poor had many needs. Unfortunately, the poor box tended to be, well, rather poor.

Stowing the items Miss Tomblin had given him, he went upstairs, shaved, and dressed. The sun was shining, the air was clear, and he was going out for a bit, crutches and all. Hitching up the horse cart on his own took some effort, but he managed and was soon on his way.

With its sagging roof and rotting shutters, Mrs. Stone’s ramshackle house appeared almost to slump between the two buildings flanking it. Looking at it, he made a snap decision. Mary was right to want to help them. He’d brought a little over fifty pounds with him on this trip—pocket change for Devlin Wayward, gambler and entrepreneur extraordinaire. He’d take a quarter of it and see Mrs. Stone’s house made warm and sound again.

It’s not like I can spend it on brandy and bad habits while I’m here, anyway.

Miss Tomblin’s “anonymously donated” gifts were received with tearful surprise. Mrs. Stone’s old eyes told him she knew exactly from whence this beneficence had come. He stayed for a cup of weak tea, enjoying the little girl’s giggles and the young boy’s crows of triumph as they played with their new toys. That a simple bilbo catcher could bring them such joy bespoke much of their plight.

Taking leave of Mrs. Stone and her small charges, he took himself to the main street and hobbled in and out of the shops for the next two hours placing orders to restock his brother’s depleted pantry. A pound of tea and a jar of honey. A new cake of soap. Cheese, eggs, a pound of salt pork, some herbs, and salt. All would be delivered to his door by sundown, save for the freshly plucked chicken he was taking with him. Returning to the vicarage, he set about preparing a meal.

Twice a week, Daniel took an early dinner at The Harper’s Arms, the village’s only inn. The rest of the time, he cooked for himself. Devlin was glad they’d learned the basics of cooking while at seminary, skills he’d thought never to use again after he’d made his first fortune at the tables in London. Now those lessons were being put to the test.

He shook his head as he readied the fowl for roasting. Daniel really must be insane for wanting to live like this! All week long, he’d tidied up after himself, including emptying his own chamber pot.

In spite of his grumbling, he found there was a certain satisfaction in preparing one’s own food. The smell of it cooking seemed that much more savory for having made it with his own hands, and the taste more flavorful. Not that he intended to make cooking a regular practice, but the chore wasn’t entirely odious.

The clearing up, however, was.

As he dried his dishes later that night, the memory of seeing Miss Tomblin pushing up the cuffs of
her sleeves and washing the dishes of the people they’d visited arose in his mind’s eye. She’d been completely selfless, sparing no thought for her delicate skin and carefully manicured nails. Though raised a lady, she’d done a maid’s work without complaint.

Again, he couldn’t help thinking how wrong Daniel had been about her. She would make a fine vicar’s wife. A grimace tightened his mouth. Unfortunately, once he was done, she’d probably never even look at another clergyman.

His traitorous mind wondered what sort of man she would spare a second glance after being deceived and wounded by a rogue and then by another rogue disguised as a priest. She’d never know the truth about the latter, of course, but it still stung his conscience.

…

In spite of the stinging cold, Mary’s face burned as if it would never again cool down. All her daydreams had manifested the moment Reverend Wayward had opened the door. His hair had been tousled, his blue eyes sleep-befuddled, and his state of undress…well.

The sight of him wearing naught but a robe had stolen every drop of moisture from her mouth. She hadn’t been able to stop herself from looking. Her eyes had feasted upon the strong column of his throat, the hollow between his collar bones, and the sprinkling of dark curls peppering his chest, thickening as they continued down to where the two halves of his robe were joined by the sash at his waist.

And the feast hadn’t stopped there. She’d looked down to avoid being caught staring like a lustful trollop at his bare flesh—but then he’d bowed and his sash had come free. He’d clutched her basket close to keep from exposing his manly bits, but below it, the robe had parted to reveal a strong, muscled calf and knee dusted by the same dark hair as that on his chest.

Add to that his stubbly, unshaven face and slumber-roughened voice, and one had a recipe for a whole new round of nocturnal torments. She’d never see him as anything but a strong, virile man again.

“Good Lord, Mary,” whispered a red-cheeked Augie, still clutching her arm as they hurried away down the street. “I think I understand now why you’ve set your cap for him. I would never have imagined a clergyman to look like that beneath his crow’s weeds.”

At first, Mary said nothing, afraid of what might pop out. Finally, having regained some composure, she addressed her friend. “Augie, promise me you’ll say nothing of what just happened. To anyone. Ever.”

“You have my word,” her friend answered without hesitation. “But Mary, what will you do?”

“Do?” Mary stared at her in consternation. “Must something be done?”

“You’ve seen him practically naked.” It was spoken as if the answer were plain.

“So have you.”

Augie’s face paled. “So I have.”

“So what will you do?”

“Well, I…” Her friend’s brow furrowed, and she closed her mouth with a soft pop. “I suppose there is nothing to be done, really.Except, perhaps, pray?” She swallowed audibly. “Oh, Lord—I shan’t be able to look our vicar in the eye next Sunday.”

They both burst out laughing, and laughed until they were out of breath and leaning against each other for support.

Mary clutched her side with one hand and swiped at her streaming eyes with the other. “Oh, Augie! My side hurts. I think I may have strained something.”
“I know I have,” gasped Augie, steadying herself against Mary. “Come, before we make a complete spectacle of ourselves.”

Mary followed her into the bakery, where they ordered hot scones and a pot of Mrs. Olson’s strongest tea to restore their addled wits and reestablish ladylike poise. But despite their benign conversation—they’d struck a tacit agreement to avoid further discussion of Reverend Wayward’s wayward wardrobe—Augie’s words stuck in Mary’s mind like a splinter that would not come out. Deeper and deeper, they dug.

She’d seen him practically naked. Part of her felt something should be done about it. The naughty, lustful part of her wanted to see what he’d been hiding behind the basket. If only he’d set it down before bowing! The morally upright, mortified part of her wanted to forget the entire incident or at least pretend it hadn’t happened.

That part lost.

As for looking him in the eye, she wouldn’t allow embarrassment to stop her from building on the foundation they’d laid yesterday. After all, there would be no shame in knowing what the good vicar looked like beneath his vestments once they were husband and wife.

“I think I know how you must feel,” whispered Augie, dragging her from her reverie.

Mary swallowed a pang of jealousy. Though it was hardly Augie’s fault, it was difficult not to resent her having seen the same glimpse of glory. “What do you mean?”

Her friend flushed deeply. “Well, I’ve a confession to make.”

Heaven help me, if she says she has feelings for him, I’ll—

“I’ve seen Mr. May in a similar state. Without—you know…” Augie lowered her voice until it was barely audible. “…without apparel.”

Mary’s mouth hung open for a long moment before she found her tongue again. “Augie, tell me you’ve not gone and—”

“Oh, heavens, no!” hissed her friend, brown eyes widening with horror. “I was walking the riverside path one day last summer when I heard voices down by the water—his and someone else’s. I thought perhaps he’d gone fishing or boating with his cousins who were visiting at the time. When I rounded the bend, however…I saw him.” Her cheeks were the color of ripe cherries. “He and his cousins were cooling themselves in the water.” She leaned closer, eyes wide. “Mr. May stood up in the shallows and turned to come back up the bank, and I saw everything.”

Mary clapped her hands to her mouth and half laughed, half moaned, “Oh, Augie! Did he see you?”

“No, thank the Lord—though I almost wish he had. It would have made things so much easier. He would have had no choice but to acknowledge me, and then we might have talked sooner. We might even be engaged by now. Instead, he’s only just begun courting me—and only because I nearly disgraced myself to encourage his interest.”

Mary refrained from smiling at the memory of Augie staging a twisted ankle while gathering fallen apples with Mr. May during an autumn picnic—to which she’d invited them both for just such a purpose.

Augie was wringing her hands. “I ought to have immediately left, but I could not make myself move or stop looking at him as he emerged from the water. And now I’m—I’m haunted by such thoughts of him as no decent lady should have.”

A thought occurred to Mary. A terrible thought. “You don’t feel you must marry him for that reason alone, do you?”

“Oh, no,” said Augie, her lashes sweeping down to brush her fiery cheeks. “I loved him for quite some time before that event. But I will say that I was somewhat, erm, well…somewhat spurred to
encourage his advances by the experience. He was quite...impressive...without his clothes." Reaching out, she grabbed Mary’s hands and clutched them between her own. “What I’m trying to say is, I understand how you must feel, because I’ve felt the same way. You’ve loved the vicar for months now, and seeing him in such a state can only have increased your tender sentiments.”

Mary stared at her, struggling to keep a straight face. Tender sentiments? No. Her “tender sentiments” were based on other qualities that had nothing to do with seeing him out of his cassock. Lust, on the other hand... Her body still ran amok with longings for which she had no name. Well, no decent name, anyway. “Augie, really, I—"

“I don’t blame you for being inspired,” her friend cut in. “And if you want my help to further yourself with him, you have but to say so, and I will do whatever I can. After all, did you not facilitate my coming together with Mr. May?”

Unbidden tears sprang into Mary’s eyes. “Thank you, Augie. You’ve no idea what it means to me to have your support.” Indeed. To have such a friend, one who not only knew—and more importantly, kept—her secrets, but who was willing to take risks on her behalf for the sake of her happiness, was a new experience. And it was another reason to want to stay in Harper’s Grove forever.

Mary longed to belong. To have a real home instead of living in a string of rented houses with bedrooms she refused to decorate for fear of feeling torn when forced to leave. To be among people who’d known her for longer than six months, people who recognized her when they passed her on the street. She was tired of living like some migratory bird, always flying from place to place, constantly building nests but never settling in them.

She’d simply love to build a nest with the vicar. “Augie, I must confess that I feel at a loss as to how I should address him when next we see each other,” she admitted.

Her friend’s brown eyes narrowed, and her chin lifted. “You must behave as if you saw nothing. That’s what I did with Mr. May.”

“Yes, but your Mr. May knows nothing of the fact that you’ve seen him”—Mary lowered her voice so the baker, who’d come in with another tray of cakes, wouldn’t overhear—“that you’ve seen him exposed. I cannot claim such ignorance. Even if I pretend not to have seen, he’ll still know.”

Augie’s brow puckered. “You could always apologize again for having disturbed his rest. That would then open the conversation for him to apologize for having answered his visitors in near nakedness.”

“I cannot expect him to apologize for that!” she whispered, appalled. “It was my fault for calling on him uninvited.”

“He’s a vicar, Mary,” said her friend primly. “He’s supposed to be accessible to his parishioners at any hour. But it’s not as if we came calling in the middle of the night. It was nearly noon, for pity’s sake. What was he doing naked at that hour?”

Neither of them had an answer, so they lapsed into silence, sipping their tea and nibbling their scones.

“Augie?” She hesitated, but had to know. “When your Mr. May looks at you, does it make you feel...different?” The blank look she received told her she’d somehow missed her mark. “Does your heart race or your skin grow hot as if you’re feverish?”

A shy smile curved her friend’s mouth. “I feel warm and cozy inside when he looks at me, if that’s what you mean. Mr. May makes me feel safe, as if when I’m with him nothing could ever go wrong or cause me harm.”

That was definitely not the feeling she got when Reverend Wayward looked at her. Not anymore. It hadn’t been ever since that fateful Sunday morning when she’d made a cake of herself.
“Why?” asked Augie.
Mary stared at her in confusion.
“Why do you ask?” her friend again prompted.

“Because when the vicar looks at me, I feel as if I’m going to fly apart,” Mary whispered. “My insides go all wobbly, and I feel hot all over. It’s quite uncomfortable.” Disconcerting and exciting would have been better words to describe it, but “uncomfortable” was more acceptable.

“I imagine it is,” said Augie, frowning a little. “I feel a sense of rightness when I’m with Mr. May. I’m content, utterly at peace with myself and the world. Mother said that’s a sure sign it’s meant to be.” Her brown eyes filled with worry. “Mary, are you quite certain you’re not making a mistake in your choice?”

No, she wasn’t sure. But she could no more stay away from the man than she could voluntarily stop breathing. Her curiosity had been whetted yesterday, inflamed today, and she must satisfy it before coming to a decision. “I won’t know until I spend more time with him.”

This Sunday, she’d know for sure.
Chapter Eight

Devlin managed to make it through the entire sermon without looking at Miss Tomblin. He’d met her eyes briefly in greeting as she’d entered the church, and what he’d seen in them had been worse than alarming.

It had been intriguing.

She hadn’t shied away from seeing him as he’d expected after his unintended exhibition. A lady of good reputation she might be, but shyness didn’t seem to be part of her constitution. Even now, she was sitting patiently inside the church, waiting for him to finish saying farewell to the members of the congregation before joining him on another grueling round of calls on the elderly and infirm of Harper’s Grove.

He could hardly be blamed for being extra patient with Mr. and Mrs. Beckley as they relayed the tale of their youngest son’s having become engaged to a young lady while away in Edinburgh. Nor could he be faulted for taking extra care in changing his garments. The longer he spent in the vestibule, the less time he’d have to endure alone with Miss Tomblin.

*Coward,* ridiculed his conscience.

*Damned right,* answered prudence.

He had good reason for being reluctant to embark on a circuit of the village with her today. She probably expected some sort of apology for Monday’s incident. It was what Daniel would do. Steeling himself, Devlin exited the vestibule. “Are you ready, Miss Tomblin?” he called, unwilling to go and fetch her from her pew.

Without a word, she rose and joined him. Both eschewed further speech as they stopped at the vicarage to fetch the horse cart, which he’d already had Tom load with the supplies for today’s calls. In silence, she added a small satchel she’d brought along.

It was dead quiet as they began the long ride to Mrs. Small’s.

Finally, after what had to be ten solid minutes of awkward silence, he could stand it no more. “You’ll be happy to know there was enough in the poor box to cover the repairs to Mrs. Stone’s house. I’ve asked Mr. Farley to see to her roof, and Mr. Kilch will see to replacing the door and sealing any cracks. The repairs will be completed this week.”

Her mouth fell open in a broad, delighted smile. “Thank you, Reverend Wayward!” she at last replied, voice laden with, to his great unease, fervent warmth.

“I’m not the one to thank.” He eyed her sidelong. “Someone made a generous donation—enough to cover the repairs as well as assist with several other pressing needs. There was a little more than twenty pounds after I counted it all.” Half of that had been from his own purse.

Whipping around, she looked at him, her wide gray eyes full of bewilderment. “Twenty? But I put in only f—” Her face bloomed with color, and she looked down. “I mean, that’s wonderful. I’m glad to know the good people of Harper’s Grove have not forgotten those less fortunate than themselves.”

Birdsong twittered from a nearby tree as she stared at the floorboards. At last he forced himself to speak. “Miss Tomblin?” He waited until she dragged her gaze back up to meet his. “About the—”

“You need not apologize,” she interrupted, the already scarlet flags in her cheeks growing brighter. “I—we should not have imposed upon you without an appointment. The fault was mine. And if you’re concerned that I might have—that I saw…anything—” She paused and swallowed, then lifted her head to stare him squarely in the face and say in a breezy manner that was belied by her flushed face,
“I can assure you that I saw nothing untoward.”

Devlin had to bite his wicked tongue to keep from grinning proudly and agreeing with the statement. He’d been told by several women that his unclothed form was anything but “untoward.” But he wasn’t Devlin today. Today, he was a prudish, mortified vicar. He affected a stammer. “I-I was going to say that the gifts you sent to Mrs. Stone and the children were received with great enthusiasm.”

Her ears slowly joined the rest of her face in turning crimson.

He couldn’t stop himself. “And what of your friend, Miss Benfield?” he asked in the same light conversational tone she’d used on him a moment ago. “I believe she was also witness to my unfortunate lack of apparel.”

Miss Tomblin’s face now shone like a flaming beacon. “Sh-she also saw nothing to warrant an apology.”

_Damned right._ He could feel a smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. “My ankles and shins did not offend, then?”

Her chin lifted, and her eyes defied him. “Why should they? Do not the Scots wear kilts that bare their legs? Yours are not the first male knees I’ve ever seen.”

So unexpected was her acidic reply that it caught him off guard. He burst out laughing. To his shock, she began laughing, too. It was a release, and the uncomfortable tension that had been building between them ebbed away.

“Forgive me,” he said at last, when he’d caught his breath. “I did not mean to goad you.”

“Yes, you did,” she answered without rancor. “You knew perfectly well how uncomfortable I was, and you were enjoying it. I saw you trying not to smile.”

_Bollocks._ “Guilty as charged,” he said sheepishly. “In truth, I worried about it all week. As vicar, it is incumbent upon me to set the example for the other men in the village. I’m afraid I’ve set a very poor one.”

“As you told me last Sunday, you are no less human than anyone else.” Her gray eyes held no guile. “Are you not entitled to make the same mistakes as the rest of us poor mortals?”

_By George, she’s lovely. Too much so._ “You judge me less harshly than I expected.”

“Judgment is reserved for the Almighty. Is that not what the gospel tells us?”

“Which of us is the vicar, here?” he asked, laughing again. “You speak truth. And yet so many are eager to sit in judgment of others.” How well he knew it. His own father and his eldest brother had both judged him—and had found him lacking. Enough to cut him off entirely.

_That part of my life is over. I have a family again, and those who deemed me unworthy are gone._ But the scars left by their judgment remained.

“All too true,” she answered, bringing him back to the present. “I try my best not to judge people, lest I also be judged. Sometimes, however, I find it quite difficult to refrain—judgment seems to be in our nature. I often worry what others think of me.”


“In the absence of information, people make assumptions based on the most insignificant things,” she continued, slanting him a wry smile. “I’ve encountered it more times than I can count.” Her expression grew wistful. “My father’s work causes us to move fairly often. He prefers to have us live near his building sites rather than be separated from us. I don’t blame him, but it has made it all but impossible for me to build lasting friendships. Every time we settle in a new place, I must overcome a whole new set of prejudices and assumptions. Augie is the first friend I’ve had for longer than a few months.”
Curiosity was a merciless goad. “Exactly how many places have you lived in?”

“Harper’s Grove is our twenty-fifth town—since I began counting, that is.” She turned her face toward the clear winter sky. “It’s by far my favorite. You’re very fortunate to have grown up in such a place. The people are kind here.”

Warning bells clanged in his head. She was leading this conversation somewhere. He could almost taste the breadcrumbs. Such trails often ended in a trap for the poor fools stupid enough to follow them. “They are just people,” he said carefully. “No better or worse than in any other village. They all have their faults, believe me. I know better than anyone.”

“Of course they do.” She turned to again regard him, her gaze altogether too soft, too warm. Too intimate. “But nowhere else have I felt as welcome as I do here. Especially now.”

The bells tolled louder as he tried to come up with some appropriate response that would make her feel a little less warmth toward him—and couldn’t. He settled for clearing his throat and saying briskly, “Well, I’m glad to hear the people here are conducting themselves so admirably. It makes my job easier.”

Turning, he headed onward toward the house, determined not to look at her again until he’d mastered himself.

When they arrived at Mrs. Small’s, her rickety old gate was dangling haphazardly off one rusty hinge—which gave out when he nudged it with the tip of his crutch to move it out of the way. The whole thing twisted loose and crashed into his bad leg on its way down. “Bollocks!” he yelled as white-hot pain shot up the limb—and then he remembered.

The look on Miss Tomblin’s face was one of complete shock.

“I’m so sorry,” he said, mortified, and yet inwardly cheering himself for having unwittingly accomplished his goal of forever altering her view of him—or of Daniel, rather. “I must beg your forgiveness, Miss Tomblin. I’m afraid it’s been a somewhat…trying week.”

Her gaze swept down and fixed on the ground. “I wanted only to help, but though it was not my intention, I fear my presence has only made things more uncomfortable for you.”

“What? No, no, of course not!” The lie rolled right off his tongue with practiced ease, as if he’d meant to say it. Why in the seven hells did I say no? Had he answered “Yes,” she’d have run off, likely had a cry, and Daniel’s problem would’ve been neatly resolved. Too late now. “My untoward behavior has nothing to do with you,” he fibbed again. “In fact, you’ve been a boon, Miss Tomblin. Truly.”

She nodded acceptance of this explanation, but he got the feeling she didn’t believe him. “You know, everyone comes to you with their problems,” she said after a moment. “But to whom do you speak when your mind is troubled?”

He could see the darker flecks in her luminous gray eyes, see each of the tiny lines that gave her ripe, pink lips their enticing texture. In spite of his throbbing leg, a wave of potent desire threatened to overwhelm all good sense. He tried to think but couldn’t. His mind was preoccupied with the temptation to kiss her. In vain, he tried to gather his wits.

What the hell would Daniel say? “I talk to the Lord, of course,” he said, sounding rather strangled in his own ears.

“How patient you must be, to speak your woes only to Him in secret, keeping faith that an answer will come that may be comprehended.”

Her insightful answer would have been perfect for Daniel, who would’ve agreed wholeheartedly and with good cheer. But it struck Devlin a deep blow. He told no one of his woes. Not even Daniel knew some of the secret pains he’d suffered in silence.
Devlin had a life many men envied, but he was not content. But to whom could he admit such a thing? His business associates would lose faith in him if they even suspected he regretted some of the acts he’d committed in the name of success. He was known for his ruthlessness, his detachment, his ability to do whatever must be done to achieve his ends.

And he was lonely. But to whom could he confess such a thing? He had many, many friends—who claimed him as such only because of what he could do for them. The moment it was in their best interest to ally themselves elsewhere, they’d do so without hesitation, and he knew it. He trusted none of them.

The truth was that there was no one in whom he could confide. He had Daniel, but he was cautious in what he revealed even to his twin, especially in writing. For one, he didn’t want his brother to think any more poorly of him than he already did, which was going to be a problem if Daniel dug too deeply while in London. Another issue was that Daniel didn’t need to be burdened with any more worries than he currently had on his plate with the people of this parish.

As for female companionship, it was his whenever he wanted it. London was full of women willing to lift their skirts for either coin or, at his level of society, simply a good time, but such women were not the sort one married. London was also full of conniving, mercenary women looking to fool a man into sharing his surname. He wanted a woman he could trust, one whose affection for him was genuine. But who could he confess that to without risking the wrong ears hearing of it and thus inviting deceit?

Another truth made him quail inside in terror of its discovery by others: he wanted love. Love like the kind David and Dean had found in their wives. To whom could he reveal that? To love without fear and be loved in return was his most secret desire, one he was barely able to admit to himself. But what sort of woman would marry a remorseless rakehell like him? Miss St. Peters, certainly, but she didn’t love him—the real him—because she didn’t know him. And he certainly didn’t love her. The very thought of being shackled to that woman made him faintly nauseous.

Love? Marriage? Again, warning bells sounded in his mind. Only a fool would even think of such things while pretending to be someone else. His problems were irrelevant. He’d deal with them later—with introspection, doubtless followed by copious amounts of alcohol and the company of a lightskirt or three.

He shook his head a little to clear it, and on looking up, saw that Miss Tomblin’s eyes had darkened to the hue of wood smoke. Her lips were parted slightly, and her color was high. He could see the pulse fluttering at the base of her throat. When had she come so close? Looking down, he realized she hadn’t moved. He was leaning toward her as though pulled by some irresistible force.

The truth was he didn’t want just any woman. Or even three. Who he wanted was standing right in front of him. And he couldn’t have her.

... Sweet merciful Lord...

Should she close her eyes? Tilt her head back? Lean toward him? Thoughts raced through her mind, but her thrumming body refused to obey any command involving movement. Panic held Mary in a vise grip, paralyzed, as he drifted closer.

And then his midnight-blue eyes, which had been staring deeply into hers, seemed suddenly to focus. Abruptly, he withdrew and cleared his throat. “Mrs. Small is waiting.” Without further comment, he turned and clumsily proceeded up the path.

The full impact of what had almost happened hit Mary, sucking the air from her lungs. Had she but
been a little closer… But she hadn’t been. And it hadn’t. But it came close. Very close. Which meant there was hope. Hefting her basket, Mary followed.

Mrs. Small answered her door with a welcoming smile. “Come in out of the cold! I’ve a fire laid and the kettle ready.”

On entering the house, Mary noted that it looked much tidier than it had the last time. Things were put away rather than scattered about haphazardly. The curtains had been tied back, letting in the pale winter sunlight, and the air seemed fresher.

“You look well today, Mrs. Small,” she said to their hostess, since Reverend Wayward seemed unable to speak. The idea that he was just as stunned pleased her immensely.

“Thank ye, dear girl. For the first time in years, I feel well,” replied the old woman, her eyes twinkling. “Set your things down and come sit with me by the fire.”

“Oh!” Mary opened the cover on her basket and withdrew a rather bulky bundle wrapped in brown paper and tied with a red ribbon. “This is for you.”

Mrs. Small’s cheeks pinked as she accepted the soft package. “I’ll wager I know what this is.” Taking it over to her chair, she sat and carefully opened it, preserving both ribbon and paper, to reveal several balls of remnant yarn in varying sizes, colors, and weights. “So many!” She held up a fat wad of dove-gray wool to her cheek and smiled. “Tis perfect—and just the right amount for a nice cap, too.” Then her eye fell on a spot of bright crimson amid the darker colors. “Oh, Miss Tomblin, ye should not have,” she exclaimed softly, laying aside the gray yarn to unbury the red. “A whole new skein? ‘Tis far too—”

“It’s my pleasure,” Mary interrupted. “I saw that bright, cheerful red, and it made me think of you. You were meant to have it.”

The old woman’s eyes glimmered. “Ye are too kind, truly. I’ll make something lovely of it.”

Mary smiled, her heart gladdened. “I look forward to seeing you wear it,” she said deliberately. “Is there anything I can do for you today, Mrs. Small?”

“Ye can help me make the tea and keep me company, child. All else is done.” Rising, she shuffled to the hearth and hung the kettle over the fire. “Winter is usually so difficult. Me bones ache so. But I felt so good this morning when I wakened, like everything was new—even old me!”

Mary went to the kitchen to find cups and tea. While she was busying herself, she heard the front door open and close. Peering through the small kitchen window, she spied Reverend Wayward struggling back down the steps. Had they forgotten something in the cart? She almost made to pursue him, but then he stopped and simply stood there in the middle of the path, staring off into the distance at, seemingly, nothing.

“I see ye’ve found the tea.”

Flinching, Mary missed the cup above which her hand had been hovering and spilled tea leaves on the table. Heat bloomed in her cheeks at the knowing look in her hostess’s eyes. “Yes. I remembered where it was from my last visit.”

“Hmm. I’ll wager yon vicar might like a cup to warm his innards,” said Mrs. Small, nodding toward the window with a sly look. She poured hot water into the cups. “Why don’t ye take him some?”

Mary nodded, embarrassed. She needed to be more careful, lest the wrong person see through her and talk of it to others. Mrs. Small was too isolated for such, and she didn’t think the lady would stoop to such behavior—but others wouldn’t hesitate to gossip. It was a small village.

She added a small amount of honey to his cup to sweeten it. Then, donning her cloak, she took it out. For a moment she just stood, watching as his breath came out in little puffs of steam on the frigid
Then, clearing her throat so as not to startle him and cause an accident, she crossed the yard. “I thought you might like some tea,” she said, alarmed at how breathless she sounded. Firming her voice, she extended the cup. “It’s just been poured, so have a care.”

His fingers slid over hers as he took the cup from her, leaving a trail of fire in their wake. “Thank you,” he said gruffly, taking a sip at once despite her warning. “Tell Mrs. Small when you go back inside that Tom will be by later to see to her kindling, and that I’ve made certain she’ll have enough to last a fortnight this time. The weather tends to get nasty this time of year, and I wanted to be sure she’s well-stocked in the event I’m unable to return next Sunday.”

Her stomach tightened. Was he planning on putting an end to their treks together? “I’ll tell her. But I pray the weather holds fair for her sake. Did you notice how improved her mood is today?”

He nodded and took another sip, saying nothing.

“I hate to think of her all alone out here,” she went on, trying not to notice the way his throat worked as he swallowed. “It’s too far removed from everyone else. Why did she not move into the village proper after her husband died?”

“Perhaps she enjoys her solitude,” he said, a biting edge to his tone. “Not everyone likes being disturbed by their neighbors.”

He’s angry. Confusion turned into a cold knot of trepidation. “Oh, I don’t think such is the case for Mrs. Small. As much as she anticipated our visit today, I can only imagine how lonely she must have been all week.”

“This is her home, Miss Tomblin,” he replied, again in a hard voice. “She’s lived here for nigh on forty years, raised a family here. All of her happiest memories were made in this place. But I don’t suppose you’d understand how attached a person can become to their home.”

Her eyes smarted, and she told herself it was the frigid air. “I—I suppose you’re right,” she stammered. “I’ll relay your message,” she said, unwilling to look at him as he drained the cup and held it out. Without another word, she took it and turned back toward the house.

“Miss Tomblin, wait,” he called, stopping her in her tracks only a few steps away. “Allow me to again apologize for my foul mood.”

She refused to face him. “It was a stupid question.”

“It was not. You spoke from a place of caring concern, and I snapped at you. Please look at me.”

Quickly, she dashed away her tears as best she could with the heel of her other hand before turning to regard him. Damned if her eyes weren’t still watering as she met his regret-filled blue gaze. “I really must be getting back inside…” The rest of whatever she’d been about to say died on the tip of her tongue as he hobbled close and his hands came up to cup her face.

Gently, he thumbed the tears from her cheeks. “I’ve been an inexcusable ass, Miss Tomblin. You’ve done naught to deserve such harsh treatment, and I beg you to forgive me.”

She stood, paralyzed, as the tender touch of his fingertips against her face, though icy cold, caused heat to unfurl deep down in her belly. The desire he’d awakened earlier at the gate again arose. Her mouth couldn’t find speech, so she settled for a jerky nod. His arms fell to his sides, and she closed her eyes to keep from grabbing at his hands to drag them back up again.

“Thank you,” he said, his voice rougher than usual. Clearing his throat, he pressed on with forced buoyancy. “We must leave for Mr. Messingham’s soon.”

Her tongue finally unfroze. “I’ll tell her it can be only a quick visit today.” She waited for him to turn away, but he didn’t. She looked up, wondering what else he needed to tell her, and what she saw in his face stole her breath.

Hunger. She recognized it at once as the same hunger eating away at her even now. The eyes staring
back at her were dark as sin and filled with want.  

_For me. He wants me._ The absolute certainty that he desired her sent a thrill through her. It traveled the length of her body, from the top of her head to the tips of her curling toes, snug in their boots.

And then his eyes became shuttered and unreadable once more. “Thank you. Please give her my thanks for the tea. I’ll just check on the horse before I rejoin you.”

Though everything in her wanted to remain, Mary forced herself to turn away and go back to the house. When she entered, her hostess was just sitting down by the fire.

“Is all well, then?” said Mrs. Small, her eyes bright with interest as Mary set the reverend’s empty cup in the wash basin and joined her.

“Yes,” she answered, taking up her own now-lukewarm tea. “Reverend Wayward wanted me to tell you he’s made sure you’re to have enough wood laid by to keep you for a fortnight—he worries the weather might turn nasty.”

“So ye’ve taken a liking to our vicar, have ye?” said the old dame, cutting straight to the point.  

Mary’s cheeks burned. “He’s a good, kind man.”

“Mmm.” Mrs. Small’s gaze was penetrating. “He appears to think highly of ye, as well. I could not help but mark the way he looks at ye.”

“Oh?” she replied, trying to sound nonchalant in spite of how her heart was racing. “I had not noticed.”

“When a man looks at a lass the way he looked at ye just now, out there, she either notices or she’s stone blind,” the old woman said tartly. “I don’t think ye blind, Miss Tomblin.” Her raspy voice softened. “If ye love him, don’t let anything stand in the way of that love—’tis more precious than all the gold in the world.”

Clearly, Mrs. Small had been spying through her window and had seen everything. Mortification set in. “Thank you, Mrs. Small. But I—”

She was saved from having to discuss it further by the front door opening.  

Reverend Wayward trudged in and cast the women a rueful look. “I’m so sorry, Mrs. Small, but I’m afraid we cannot stay any longer.”

“’Tis quite all right, lad,” said their hostess as Mary jumped up to quickly wash their teacups. “The days are so short in winter, and I know ye’ve many others to attend today. Thank ye for coming to see this old woman. Ye brightened me day more than ye know.”

Mary caught the sly gleam in her eye as she said it and felt herself flushing all over again. They said their goodbyes and departed. As she walked behind the vicar and they boarded the horse cart, a strange calm washed over her. She’d thought to ask him about what had nearly happened between them—_twice now_—but decided against it.

*Let him be the first to speak of it. Let him be the one to give some excuse, if he dares.* If he chose to address the matter, she would answer honestly. If not…

What would be, would be.
Chapter Nine

Devlin had never been so confused in all his life. Everything was all wrong. He was supposed to be driving this woman away, but everything he said and did seemed to result in the opposite.

His problems concerning Miss Tomblin were threefold, the first being that she was damned attractive and he couldn’t seem to keep a clear head around her. It grew worse with every interaction. He’d bloody well nearly kissed her back there. The stiffness in his trousers—hidden, thankfully, by his brother’s priestly garb—still hadn’t abated.

The second problem was that he actually liked the woman. She was intelligent, funny, kind, and he appreciated the way she spoke her mind.

The third problem was that he couldn’t bear to cause her pain. Every time he even thought he’d bruised her feelings, he found himself apologizing—a highly aberrant behavior for a man unaccustomed to apologizing for anything. But one look into her wounded eyes was all it took to turn his resolve to jelly. He had to figure out a way to get around that unfortunate new compulsion.

Or write to Daniel and tell him to come home and pretend his leg is broken.

He wondered how his twin was managing. He was to write Daniel tonight, in fact. What would he tell him? That he’d nearly kissed the woman he was meant to be rejecting in his stead? That he’d only made things worse?

No. There is still plenty of time to mend the situation. I’ll simply have to exert more self-control. He knew better than anyone how to resist feminine wiles. Of late, it had become a tricky business, but he wasn’t so far gone as to think it hopeless.

His companion, he noted, was uncharacteristically quiet. Their close encounter had clearly unsettled her as much as it had him, though thanks to his foolish lack of discipline, she doubtless now thought she had the upper hand.

Time to prove her wrong. “I hope you don’t mind keeping Mr. Messingham company on your own, but I must see to repairing the fencing around his henhouse. I noticed last week it looked as if foxes have been trying to get in near the back, and I’ve brought a hammer and some nails to help reinforce it.”

“It will be my pleasure,” she said, her face unreadable.

“I won’t be long.” He eyed her for a moment, then added, “Please don’t trouble either him or yourself with bringing me any tea, should he offer. Not to slight anyone’s hospitality, but we had a late start, and I need to make my entire circuit before sundown.”

“Of course. I, too, shall decline for the same reason.” Her gaze remained fixed on the path ahead, and she sounded perfectly calm and reasonable, as if she hadn’t nearly been kissed at all.

If he was honest with himself, this offended him mightily. It was customary for a woman nearly kissed by him to be at least somewhat ruffled, if not completely addled by the experience. Still, if she wanted to pretend nothing had happened, he would do the same.

In fact, it was better that way. The last thing he needed was for anyone to hear of the incident. Good Lord, if her parents were to ever learn of it... He prayed she knew well enough to keep her mouth shut.

It struck him then that her parents had given him—or Daniel, rather—their complete trust. And why not? As vicar, he was an example of the very highest standard of morality, a template all other men were to follow. In their minds, he was completely trustworthy when it came to women.
Only, Devlin wasn’t their vicar. His morality could be measured somewhere near the bottom of the scale, and he wasn’t at all trustworthy when it came to women. For the moment, however, he had no choice but to act as if he were. Putting on a cheerful face, he whistled a merry tune in tempo to the horse’s gait.

Beside him, Miss Tomblin sat without complaint, eyes forward. By the time they stopped at Mr. Messingham’s, he’d all but lost patience over her blatant indifference and was glad to sling his tool satchel over his shoulder and ease himself down to the ground. His bad leg hurt abominably where Mrs. Small’s gate had smacked it, and he wondered if he ought not to go inside and have a look at it before proceeding.

Then she sailed past with her head held high and, not bothering to wait for him, continued without slowing, all the way to Mr. Messingham’s front door. Her back was as straight as a ramrod, her knock brisk, and her greeting to Mr. Messingham bright and energetic.

Devlin stood, dumbfounded, as she explained to their host that “the good vicar” would be unable to join them inside as he was to repair the coop, but that she would be keeping him company today—quietly.

She then pulled from her pocket a slim book and said, “I’ve brought along some reading material, so you need not feel obligated to converse. I shall take no offense if you desire silence.” Turning to Devlin, she cast him a saccharine smile. “Go to your task, Reverend. I’m quite capable of managing on my own and will disturb neither of you unless my fellowship or service is desired.”

The barb pierced deep and sank into his flesh to burrow into bone.

She’d brought him a cup of tea as a courtesy. She hadn’t asked to be nearly kissed—unless her very presence was a request for ravishment, which he was beginning to think might be the case. She hadn’t been the one to lean closer…but she hadn’t been the one to back away, either. Even so, he could hardly blame her for the incident. His growing fascination with her wasn’t her fault. She intrigued him. Just when he thought he had her figured out, she surprised him. Like now.

Mr. Messingham stared at him expectantly.

Oh. “Yes,” he said brightly, as though he hadn’t been standing there like a lump. “I’ll just get to it, shall I? Thank you, Miss Tomblin, for being so obliging.” Heat crept up from beneath his collar to flood his face. Idiot!

The sight of the rundown coop was a welcome one. If he’d been resenting the fact that his brother had him doing manual labor while suffering with a broken leg, that resentment was long gone. He attacked the task with vigor, venting his frustration with each swing of the hammer, finding both satisfaction and release in pure physical exertion. By the time he’d finished, he felt much better, if exhausted. His mind was clearer, at least.

As he hobbled back to Mr. Messingham’s house, his thoughts crystallized. He knew what he had to do. When he went in, however, those plans evaporated from his immediate mind due to sheer astonishment.

There before the fire sat Miss Tomblin and Mr. Messingham, playing chess. Without speaking, she moved her bishop to threaten his king. He countered and took her knight. She moved and again put him in check. He countered.

Two moves later, with not a single word spoken between them, Messingham conceded the game by tipping his king. “Congratulations, Miss Tomblin. And may I say that I’ve rarely enjoyed such a good game. You’re a worthy opponent.”

Devlin cleared his throat. Both of the room’s occupants flinched and looked to him in surprise. It was quite a blow to his ego to realize neither of them had even noticed him come in—especially Miss
Tomblin. “Apologies for having startled you.”

Messingham’s brows rose. “Your pardon, vicar. I was just telling Miss Tomblin—”

“Yes, I heard,” he said, coming to stand over the board. “My goodness, Miss Tomblin. I had no idea you were such a skilled strategist.”

It was hard to tell by the light of the fire whether or not she was blushing, but her expression said it all. She’d been caught.

Any person capable of beating Messingham at chess was to be regarded with respect. Daniel had warned him of the man’s ability to think several moves ahead, as well as his competitive nature. Messingham would never have let her win—he didn’t believe in doing such things. If she’d won, it was because she was a damned good player.

He’d underestimated her. He wouldn’t be so foolish again.

Messingham, rather than being the sore loser Devlin expected, instead seemed delighted by Miss Tomblin’s skill. “Where did you learn to play so well?” the man asked her, beaming.

“My father is an excellent player, sir,” she answered with a shy smile. “He began teaching me when I was very young. We often play in the evenings after dinner.”

“Well, well,” said the man, giving her a pleased smile. “Your father, eh? Tell him if he’s ever deprived of your company and finds himself in want of an opponent, he is welcome to knock on my door at any time and be received with welcome. And you, as well, my dear.” He turned to Devlin. “You’ll have to be on your game to win against this one, vicar.”

Miss Tomblin turned a startled gaze upon him. “Oh, do you play, Reverend?”

Damn.

“Indeed, I do.”

Messingham let out a bark of laughter and leaned toward Miss Tomblin. “He plays well enough to sit me a match every now and again and hold his own, but he’s no artist like you, my dear.”

“You flatter me, sir,” she replied demurely.

“I never flatter,” said Messingham in a dour tone. “I but speak the truth. It was a pleasure being trounced by you, madam. That said, I hope to reclaim my dignity when next we meet.”

“I would be delighted, of course. Until next Sunday, then?”

Devlin listened to their banter with bewilderment. What in the seven hells is happening here? The world had gone upside down. According to Daniel, Messingham was a bona fide woman hater, and yet here he was looking at Miss Tomblin with calf eyes! She’d charmed the venomous old serpent and had wrapped him around her dainty finger for a ring.

Well, she won’t wrap me around it. “Miss Tomblin, much as I’m loath to end what seems like a delightful visit, I’m afraid we must be getting on.”

She rose at once. Before coming to fetch her cloak, however, she paused to place a kiss on Mr. Messingham’s white-whiskered cheek. Devlin looked on, flabbergasted, as the man chuckled in response and patted her hand in a distinctly paternal gesture.

The woman is a bloody siren!

Not a word was spoken as they returned to the cart—mainly because the siren was currently employing her voice in humming a merry tune. With a jolt, he realized it was the same one he’d been whistling earlier.

Devlin now regretted having flung himself at that coop with such abandon. In fact, he was regretting ever having ventured past his brother’s doorstep. His bad leg was hurting something awful, and the crutches were beginning to rub sore spots under his arms. Irritability spiked as his companion hopped up to the seat with all the ease of a gazelle, leaving him to clamber up with all the speed and grace of an ungainly tortoise.
This time, it was she who carried the tune to the beat of the horse’s hooves.

Finally, when he could stand it no more, he broke his silence. “I’m glad you’ve managed to make friends with Mr. Messingham. He has so very few visitors. A man should not be alone so much.” The moment it escaped his lips, he wanted to kick himself.

“Being alone does not equate to being unhappy, Reverend,” she replied with a little laugh, surprising him. “Mr. Messingham likes his own company, to be sure, but he appreciates a guest who does not tax his patience overmuch. I simply learned what annoys him and vowed not to do those things.”

“And just how, pray tell, did you learn such a thing so quickly?”

A smile lurked behind her twinkling eyes. “The best approach with people like Mr. Messingham is to be direct. I asked.”

“You asked him to tell you what he dislikes? And he told you? Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

He tried to picture it but couldn’t. She was bold, but not that bold! He wanted to refute the claim, but she’d already moved on to another topic—his reputed chess skills. Or, rather, Daniel’s.

“Mr. Messingham said it’s been months since you last played him,” she reproached. “Perhaps you’ll play him when next we visit?”

Without waiting for an answer, she turned to face the front, smiled beatifically, and again began humming.

By the time they reached Mrs. Mickelby’s, he was all but at the end of his wits—and his leg had begun to hurt in earnest. Never in all his life was he happier to come out of the cold and sit down in a parlor full of lace doilies and china figurines.

Mary found it difficult to hide her glee as she sipped her tea and dwelt on their last call while Mrs. Mickelby nattered on with Reverend Wayward.

Without the presence of a fellow male with whom to conspire against her sex, old Messingham had been surprisingly easy to win over. She’d simply gone to the fire with her book, sat down, and started reading silently. After several minutes of being ignored, the old codger had insisted upon conversing with her. Fortunately, he’d approved of the book she’d brought, having read it himself, and thus had begun their discussion—and friendship.

Wayward had lost his prize piece in this little game of theirs. What made it even more delicious was the fact that he knew it. His look of disgruntlement when he’d come in and found them playing was such that she’d been hard put not to laugh aloud.

*Check and mate!*  

She and the reverend entertained Mrs. Mickelby for about half an hour before rising to give regrets, saying they couldn’t tarry, but promised to visit longer the next time.

Next, they visited Mrs. Tidwell and her so-called feline menace, which took an immediate liking to her. The cat spent most of the visit bumping up against her hand to be petted and attempting to crawl into her lap. It did not, however, welcome with any warmth whatsoever the male half of their duo. The good reverend came away from their encounter with a nasty row of deep scratches on the back of his hand.

*Justice!*  

Old Mr. Cotsworth was cordiality incarnate. Generous, too. When they left his house, the good vicar had half a dozen new books of no mean length to read as he convalesced. For a man who
purportedly enjoyed reading, she observed that the expression he wore as they were leaving was rather more resigned than enthusiastic.

Mary couldn’t bring herself to sympathize, as she was the one forced to carry them all. She’d been lugging about baskets full of goods all afternoon, and no matter how charitable her motives were, her back was beginning to complain about it. It was hard not to resent Wayward for using her like a pack mule, even though she’d been the one to volunteer her services.

Mrs. Stone welcomed them with gladness, and when the reverend told her of the impending repairs to her home, she sobbed her gratitude on Mary’s shoulder.

Mary’s heart softened toward him. It was hard to stay bitter after such an event, and she resolved to make a fresh start when they left. “You poor dear,” she commented to him as they rounded the last corner before turning toward the vicarage. “Even when you’re well and fit, I don’t know how you manage to make such a circuit every week all on your own. And with your leg, I cannot imagine how tired you must be. Especially after that gate hit it.”

“Oh, come now, Miss Tomblin.” He held her with his eyes as a mischievous smile slanted his lips. “Surely you know by now I’m made of sterner stuff than that?”

Warmth gathered in her cheeks as her toes curled in their boots. “Glad am I to hear it,” she said too brightly. “As for myself, I feel much refreshed by the outing.” How she wished the air would cool her face! But though the breeze was full of winter’s chill, it did naught to ease the heat in her face.

“Wonderful,” he said, the smile broadening. “Then perhaps, since we completed our round of visits so early today, you’d like to assist me in readying the sanctuary for the evening service?”

Her back groaned in protest, but she could hardly decline. “Nothing would delight me more.”

After stopping briefly at the vicarage to leave the horse cart with Tom and drop off the now-empty baskets, he let her into the church. The stillness and silence of the dim sanctuary seemed almost oppressive after being in the brisk, open air and hearing the winter birds twittering their songs in the trees. It would have been a peaceful space but for the riot of feelings she brought into it. Frustrated yearning along with too many others to name, all jumbled up together. Every time he glanced at her, she felt exposed, naked, as if he knew her every motive and the secret whisperings of her heart.

Nonsense! He’s a man, not a mind reader. “How may these hands best serve you, Reverend?”

He stiffened, pausing in the act of rummaging through a large wooden chest by the rear door. When he slowly straightened a moment later, he wore a decidedly cool expression. Clutched in one large hand was a basket containing a wad of rags and two earthenware jars. Using just one crutch, he hobbled over and plunked it down in front of her. “I’ve the perfect task for idle hands: the pews could do with a good polishing.”

She glanced at the one beside her. The wood shone like glass.

“Not these. Those.” He pointed to the back. “The men often come in straight from tending their animals. Thus, the rear pews’ handrails are quite filthy.” Lifting a wry brow, he glanced down at her hands. “I assume you know how to polish?”

“Of course, b—”

“Good. Then you may start on the last row and work your way forward.” Turning, he hobbled back to retrieve his other crutch, leaving her standing there in openmouthed astonishment instead of offering to polish alongside her, which he most certainly could have done even with his injured leg.

Of all the—! She contemplated flinging the jars at his head and walking out, but didn’t. Glaring at his retreating back, she instead snatched up the implements and took herself off to the back to make war on wood.

The pews in the rear were indeed deeply soiled by the dirt and sweat of working men’s palms.
Stroke after vicious stroke, through the liberal and vigorous application of lemon oil, beeswax, and elbow grease, she scoured off the layers of grime to reveal the wood beneath, and then polished until it gleamed.

While she took out her vexation on the pews, the vicar took his time draping the altar and setting out fresh candles. Silently, she fumed over the inequity of their tasks, but kept on polishing. After about twenty minutes, her arm grew weary. After half an hour, it ached. Glowering at the vicar, who was now slowly setting out hymnals, she switched hands, determined not to give him the satisfaction of seeing her give up and quit.

Finally, after what had to be at least an hour, he deigned to survey her progress. Continuing her work, she acted as though she didn’t notice him. She’d restored the handrails of six long pews to their original color.

“Impressive, Miss Tomblin,” he said, at last acknowledging her and calling her efforts to a halt. “Truly, I don’t think I’ve ever seen them so clean. I shall have to have a word with the acolytes and show them your fine example.”

Standing proudly, she regarded him with a gimlet stare. “It was my pleasure, Reverend.” She couldn’t resist. “I can return on the morrow and work on the rest, if you like.” Wicked mirth welled up inside her at the flicker of alarm in his eyes. “I would remain and finish the job now, but I really must be getting home.”

“Thank you, I’ll have the acolytes finish the rest, with your shining example to aspire to. Come, I’ll have Tom bring around the cart and I’ll drive you home.”

For a moment, she wanted to tell him to walk off the edge of a tall cliff. Her arms ached abominably, her fingers were rough and red, and she smelled to high heaven of lemon. *Honey catches more vicars than vinegar, Mary.* “Thank you,” she said sweetly.

She marked the stiffness of his manner—and his pained expression as he donned his coat and gloves. His leg must really be smarting from the hit it took today.

*Good! Serves him right, and I hope it aches for the next week.* She let him help drape her cloak about her shoulders. “I do hope the heavy snow holds off until after Mr. Farley can make the repairs to Mrs. Stone’s roof,” she said as they left the warm sanctuary behind for the chill of the outdoors. “It looked quite ready to fall in near the back.”

“Mr. Farley said the same thing when I spoke with him Friday. He’s to start work on it tomorrow. His son will be helping.”

“Happy news,” she said with a genuine smile as they approached the stable. “Tell me, do your rounds include those of the parish who live farther away than Mr. Messingham? I don’t wish to deprive them of a visit, and I fear you’ve kept close to the village for my sake.”

“I do, but on horseback only, as some of the paths are too narrow for the cart.” He cast about for a moment, then nodded at Tom, who poked his head out of the stable at their approach before quickly ducking back in. “I fear those folk will have to wait until I fully recover before I darken their doorsteps.”

“I have a mount of my own, you know,” she said as their feet crunched through the thin layer of melting snow that remained on the ground in patches. “Some years ago, Papa gifted me with a lovely filly named Dawn Wind. She’s my darling, and I hardly ever get to ride her.”

“Why not?”

“Our last house was in the country rather than in town, and I used to take her across the fields surrounding it,” she answered as Tom led the horse back out and began hitching him to the cart. “I would take her to the downs here, but Papa has not the time to accompany me, and Augie does not
enjoy riding as I do. Perhaps I could accompany you once or twice a week to visit those of your flock who live farther away? Dawn and I could carry some things for you—she’d benefit from the exercise, and I would get to see the countryside.”

“I would be afraid to take you too far out if the weather turned ugly.” Once again, he wore the look of something hunted.

“Perhaps this spring, then?” she said, keeping her tone light. “I imagine the wildflowers here are quite a sight to behold in the warm weather.”

“Indeed they are. Harper’s Grove is picturesque in any season, but especially so in the spring. There is no place as beautiful, in my opinion.”

There was a soft light in his eyes as he spoke. It made her yearn to belong here, to be part of it, really part of it, all the more. “You must truly love it here.”

…

“Indeed, I do.” The sincerity with which he’d uttered these words greatly surprised Devlin. London’s bustling streets and constant noise were his preferred environs, not this sleepy little village in which nothing exciting ever happened.

Except for Mary Tomblin, his mind corrected.

Smiling, Miss Tomblin paused to flick a long, thin icicle off a low-hanging branch. “It’s rare to meet a person content to remain in one place their entire life. Most people seek fulfillment away from the place of their birth. Either their ambitions take them far afield, as is the case with my father, or they leave in order to escape some unpleasantness.”

Escape, indeed. When Devlin had declined to accept ordination, his family, with the singular exception of Daniel, had been wroth. He’d run away from their disappointment and censure. But he hadn’t escaped. Not really.

Only Daniel had, eventually, understood his decision and supported him. Devlin wasn’t suited to a life of piety, labor, and self-denial—the life of a clergyman. To this day, he had yet to feel any urge or “calling” to be anything other than what he was: a gambler and a sybarite. The only reason he’d even gone to seminary was to remain close to his twin. It had worked until graduation. Then their paths had diverged.

Irrevocably.

Daniel. Everyone thought him the weaker twin, but Devlin knew better. Daniel possessed the will to resist temptation, to do the right thing no matter how it pained him, to sacrifice his own comfort and pleasure for others’ sake.

I am not that man. Altruism was a quality possessed by other people. As for being content in Harper’s Grove… Ha! What does this plot of earth boast to hold any man, let alone one accustomed to London’s innumerable diversions? Unbidden, his eyes traced Miss Tomblin’s profile, caressing the elegant curve of her cheek, fascinated by the curling sweep of her thick lashes.

Fool. That road leads straight to ruin—for all.

But he couldn’t look away. His hedonist nature wanted nothing more than to give the lady what she so clearly wanted—in part, at least. He wasn’t the marrying sort, but one didn’t have to be wed to a woman to enjoy her charms. All it would take was a look, a few soft words, and she’d be warming his bed.

Unfortunately, the pesky conscience he’d recently acquired wouldn’t allow it. Not only for his brother’s sake, but for hers. To his growing astonishment, Devlin realized he wanted Miss Tomblin to be happy. And he was the last man in the world capable of bringing her joy.
A wave of something that felt dangerously like melancholy swept through him.  
Conscience? Sentiment? Regret? What the devil is the matter with me? One cannot mourn what one has not lost—and she has never belonged to me. And, despite an increasingly alarming desire for it to be otherwise, it was highly unlikely she ever would.

Even if he wanted to consider settling down, he couldn’t. Not here, and certainly not with Miss Tomblin. She thought him someone else. And, too, he had a life of his own back in London—one he hoped wasn’t being shoveled straight into the sewer the way he was threatening to do with his brother’s.

He watched Miss Tomblin break off another long icicle and twirl it between her fingers. She’s no different from any other woman. But even as he thought it, he knew it for a lie. Distance yourself from her, before it’s too late and this unfortunate sentiment grows into something more serious than a passing fancy.

“If I had a choice, I’d never leave here,” she murmured wistfully, tossing aside the sparkling shard. Her soft, grey gaze pierced him. “Of all the places I’ve lived, Harper’s Grove has become the dearest.”

With the way she was looking at him, he knew part of the reason why. Damn. For her own sake as well as Daniel’s, he had to make her understand that his idiot twin couldn’t be any part of what held her to this place.

He must make her dislike him—Daniel. “While I consider myself truly blessed to have been planted so near my family, I see little in Harper’s Grove to appeal to any stranger,” he said, deliberately glib. “Having grown up here, I can personally attest that it’s entirely devoid of excitement. Surely you must look forward to London’s attractions?”

“Not at all.” She frowned, but the expression was tempered by a disbelieving chuckle. “And how can you call this place unexciting? I cannot imagine a livelier village.”

“Oh, indeed? You must have lived in some very dull places to think so.”

Her laugh was a brook’s melody. “Quite likely. But really, how can you think it at all boring? The constant machinations of the sisters Ellington are a source of daily cheer. And what of Lady Pompton and her many fortune-seeking suitors? As well, don’t forget Mr. Childs and his six daughters—their mother’s ceaseless efforts at matchmaking provide endless entertainment.”

“You seem to know everything about everyone in our drowsy little village,” he responded after a moment. Distance yourself. “Are your neighbors aware that such a busybody lives in their midst? Beware, Miss Tomblin. Words have the power to cause people grievous injury when misused in idle gossip.”

Color rushed into her face, but he soon discovered it wasn’t shame that brought the pink to her cheeks. “I am no gossip, sir,” she said with heat. “I spoke only of things generally known within our community—and without malicious intent. I would not deign to share truly personal information about any of my neighbors save under circumstances of direst need and in strictest confidence.”

“So many a gossip has claimed,” he shot back, hating himself. Her eyes became twin flints. “Having been a newcomer many times throughout my life, I’ve often found myself the subject of fanciful speculation. As such, I would sooner have my tongue cut out than spread an ill rumor that might result in another person’s undeserved pain. My trust is not given easily, Reverend. When I speak in confidence, it is only because the listener has proven worthy of it. Your slight against my character is undeserved.”

All conversation was cut off then as Tom brought the cart over. They boarded it in frosty silence and began the short trek to her house.
Yet again, Devlin felt the unfamiliar, unpleasant sting of guilt. And no small amount of respect for the direct manner in which she’d rebutted his accusation. Once more, his palate was forced to adjust to the bitter taste of crow. “Please forgive my unwarranted censure, madam,” he said, breaking the silence. “If I appear to be sensitive to the matter, it is only because I’ve observed that longstanding familiarity with one’s neighbors often results in unguarded speech concerning them. Such speech can give terrible, sometimes irreparable, wounds to the subject and, indeed, can divide an entire community.”

Some, but not all, of the hostility left her countenance as she replied, “Would that I could boast of such longstanding familiarity with my neighbors. But until Papa deigns to retire from his labors, which I do not foresee happening any time soon, I’m doomed to roam the earth at his side.”

Opportunity knocks. He hated himself for it, but it had to be said: “Unless, of course, you find a suitable groom while in London. I’m certain you’ll find your husband’s home every bit as appealing as Harper’s Grove. Perhaps even more so, once you grow accustomed to it and get to know your neighbors. I trust you will thrive wherever you are planted, Miss Tomblin.”

The last spark of hope faded from her beautiful gray eyes, leaving them dull with resignation. “I’m sure I shall,” she said woodenly, averting her gaze. “I should, of course, prefer to marry someone with whom I share a mutual affection and respect, but an alliance with a stranger is more likely to be my lot.”

“Oh, come now,” he scoffed, gentling his words with a chuckle. “I’m sure your parents will take your happiness into account when considering a match. You’ll have plenty of time to ascertain and assure mutual compatibility before exchanging vows. But in the end, the choice to accept a suit is yours and yours alone. No one can make you marry.”

“Not yet.” Her face remained impassive. “But make no mistake, circumstances will eventually force me to the altar. If anything should happen to my father while I remain unwed, both Mama and I will be at the mercy of the distant relation who is to inherit his modest estate. A man whose character is completely unknown to us. At that point, the luxury of refusal will no longer be mine.”

“The law says otherwise,” he insisted. “And anyway, you might be pleasantly surprised to find this distant relation of yours a kind, amiable fellow rather than a villain to be feared.”

“Regardless, if he should insist I accept an offer of marriage, I’ll have little choice but to comply. I’ve a dowry, but no money of my own, and my mother’s jointure won’t support us both. Therefore, I must marry, lest I burden her.”

Shame crept up from beneath Devlin’s collar to heat his face. Many of the girls who worked at his gaming hells had come to him for employment after having been turned away from a relative’s house following the loss of a husband or father. That Miss Tomblin might someday find herself in such straits was more than a little unsettling. In fact, it made him feel distinctly nauseous. “Forgive me, I had not fully considered your position.”

“In this, you are no different than most men,” she said quietly. “The world is yours from birth—a man can always make his own way. It is not so for a woman. In reality, marriage is the only path for any gently raised female not possessed of wealth in her own right. As I am no heiress…” A tiny shrug lifted her shoulders.

“I see your struggle,” he acknowledged with chagrin. “In the future, I shall endeavor to be more understanding of the female plight.” He wondered if Miss St. Peters was under similar pressure. Surely, her father’s financial situation was secure enough that she should never worry. Regardless, Miss St. Peters must look elsewhere for a husband.

As must Miss Tomblin. “Fortunately, your father appears to be in excellent health, so I trust you’ll
have plenty of time to make your selection.”

“I am one and twenty, already quite mature by Society’s standards,” she replied wryly. “This is to be my last Season as an unwed woman. My parents are quite determined that I marry before next winter.”

Clearing his throat, he nodded. “Then, I wish you success in your pursuit and joy in the result.”

“Thank you.” She held his gaze prisoner for a long moment before speaking again. “Despite my many impositions on your forbearance, you have been a true and steadfast friend. No please, let me finish,” she said when he began to object.

Biting his tongue, he fell silent.

“First, I made you uncomfortable with my indiscreet behavior, and then I subsequently inserted myself into your life where I was unwanted. I knew it then, yet I persisted, thinking that if only you knew me better, you might change your mind. It was wrong of me.” Her voice broke a little, but she continued. “You have tolerated my constant intrusions with both patience and kindness, when any other man would have cruelly rejected me. I will impose upon you no further save to ask forgiveness and request that you pray for me when I leave Harper’s Grove. Pray that the man I marry is a good man. He need not be perfect, only good. Will you do that for me?”

The paper cut’s sting of guilt became an enormous gaping wound—with salt and strong spirits poured into it. His tongue cleaved to the roof of his mouth. *Have the spine to do what must be done!* He forced the words past unwilling lips. “I shall pray for better than that, Miss Tomblin. I shall pray the man you marry loves you truly and deeply, as you deserve.”
“Thank you, Reverend.” Mary held back her emotions with an iron will, determined to behave with all the dignity she’d thus far lacked in this man’s presence. It was well and truly over, if indeed, it had ever even begun. Turning, she silently urged the horse to pick up the pace. The sooner they parted ways and she forgot him, the better.

When he spoke, it was with an air of studied indifference. “Am I to assume this means you no longer wish to accompany me on my Sunday calls?”

She couldn’t look at him. Not without bursting into tears. “I would not want to cause you further discomfort. You’ve made it perfectly clear you have neither need for my assistance nor desire for my company. Therefore, to continue in our present mode makes no sense.”

“What of the people you’ve promised to visit?”

Oh, really! Must he make this more difficult? “I shall arrange to call on them during the week with my mother.” She clenched her teeth for a moment before continuing, gathering her courage. “With the exception of church, however, our paths need never cross again. I’m afraid I cannot avoid attending services without rousing my parents’ suspicion as to my motive, but I’ll tell them our parish visits have concluded due to the threat of inclement weather. They won’t question it. By the time it improves enough to resume, I’ll be well on my way to London.”

His look became indignant. “Are y— Do you now seek to punish me for having accepted your apology? I begin to wonder if it was truly meant!”

Frustration burned away the threat of tears. “Every word I utter, you take the wrong way! If I’m friendly, you see it as an attempt to entrap you. If I seek to distance myself, you think I’m trying to bait you into a pursuit. You read inferences into my every action and color my every phrase!”

“Ha!” The derisive bark of laughter echoed in the cold, still air. “And how am I not to color the words of a woman who all but openly declared an affection for me despite my having given her no encouragement?”

Furious beyond caring, she raised her voice. “Had I been bent on having you without considering your wishes or your happiness, I would long ago have ensured the appearance of my compromise at your hands.” She let that sink in. “But you need have no fear of me, Reverend. I would sooner die than entrap an unwilling man, and I fully respect your desire to remain unencumbered. Unlike many women, I comprehend that not all men are the marrying sort. Some remain bachelors for good reason!”

Satisfaction warred with apprehension as his flushed face slowly drained of color. She hadn’t intended to insult him, but if he chose to take her words as such, then so be it. Anger had made her bold enough not to care. He wasn’t interested in her anyway.

“You assume much, Miss Tomblin, and wrongly so, I think.” Against the pallor of his cheeks, his blue eyes looked even darker as they locked with hers. “I will one day take a wife, but it won’t be for some years yet.”

“Best not wait too far into your dotage,” she quipped. “You must be some thirty-five years of age already.”

The color returned to his face in a rush. “I am, in fact, only recently turned thirty—hardly what I would call ‘into my dotage.’ And my age is irrelevant—many men marry at the half century mark or even older.”
“You wish to wait until you’re fifty?” She allowed her incredulity free rein and laughed aloud. “What possible reason can you have to wait so long? It cannot be your situation. A vicar’s living is modest, but well enough to support a family comfortably, provided your household observes good economy.” She couldn’t resist. “Therefore, it must be a lack of suitable candidates that prevents your wedded bliss.”

“Yes, if you must know,” he answered hotly. “My standards are not those of most men.”

And I’ve obviously fallen far short of them! Stung, she smiled sweetly and laced her reply with utmost scorn. “Dear Reverend, you of all people should know perfection exists only in heaven. But if indeed there is an earthly female capable of meeting your lofty requirements, one cannot help but wonder what she’ll make of you. Should you chance to meet this paragon, my advice would be to marry her quickly, before she learns the truth.”

His eyes darkened another shade, presumably with fury. “And what truth is that, Miss Tomblin?”

The thrill of battle sang in her veins, and she made no effort to moderate her harsh tone. “That you, sir, are a conceited ass who thinks himself high above the rest of us unworthy sinners. I’m glad I discovered it now rather than continuing to lavish my time and regard on someone so ungrateful and undeserving of my attentions.”

He flinched, and she saw pain, real pain in his eyes. The gravity of what she’d done struck her. “Forgive me,” she gasped, full of remorse. “I—I should not have spoken so to you.” Again, she fought back tears, shame making her cheeks warm as he stared at her. “Please, let me take back my harsh words.”

When he at last spoke, it was with unexpected gentleness. “There is naught to forgive. I’ve caused you pain and deserved every one of them. The fault for my rejection is not yours, Miss Tomblin. You are lovely and—when not provoked to wrath—generous and kindhearted. I’m exceedingly flattered by your interest; however, I cannot in good conscience reciprocate.”

“In good conscience”? What does that mean?

But he went on before she could seek clarification. “It would be cruel of me to encourage and accept tender sentiments when I know doing so would only cause you the acutest misery.”

A scowl tightened her brow. “Misery?”

The ghost of a smile flickered about the corners of his mouth, eliciting a hollow ache inside her. “Come now, Miss Tomblin. Let us be frank. Within a few minutes of being in each other’s presence, we unerringly find a bone of contention to squabble over. A marriage between us would be full of strife, the two of us either carrying silent grudges against each other or engaging in open, bloody warfare. In time, you would grow to hate me.”

“I could never ‘hate’ you,” she said, appalled by his gloomy prediction. “Though you do seem to know just how to infuriate me, you are too good a man to truly despise.”

Again, that small, wry smile hovered on his lips. “As you so accurately pointed out, I’m a sinner like everyone else, madam. And even a good man may earn his wife’s contempt if she feels slighted. And you would, in time.” He shut his eyes briefly, as though struggling with some inner pain, before going on. “The Lord is first in my heart, you see, and His flock second. What room is there for aught else in a heart already so occupied?”

The crack in hers widened a little more. “But I’m part of that flock, am I not?”

“Indeed you are.” Reaching out, he gently brushed her cheek with the backs of his fingers.

The shock of his tender touch against her bare skin left a tingling river of fire in its wake, a sensation that was almost eclipsed by surprise at the naked regret that flashed in his blue gaze just before resignation chased it away.
When he spoke again, his voice had deepened to a gravely rumble. “But someone like you could never be happy with anything less than her husband’s whole heart, and that is something I simply cannot give.”

Pulse pounding, Mary couldn’t formulate a coherent argument. Her mind was too busy marking the regretful tone of his words, as well as his nearness and its effect on her. Winter lost its chill as heat slowly blossomed throughout her body and the place between her legs began to throb. As if a hand were pushing her, she found herself leaning toward him on the seat.

Larkspur eyes widened an increment, but he didn’t withdraw.

Closer.

His clean-shaven face came into sharp relief, the faint, sandpapery texture of the day’s new growth along his jaw contrasting with the smoothness of his lips. For a man, he had such full, sensuous lips. Were they as soft as they looked?

Closer.

Like iron to a lodestone, he drew her. The look in his darkening eyes shifted as she neared. He wants me. Nothing in his speech had denied it. He’d simply chosen not to act on it.

Closer.

Emotion met with physical sensation, both crashing over her in a roiling confluence of heartfelt longing and raw, visceral desire. Every nerve came alive in anticipation…

The cart hit a bump, jostling them apart and breaking the spell. Mary turned away suddenly. Cold dribbles of melting snow, shaken from the branches above as a startled bird fled, stung her face. But the icy droplets couldn’t dispel the hot flush rising in her cheeks. And their seemingly mutual physical attraction couldn’t reconcile the differences between them.

I’ve been a complete fool.

She fought to feign nonchalance as she at last answered his rebuttal. “You are undeniably correct in your assessment of me. I would indeed want my affection returned in full measure. As such, I’m forced to admit both my selfishness and our incompatibility. With the exception of the Almighty Himself, Whom we are commanded to love first, I want no competition for my husband’s devotion.”

Steeling herself, she added, “Thank you for being patient enough to take the time and make me see the truth.”

His brows shot skyward. “I must confess, that was…not the response I anticipated.”

Mary knew all too well the sort of response he’d expected. But she’d give him no tears.

I’m done crying over men who don’t want me.

It was an effort to dredge up a smile, but she did, though it was tight and shallow, at best. “Rest easy, Reverend. You’ll have no more trouble out of me.”

Part of Devlin was glad to have at last accomplished his goal. Another part—by far the greater part—rebelled against it.

Vehemently.

This is for Danny. I must behave as he would. Still, it took every ounce of will not to turn and take Miss Tomblin in his arms, consequences be damned.

“If you wish my continued assistance with your weekly visits, you have but to say so,” she went on, oblivious to his inner struggle. “However, I think it would be easier on my parents’ expectations if we simply sever our association. As such, you had best drop me off at the gate instead of walking me all the way to my door, as I believe they are planning to ask you to dinner later this week.”
All the warmth had gone from her voice and her eyes. It was as if they’d never laughed together, never argued, never nearly kissed. She’d dismissed him from her heart. It was for the best, but it rankled.

*It’s Daniel she’s dismissing, not you, dolt!* He wanted to believe that if she knew him—the *real* him—she’d never be able to walk away so easily. But the truth of the matter was that if she knew the real man beneath this cassock, she’d never speak to him, much less consider him for a husband. And she’d be well within her rights to refuse him address. Mary Tomblin was a decent woman, and he was unworthy of her in every respect.

Knowing it made him feel no better. In fact, it made him quite wretched.

At last, he forced himself to speak. “I think you must know best, Miss Tomblin.” Each word was a searing knife plunged into his chest. But she deserved to walk away from this with as little injury as possible. “I’ve been blessed to have you as part of my congregation,” he added awkwardly. “I really do hope you find someone who will make you truly happy.”

Her nod of acceptance was firm and her gray gaze unveiled by tears. When she replied, her voice was calm and quiet. “Thank you, Reverend. I shall always remember the time we’ve spent together with great fondness. When you are ready, I hope you find the right lady to stand by your side.” Her mouth twisted in a wry half smile. “One who won’t be jealous of her husband’s parishioners.”

Devlin knew better than to buy the act, but it was better for her dignity to let her think she’d fooled him. The remainder of their journey was made in silence—at least on the outside. Inside, he was full of questions.

Why hadn’t Daniel given this woman a chance? In Devlin’s case, his main attractant to women was money. He was, to put it bluntly, filthy rich. But, as the lady herself had pointed out, Daniel was a humble vicar, a man of modest means who would require a practical wife capable of running a household with economy. Her interest in his brother had been genuine, not mercenary. She’d thought him kind and caring, a true gentleman worthy of her regard, worthy of her devotion.

For the first time in his life, Devlin thought of his twin with both envy and contempt. How blind did Danny have to be not to see what a treasure she was? His brother was a coward, plain and simple—a craven fool for running from what was possibly the best thing that could ever have landed in this backwater village.

Such thoughts rattled around inside his skull like dice in a cup, allowing him no peace. Half a dozen times, he opened his mouth to speak. Half a dozen times, he closed it again and bit his tongue to keep it still. Its tip was sore by the time they pulled up before her front gate.

His companion turned to face him one last time. “I—I don’t think I’ll be attending the service this evening,” she stammered, her cheeks pinking. “I just…need a little time.”

“Of course.” Inside, he squirmed with discomfort. Clearing his throat, he nodded formally. “Goodnight, Miss Tomblin.”

“Goodbye, Reverend.”

Stepping down, she went in, shut the gate behind her, and retreated down the gravel path. Her head was high, her back straight, and she didn’t look back even once. As her front door shut, blocking his view, it seemed as though all the color left the world. Even the vivid red breast of the robin that lit on the postern suddenly seemed leached of its brightness.

He’d done it. He’d driven her away. But Devlin felt no sense of accomplishment. Foolishly hoping to see her face appear at a window, he lingered a few minutes more. The robin sang out as twilight deepened, and a chill wind at last impelled him to seek the shelter of the vicarage.

Yes, he’d done what Daniel wanted. But it wasn’t what *he* wanted. What he wanted was for Mary
Tomblin to look on him with affection again. He wanted to see the soft light of it in her eyes, to feel its warmth steal over him. He’d grown to care for her, enough that he hadn’t wanted to hurt her, but it had been impossible to part ways without some pain.

_Had I let it go on, her wounds would be far worse. This was for her own good. Daniel does not love her, and if she knew the truth about what we’ve done, she’d hate us both._

She’d called him “ungrateful,” having no idea how true it was. What reason had he to be grateful for a woman’s love? The ladies had always favored him. As a child, they’d doted on him even when he’d been a terror. As a young man, the village girls had looked at him with calf eyes. A fair few had invited him into their beds once he’d gotten old enough for that sort of thing, and he’d gladly accepted. But he’d known it wasn’t love. How could it be love when they’d hardly spoken save for a few words here and there during their clandestine couplings?

But Mary…Mary hadn’t been pretending. Oh, at first she’d been like all the rest, taking him—or Daniel, rather—at face value. She’d confessed to seeing a man in a vicar’s garb, to making assumptions about his character based on it, and to being enamored of the image he presented. And then she’d insisted on making things right and getting to know the real man beneath the collar.

Unfortunately, the man she’d gotten acquainted with was the wrong man.

_And yet…she was fond of my company._ Good sense ruthlessly snuffed out the errant thought. _Don’t lie to yourself. She’s fond of the man you were pretending to be._

He’d grown fond of her, too. _Too fond, confound it! This really is for the best._ It wouldn’t do to dwell on his liking for a woman whose heart he couldn’t hope to win as himself. She’d called him “undeserving” and it, too, was true. He’d never be worthy of someone like her. Not if he spent a lifetime trying to make amends for the path he’d trodden.
That evening, he missed her face during the service. When he inquired, he was told by her mother that she’d come in from their outing complaining of the bitter cold and a headache. She was at home, indisposed.

That night, he tried to put nib to paper and relate to Daniel all that had transpired, his frustrations, guilt, and dissatisfaction with his management of the matter. The crumpled-up page was in the fire before the ink had dried on the last sentence. Half a dozen sheets of parchment later, he realized it was hopeless. In the end, he wrote only that he was making fine progress, and inquired as to Daniel’s luck with the deal and Miss St. Peters. Sealing the note, he laid it aside to post in the morning.

I’ll give it a couple of weeks before declaring the matter closed. Just to make certain. After all, Miss Tomblin was a particularly stubborn specimen, and women were known to change their minds. He had to be sure. For Daniel’s sake.

Despite Devlin’s weariness, sleep evaded him. And not just because of the giant new bruise on his leg where the gate had hit him. For a long while he lay in the dark, reliving the last conversation he’d had with Mary, picking it apart. What might have happened had he spoken differently? Their almost-kiss haunted him and made him restless.

He awakened to a cheerless gray morning that did nothing to improve his mood. Taking his letter to the inn, he was pleased to receive one in return from Daniel. He skimmed over the grousing about his excessive lifestyle and the questionable company he kept, his only real concern being that no one suspected anything was amiss, and was informed that his brother had succeeded in fooling his London acquaintances.

There was no mention of Miss St. Peters, and Devlin couldn’t help wondering if his brother had done the same as he and simply neglected to mention any female-related complications. It was an uncharitable thought, and he dismissed it at once. Unlike himself, Daniel had always been the sort to want to talk about it whenever things went pear-shaped. It’s what made him an excellent vicar and a complete disaster at cards.

The days following managed only to further sink his spirits. Time maintained a steady march at a snail’s pace, and though he tried to busy himself, nothing he did made it go by any faster. With every outing, he found himself hoping to catch a glimpse of Mary in passing.

At the mercantile, he searched every nook for her familiar profile. Nothing.

Remembering what she’d said about scheduling visits to her newfound friends during the week, he paid call on Mrs. Stone that Wednesday to check on the progress of the repairs, thinking Mary might be there. She wasn’t.

He visited the patisserie, the village’s tiny bookstore, even the milliner. But Mary Tomblin was nowhere to be found.

On the fourth day of his fruitless efforts to “accidentally” encounter her, he spied her friend, Miss Augusta Benfield, coming out of the apothecary. Putting on his best “vicar face,” Devlin hobbled his way over. “Miss Benfield, what a pleasure to see you.”

There was no wariness in the girl’s eyes as she smiled and made her curtsy. “Likewise, Reverend.”

He inquired after her family’s health, received the expected reply, and then carefully broached the subject of Mary. “Miss Tomblin was not at the Sunday evening service with her family, and her mother said she’d taken a headache. I do hope she is not still ill?”
Miss Benfield’s smile broadened knowingly. “She is quite well, I assure you—although I believe she’s feeling the effects of the inclement weather most keenly. Mary likes the outdoors, as you must already know, but her mother insists that she remain inside while it’s so cold for fear she’ll come down with worse than a headache.”

“Well, I suppose the lady must know what’s best for her daughter.” Damn. He’d sounded as petulant as a child after being forbidden a visit to the sweet shop. Embarrassment warmed the tips of his ears as the girl’s eyes softened with sympathy.

“I’m sure she would not mind a visit,” volunteered Miss Benfield. “I know her mother was disappointed when you failed to visit on Sunday after your calls. I believe she intended to invite you to dinner this week.”

So Mary had been telling the truth. “Ah, yes, well…”

“I’m on my way there now, if you’d like to accompany me.” She eyed his crutches with some doubt. “That is, if you can manage?”

Good sense told him to decline as she awaited his answer, but his lips ignored the command to be still in favor of responding with: “I would be delighted to escort you, Miss Benfield, though I fear I won’t be able to stay long. And we need not walk—my trap is just around the corner.”

“I cannot believe it,” Mary whispered, her fingers tightening on the window sash. She’d been reading on her bed when she’d heard Augie’s voice outside her bedroom window, and had wondered who on earth she might be talking to. Now she knew. Lo and behold, there he was, struggling up the front walk on his crutches beside her best friend, bold as broad daylight, as if she’d never told him to stay away.

What does he mean, coming here now after the conversation we had? And on foot, in his condition! Anger surged through her as his laughter drifted up from below. Hot on its heels, another, darker emotion assaulted her as she heard Augie respond in kind.

Stop it. She’s in love with Mr. May. Even so, it was impossible to ignore the spike of envy that pierced her at the lack of wariness in his face as he regarded her friend. It was plain to see their rapport was one of comfortable amity, free of any strain or distrust. They appeared for all the world like bosom companions.

And he looked like no other vicar she’d ever known. His was the face of a gentleman at leisure with not a care in the world—not that of a concerned shepherd burdened with the cares of his flock.

It occurred to her then that he’d changed significantly since they’d first met. She hadn’t noticed until after having distanced herself from him, but his bearing was different—and it had nothing to do with his broken leg. There was nothing of his former humility in the way he now held himself. He looked like a man accustomed to command rather than one called to be a servant.

Not only was his bearing altered, but his speech had become more direct, and ever since Christmas he’d begun to look her in the eyes when they spoke. Just as he was now doing with Augie. Again, she felt jealousy’s sharp sting as he threw back his head and laughed again just before the pair disappeared beneath the eaves.

Fury mounted in her breast. That he should laugh so with Augie, of all people, elicited a strange pain in her chest and put her in a black mood. Below, she heard the front door close with a solid thump. Whirling from the window, she darted to the mirror to check her appearance. Any second now she’d receive a summons to come and greet their guests.

One question rose to the fore, pushing aside all others: Why had he come? What could he possibly
have to say to her that was so important it couldn’t wait until Sunday? Her parents would surely make
the wrong assumption, even if—perhaps especially because—he’d arrived with her best friend.

She patted a stray wisp of hair back into place and straightened her fichu where it had gone askew
as she’d lain reading. The color in her cheeks was high, but there was nothing to be done about it.

*I ought to have confided in Augie and told her everything. Then she might have known better
than to drag him along. For surely that must be what happened. He’d never willingly come here.
Augie, no doubt still thinking her in love with him, must have coerced him into this unexpected visit.
He *must* know how his presence would mortify her!*

The anticipated knock on her bedroom door told her it was time to face him and find out what he
wanted. For the last several days, she’d thought of little else but what had passed between them, and
she’d concluded that her own behavior to date had been full of error.

Never again would she make such a fool of herself as to hang at a man’s heels, waiting for him to
toss her any scrap of affection. He *was* right. She’d never be satisfied with only a piece of her
husband’s heart.

With all the dignity she could muster, Mary slowly descended the stairs and made her way to the
salon where waited her mother and their callers. *Damned if I’ll hurry just because he’s here!*

When she entered, it was Augie to whom she first paid her respects. Only after learning her friend
was in perfect health and happiness did she deign to address her escort. “Reverend Wayward, how
good of you to come. To what do we owe the pleasure of this visit?” It was as polite a greeting as
could be, but there was no welcome in it.

And he knew it. His eyes narrowed a fraction, but his smile remained fixed. “I was concerned for
you, Miss Tomblin. Miss Benfield told me you’d been confined after having come home with a
headache after our last outing. I was so sorry to hear it, and afraid you might not want to accompany
me again this Sunday.”

The hint was as broad as the Atlantic, and the remorse in his eyes was her undoing. Her hardened
heart softened like tallow. “Your worry is needless, Reverend. I’m fine, as you can see. My mother,”
she glanced at Mama, who was looking on with wondering eyes, “has insisted on my staying in, but
my constitution is hearty. Surely, I’m cured of any ailment that might have threatened. Is that not so,
Mama?”

Her mother’s eyebrows inched higher still. “Indeed,” she agreed, her gaze flicking between them,
assessing. “I believe she may venture out again, provided the weather is not too bitter and she is
appropriately attired—though I should still not like her exposed to the cold for very long.”

Wayward, who’d stood awkwardly to greet Mary, didn’t take his eyes off her as he answered his
hostess. “I shall certainly err on the side of caution when determining whether or not to allow it,
madam. I would never willingly cause harm to your daughter.”

*What does that mean? Has he changed his mind?* There was no time to decide whether the
apology implicit in his tone was for her fictitious malady or his having injured her heart, for her
mother again began to speak.

“I’m so glad you came by today,” she was saying. “I thought to see you when you brought Mary
home on Sunday, but she said you were all in a rush and had not the time for a visit, and with your
leg…well. Do sit, Reverend,” she adjured. “I was sorely disappointed—I had intended to invite you
to take supper with us one evening this week. We would be honored to have you as our guest this
Friday—if you are feeling up to it, that is.”

Mary’s heart all but seized. *Oh, sweet Lord above, help me!*

“I would be delighted,” answered the vicar, easing himself down into the nearest chair to perch on
its edge as if poised for flight. “And most grateful. I grow weary of my own culinary skills—or lack thereof,” he added with a chagrined laugh.

All the longing Mary had thought to suppress thrilled to life at the sound. Lust, too, rekindled in a blaze as the fine lines at the corners of his dark eyes deepened. While her mother nattered on, she reflected on her strange predicament. Was this visit a show of true interest, or merely the result of guilt, a sop for his conscience? Clearly, he felt bad about how things had ended between them, but it couldn’t be his only reason for showing up at her house and effectively negating their previous accord. Could it? She had to know. “I cannot help but wonder at your change of heart,” she ventured, earning a startled look from her mother. “When last we spoke, you led me to believe you would not consider allowing me to accompany you again until spring. You were quite adamant. What changed your mind?”

In the silence that followed her statement, she heard the clock’s tick and the rustle of her mother’s skirts as she nervously smoothed them.

“I thought about our…disagreement for a long time afterward,” he said at last, his blue gaze piercing. “In retrospect, the vehemence of my reaction was perhaps unwarranted. I can attribute it only to fear.” He flicked a tense glance at her mother. “It was my responsibility to keep you safe, and I felt I’d failed. We should not have ventured outside the village proper with it so cold, and I was wroth with myself for not having used better judgment with regard to your health. I humbly ask your forgiveness for both my poor guardianship and undeserved severity.”

Inside, Mary felt all wobbly and lightheaded, as if she’d forgone several meals. “Of course I forgive you,” she managed, fighting back an urge to crow in triumph. He does like me! So much that he hadn’t been able to stay away, despite his fears. Why, the man was actually blushing! She realized she was staring and quickly looked down. “I cannot find fault with you for having my best interests at heart.”

The set of his shoulders eased, and she knew then that he’d been genuinely worried over how she’d react to his apology. How dear was his awkwardness, how charming his humility in coming here to make amends!

Be calm, Mary. Don’t bungle it. “I’ll admit I was saddened by the thought of not seeing everyone until the weather warmed,” she said. “Your visit today has made me most happy.” Finally, she allowed herself to smile. “I shall be able to return Mr. Messingham’s book myself and see how Mrs. Small has enjoyed my gift, among other things.”

Clearing his throat, Wayward nodded. “Indeed. Seeing a friend’s joy firsthand is always best, but I hope you won’t mind if I relate a friend’s good news on their behalf?”

“How pleased I am indeed!” she exclaimed softly, meaning every word. “Thank you for bringing me such news in person. I shall be glad to visit her this Sunday and see her and the children warm and cozy.”

Movement to his left caught her attention, and she marked Augie’s smug look. Mary owed her a debt of gratitude for having facilitated this encounter. An idea formed, one that would repay Augie’s kindness—and serve another purpose. “Dear Augie, won’t you also join us for dinner this Friday?” She ignored her mother’s incredulous look and Wayward’s perplexed frown. “Together, we’ll make a most cheerful party. Oh, do say yes!” She gave the tiniest nod of encouragement.

Augie, stunned, stammered acceptance. “I would love to join you. Of course I’ll come.”
“Excellent! I’ll be sure to have the card table laid for us—I owe you a good trouncing. Perhaps you’ll join us, Reverend, if it does not offend your morals to play for sweets?” She watched his expression change as it occurred to him what she’d just done. By removing any opportunity for privacy between them, there could no longer be any expectation on her parents’ part. She’d effectively conceded the field.

Now it was up to him to make the first move. His behavior would inform hers. If it was meant to be, then it was only a matter of time before he declared himself. She would wait until he was “ready”—or until her parents made her board a London-bound carriage. “What say you, Reverend?” she prompted before the silence could grow awkward.

A cat-that-ate-the-cream smile stole over his lips. “I have no objection to a friendly game—as long as you have no objection to losing your stakes. Not many people know it, but I have a great liking for sweets.”
Bloody hell. In his cocksure pride, he’d momentarily forgotten himself, and from the look on her face, Devlin knew she’d mistaken his words for a flirtation. Was it not? Silencing his conscience, he decided the best thing he could do now was play innocent. “Marzipan is my Achilles’ heel. What is yours?”

“I…ah, Turkish Delight,” she replied, visibly flustered. “Papa sometimes brings me a box from London—a rare treat. Which I suppose must be good, or I would eat little else.” Her laugh sounded strained. “I fear I’m a terrible glutton when it comes to sweets.”

Feeling awkward was not something Devlin experienced often, and he didn’t much care for it. Unfortunately, he’d felt it more often than not of late. Focus. “I think it not a sin to occasionally indulge one’s sweet tooth. As such, I shall feel no guilt whatsoever in enjoying my winnings.”

Her rain-gray eyes lit with mischief. “Such a bold assumption of victory seems a bit premature, don’t you think? I should warn you that I’m a skilled player.”

Not as good as this old gambler! He bit his tongue to keep the words behind his teeth. “I again crave your pardon, Miss Tomblin. If there is anything I’ve learned during our time together, it is that I should never underestimate you. I shall enjoy pitting myself against a worthy opponent.”

“As shall I.” Now it was her turn to smile—a slow upturning of the corners of her lush mouth. A bolt of desire lanced down through his nethers, which instantly tightened in response. George’s balls… Time to leave—before I dig myself into a hole from which I cannot escape! “I look forward to exceeding your expectations. But for the moment, I fear I must leave you to attend to my duties.”

Taking up his crutches, he rose. “Ladies, it has been a most pleasant visit. I look forward to seeing you again Friday.”

The way her face fell told him he’d be missed. Again, part of him rejoiced in triumph. Again, good sense told him he was a bloody fool. He shouldn’t have come here today, and he definitely ought not to have accepted the invitation to return.

The issue was that he could make her dislike Daniel, but he couldn’t make himself dislike her. And telling himself to stay away from her was proving to be much like a fox telling itself to stay away from the chickens. She was an irresistible lure.

Farewells were made, during which he couldn’t take his eyes off Mary. The way he lingered on the threshold, stretching the moment, should have mortified him. He was no love-struck schoolboy to be hanging about on a woman’s doorstep! And yet, the moment he put her house behind him, he felt a pull to go back. He refused to give in to it.

I’ll not behave like some calf-eyed lackwit! He’d come only to assure himself that he hadn’t done her any permanent injury.

Then why did you accept the invitation to dine? It would have been rude to decline, but he could’ve made some plausible excuse.

As he approached the front gate, the tingling between his shoulder blades grew impossible to ignore. He looked back.

There at the window stood Mary. Their eyes met, but she didn’t turn away. Raising her palm, she bid him a final farewell.

Devlin’s heart began racing as though he’d just sprinted a mile. Raising his hand, he replied in kind, accidentally dropping one of his crutches. Behind the glass, her lips curved in a sweet smile as
she laughed. Before he could stop himself, he smiled back.

_Idiot!_ Forcing himself to focus on picking up his stupid crutch and wrangling the blasted gate open, he let himself out. With each awkward, unsteady step that carried him down the path, his silent self-castigation grew more vehement.

_George’s arse!_ Jerking the knot loose with angry fingers, he untied the horse and then made his way around to clamber up onto the box, again managing to drop his crutch in the process.

_What the devil is the matter with me?_ A quarter of an hour was all it had taken to render all the work he’d done to get her to leave off an utter waste of time and effort. He was right back where he’d started.

Scowling, he urged the horse to walk on, desperately trying to think of a way to salvage the situation. But all he could think of was her. The way her moon-gray eyes had sparkled again once he’d mended things between them. The way her lips had quirked, bringing out the dimples at their corners. He wondered what it would be like to kiss those impish little hollows.

Again, his nethers tightened. Again, he let out a quiet stream of invective. Despite being half frozen, he had an unrelenting erection. He quickened the pace, determined to get home as fast as possible.

Had Harper’s Grove boasted a brothel, he’d pay it call this instant, broken leg and all. As it did not, his only option was self-abuse. He hadn’t had to satisfy himself since his school years and didn’t much relish the prospect of doing it now, but he needed some bloody relief before his wedding tackle turned blue.

“Good afternoon, Reverend!” called a villager, pausing in the act of dumping out a pail of wash water to offer him a cheerful wave from her doorstep.

It was a sharp reminder that he was playing the part of a clergyman. Pasting on a benign smile, he waved back. “Good afternoon, Mrs. Waite!” He drove on past, thankful for the long folds of his coat, which concealed the bulge at his crotch.

The door to the inn swung open just as he passed it, and laughter, gruff and raucous, drifted from within. An almost overwhelming urge to join the men in their merrymaking nearly brought him to a halt. He’d give just about anything to be able to go in there right now and have a pint in their blessedly uncomplicated company.

Gritting his teeth, he pressed on. At the very least, he’d have a brandy when he got home—and be damned his promise to Daniel. There were just some things a man couldn’t handle without the aid of a little brandy, and women most definitely fell into that category. Besides, the vicarage was cozy and above all, _private_. No one would know.

As soon as he made it in and divested himself of his overcoat, it was straight to the bottle to pour a large glass. As the amber fluid blazed a warm trail down his throat, he contemplated his predicament.

Every time he closed his eyes, she appeared. _Is her image emblazoned on the ruddy insides of my eyelids?_ Downing the brandy, he poured himself another and grabbed a random book from the shelf, determined to drive her from his thoughts by sheer dint of will.

He’d just settled in before the fire when a firm knock at the door shattered the quiet. Cursing softly, he laid aside his book and brandy to go attend his guest. It was all he could do to repress a groan at the sight of Mrs. Greer, pregnant to the point of fairly popping, standing at his door. Another groan piled up behind the first when she lifted a kerchief to her puffy, red, tear-filled eyes.

“Oh, Reverend!” she burst out, barging in past him. “He’s gone and taken a mistress. I just know he has!”

For the next twenty minutes, Devlin listened to the distraught woman pour out her woes with hardly a pause for breath. Finally, when she slowed enough to gulp in some air, he was able to get a word in
edgewise. “Now, Mrs. Greer, your husband is likely down at the pub with his mates, taking a moment’s well-deserved respite after a long day’s work.” Mr. Greer’s voice had been one of those raised in happy song at the pub when he’d passed by. “He’ll doubtless be home in time for dinner.”

This subtle hint resulted in a soggy tirade about how she was expected to manage everything on her own—hard enough when she wasn’t carrying a babe—while caring for their four young children.

His neglected glass of brandy beckoned, and he eyed it with longing. When she finally paused again, Devlin quoted scripture praising womanly forbearance and forgiveness, thinking to appeal to her piety to send her off feeling both acquitted and appeased.

*That* worked about as well as kicking a hornet’s nest. There was just no reasoning with her, so he kept his mouth shut and let her have the floor. Daniel had told him that sometimes people just needed to unburden themselves in order to feel better, and they came to him because they knew he would never repeat what was said.

As Mrs. Greer’s shrill voice filled the space and set his teeth on edge, Devlin retreated into thoughts of Mary. Would she transform into a jealous shrew after marriage? He didn’t think so, despite her assertion to the contrary. No. She’d be too well loved to ever fear for her place in his heart.

*My heart?* Dismayed, he shoved the errant thought aside and attributed it to fatigue. It would not be *his* heart that held her trust, but someone else’s. Someone who wasn’t a fraud.

Even as he thought this, he couldn’t help imagining being married to Mary.

To come home every day to her smiles, her laughter. To enjoy quiet evenings spent in her company instead of down at the club. To anticipate every night rather than drinking it away, and to wake up beside her every morning.

He lost himself in such happy musings until Mrs. Greer finally grew hoarse and ended her tearful rant.

With a wistful glance at the window, which showed a sky just beginning to darken with the onset of twilight, he meekly ventured, “I imagine if you were to return home, you’d find your husband waiting. Or perhaps he’s already gone to look for you? I should think, given your condition, he’d be quite worried at your prolonged absence.”

Her watery gaze darted to the window, and she gasped. “Merciful heaven! I did not mean to stay so long. I crave your pardon for keeping you from your rest, Reverend—I simply could not take any more of her carping.” She explained that her mother-in-law had come to help with preparations for the babe—and had been there for nearly a month without lifting a finger.

Comprehension dawned. Now he knew why Mr. Greer had been at the pub instead of at home. Devlin looked his guest straight in the eye and deadpanned, “How her poor husband must miss her. Surely your oldest daughter could help with the rest of the preparations, allowing your dear mother-in-law to return to her beloved husband’s side sooner?”

Her eyes widened, and a hint of a smile quirked one corner of her mouth. “Do you know, I think you might be right, Reverend.”

Devlin allowed himself a small smile in return. “Why don’t you talk it over with your husband when you have a moment’s privacy tonight and see what he thinks?”

“Oh, I shall, Reverend. I *certainly* shall.” She stood, supporting the heavy underside of her gravid belly with one hand. “Thank you for hearing me. I’m sorry I took so much of your time.”

“Not at all, Mrs. Greer.” He ushered her to the door. “Go in peace, and may the Lord look favorably upon you.” Holding his smile as she turned back to wave took serious effort, and it was with great relief that he finally closed the door, plucked out the stiff white collar binding his throat,
and flung it across the room. “I’m not meant for this,” he exclaimed aloud. “I’m meant to be in London swilling expensive brandy and tupping expensive women!”

But that thought just made him even unhappier. He was no longer that person, and he knew it. What sort of man was he becoming, then?

_Not a bloody priest, that much is certain._ What did he really want out of life? He had money. He had renown, for all the wrong reasons. He had his pick of women.

With one exception.

Mary. He’d let himself think about her all evening in terms he could ill afford to acknowledge even to himself. Yet, he’d done it. He’d willingly wallowed in woolgathering of the worst kind, indulging in visions of blissful domesticity with a woman who didn’t even know his real name.

Worse, he’d allowed himself to contemplate a different life, one he had no chance of ever attaining. At least, not with her.

Again, he wondered what might’ve happened had they met under different circumstances, say while he and his twin were walking about the village together. He imagined how her eyes would’ve widened the way so many people’s did upon seeing them together. Might he have been able to wrest her attention from his oblivious brother? Charm her into transferring her affections to him instead?

He let out a snort of self-contempt. _I’m the sort of man she’d cross to the other side of the street to avoid having to greet in passing._ Indeed, he was everything she did not desire.

But perhaps, with time and a bit of brotherly assistance from his twin, they might have gotten to know each other and become friends. _And then maybe, just maybe…_

_Maybe what?_ intruded the cold voice of reason. _Maybe she’d have fallen in love with a hardened rake?_ Because that’s what he was. He knew the time spent in his brother’s shoes had changed him, but not enough to merit the high regard of one such as Mary.

Even if he were to confess to her the truth this instant and beg forgiveness, it would be to no avail. She’d never trust a man who’d so thoroughly deceived her. And the very idea of what might happen if she told anyone about the ruse was enough to make him break out in a nervous sweat.

_Stay the course. There is no other choice that does not lead to disaster. This is simply how it must be._

No matter how much he might wish it otherwise.

Oh, how he wished Daniel had simply been blunt with her to begin with! Had he done so, all this doubt and discomfort might have been avoided.

Anger seethed in his gut, burning there like a hot coal. Anger at Daniel for being such a coward. Anger at himself for being an even bigger one.

…

_Friday_

Mary fussied with her appearance, smoothing a wrinkle out of her gown’s skirt, picking at the lace on her cuffs, and pinching her cheeks to refresh their bloom.

“You’ll bruise your face if you keep doing that,” warned Augie from her perch on the windowsill.

Turning, Mary faced her with unconcealed anxiety. “Do you really think I have cause for hope?”

“Dear Mary, there is always cause for hope. In truth, I think our good reverend is in imminent danger of falling madly in love with you, if he is not already. I saw the way he looked at you.”

There was no need to pinch her cheeks to make them rosy now. “He _did_ turn and look back at the house as he was leaving,” Mary mused, smiling.
“My Mr. May does that,” said Augie, eyes alight. “Every time, without fail.”

Mary adopted a dry expression. “If your Mr. May does not soon bend knee and ask for your hand, I shall have to speak with him.” A look of such dismay filled her friend’s face that she relented, laughing. “It’s high time he spoke his mind and made known his intent.”

Instead of defending her beau’s lack of urgency, however, Augie dropped her gaze to the floor, blushing furiously. “I believe he shall, and soon. He has taken himself to Whitlow this week and will be gone several days. He would not say what was his errand, but I suspect he went to purchase a ring. He has been hinting at his purpose for nigh on a fortnight now. Even my mother believes he is soon to offer for my hand.”

“Oh, Augie! How happy I shall be when you bring news confirming it,” Mary said, embracing her. She did not give voice to the qualm in her heart. The man who’d betrayed her had done something similar just before dashing her heart to pieces. Reason told her Mr. May was not that sort of man—she’d seen him with Augie and knew he’d given her his heart in whole. Even so, her distrust persisted, and she worried on behalf of her friend.

Downstairs, Mary waited for their guest to arrive. Again she smoothed her rose and amber brocade skirts. The sun was already low. What if he didn’t come? What if he did, but was returned to his former detachment? She didn’t think she’d be able to withstand it.

When the bell rang at the front door, her heart gave a great leap. He had come! Now to ascertain his state of mind. The moment their eyes met across the salon, she knew his detachment was a thing of the past. But this knowledge did little to calm her spirit. Dark circles beneath his eyes showed he’d not been sleeping well, and his uncertain gaze told of a conflicted mind.

He’d come, but he was anything but happy to be here. Fear crept in on shadowy feet to infect her heart. Forcing a smile, she rose and came forward to greet him. Leaning on his cane—he’d traded in his crutches—he bent over her hand, careful not to touch its back with his lips. Even so, she felt the flesh there ignite. Just his nearness was enough to elicit longing of a most indecent sort. No, she didn’t need to pinch her cheeks anymore. Heat rose in them readily enough in his presence.

“Reverend Wayward, how delighted we are to have you with us this evening,” she said dutifully, withdrawing.

Setting aside his support, he sank into a chair, folded his hands in his lap, and gazed everywhere but at her as he delivered a polite response. Look at me, she silently cried, willing him to do so. But his eyes remained fixed elsewhere.

No. I will not allow this to happen. I will not lose him!

He’s not yours to lose. He never has been, retorted the logical part of her mind.

She didn’t want to listen to logic, however. “How nice it is that the weather appears to be clearing. Perhaps it will be warmer by the time Sunday arrives.” The weather, Mary? Is that the best you can come up with to engage him?

“Indeed,” he replied, finally raising his eyes. But they were unreadable. “It appears as though winter may not keep its grip on us for much longer. I saw a few snowdrops blooming on my way here.”

Panic pounded against her rib cage. If spring came early, she’d be leaving for London sooner than planned. Did he hope for such an event? Or was he, like her, dreading it? “I suppose the emergence of the crocuses will tell us when true spring is on our doorstep. They never fail to herald its imminent arrival.”

He shifted slightly, sat up a bit straighter, and cleared his throat. “Too right, you are.” Some
unnamed emotion sparked in his eyes, or was it her imagination? “I’ll wait to pack away my heavy coat, then, lest I find myself wanting.”

The heart that had raced with trepidation a moment ago now beat with growing hope and burgeoning affection as her father took up the thread and began relating plans for the garden landscaping at the new bridge he was building. Ostensibly, such plantings were meant to anchor the soil, but her father both had an eye for beauty and loved flowers. When the men rose to continue their discussion by the salon window, she, Augie, and her mother clustered together to talk among themselves.

Her mother wore a satisfied smile. “I begin to wonder if we’ll even need to go to London this Season,” she murmured with a meaningful glance in the gentlemen’s direction. “You may find yourself making the trip without us, Augusta.”

Augie shot Mary a conspiratorial smile. “I have faith that all will be as it ought.”

They talked then of the upcoming Belmont ball and other trivial matters until a servant announced dinner.

Sitting across from the reverend was likely less disturbing than being seated at his side would have been, but nonetheless, Mary found it unnerving. For one, his gaze fixed on her whenever he wasn’t talking to someone else. She prayed nothing got stuck in her teeth.

The conversation was pleasant, if a bit stilted at first. But by the time the second course was served and everyone had taken some wine, it relaxed into comfortable geniality.

If Mary was embarrassed by some of the stories her parents told about her childhood, it was mitigated by the growing warmth in the reverend’s eyes whenever he looked at her. They were especially blue tonight, sparkling with good humor and something else that made her pulse quicken. She’d suffer any number of “Mary in nappies” stories if it meant he looked at her so.

After dinner when they retired to the drawing room, she showed off her skill at the harpsichord. Her fingers flew over the keys, and her sweet, high soprano soared, every note in perfect pitch. Again, he seemed unable to look anywhere else.

When she was finished, he surprised all by offering to play as well, with one condition—Mary had to turn the pages and accompany him. Blushing, she happily acquiesced. Although she knew he had a fine voice, he declined to sing with her, but rather allowed her to carry the vocal melody alone. She marked that his eyes rested neither on the keys nor the sheet music, but on her.

He must know this piece by heart...

The world around her receded until there was naught but the two of them and the music. His shoulder brushed against her arm like a caress as he played, eliciting a pleasant shiver each time. The act of reaching across him to flip the page brought them closer than they’d been all evening. Her fingers itched to touch him instead of the sheet music. Her lips tingled, and the thought of him kissing them made her tense with want.

At the end of the song, he simply sat, seemingly oblivious to their audience’s applause, and stared at her as if she were something new and entirely foreign. A flush heated her cheeks. Could he tell what she’d been thinking?

Augie came forward to take her place, and Mary sat down with her parents. She tried to slow her runaway heart, but every time she looked at him it seemed only to want to race. He and Augie played well together, but she noted with intense pleasure that he kept his eyes trained on the music and did not look up at his accompanist until the song’s end.

Then it was her mother’s turn to play. Mary was delighted when the reverend chose to sit beside her. “I do hope you are enjoying yourself this evening,” she murmured, taking the opportunity to lean
toward him so he could hear her without having to raise her voice. Although they sat far enough apart to satisfy propriety, she swore she could feel the heat of him across the scant inches that separated them. Again, desire stabbed through her.

“Indeed,” he replied. “I have not had such a wonderful evening since before Christmas.”

“Do you not visit them every weekend?”

His face colored slightly, and he nodded. “Normally I do, but not since the accident. And that is a routine family affair. Tonight I am being treated with good food, beautiful music, and excellent company untainted by sibling squabbles or ill news from distant relations. To experience such unblemished enjoyment is rare for me.”

Inside, her heart sang a song of triumph in counterpoint to the music being played. “Then I hope you’ll join us often. I know my parents will not object if I extend to you an open invitation.”

Suddenly, his gaze became shuttered, his manner subdued. “That is most generous. But I’m uncertain as to how often I can manage such an extended visit. As much as I took pleasure in this evening’s enjoyments, I cannot neglect my duties to the parish. There is a great deal of preparation to be done before Easter.”

Again, the thought of spring’s arrival cast a shadow over her heart. “I’ll gladly help you if it means you are free of an evening to grace us with your company.”

“Tonight was special, and I shall always remember it,” he said softly. His mouth then hardened. “But I’m afraid it’s impossible for me to commit to anything further.”

The sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach increased. He was speaking as if this had been a one-time event, almost as if he were saying goodbye. “It does not have to be,” she offered. “I’m sure we can find a way.”

But it was already too late.

“No, we cannot,” he said crisply. “Some things simply cannot be altered.” Gone was the warmth of a moment ago, and in its place was cool, distant cordiality. “Purely social events like tonight are to be savored, for they are few and far between for a clergyman. But rather than regret that it must be so, I will instead look forward to our Sunday outing, weather permitting, of course.”

_Sunday. Yes_. She relaxed again, though not completely. Something was wrong. Something was keeping him from allowing them to grow closer. Or at least, it was attempting to do so. _I won’t let it._

“Until Sunday, then. I sewed some doll clothes to give to little Beth,” she said, moving on to a safe topic. “And after telling Cook of our efforts, she has donated five jars of last summer’s strawberry preserves from her personal store.”

“That’s very kind,” he said, sounding oddly deflated. “A taste of summer will be greatly appreciated during these bleak months. I’ve all but forgotten what the sun on my face feels like.” He swallowed and looked away. “Sometimes, it seems like all I’ll ever know is winter.”

All the joy seemed to have bled out of him. She ached to reach out, turn his face toward her, and make him smile again. But such was not possible in their present company. _It would not be possible even if we were alone_, she sternly reminded herself. He would see it as an impropriety.

She waited in silence until he looked askance at her. What she couldn’t communicate through touch or direct speech, she did with her eyes, seeking out and holding his gaze. Her words were chosen with great care. “Though it be gray now, the warmth of the sun lives in my memory. It can never be forgotten. So, though I am deprived of the sun itself, the memory of its light will sustain me through the bleak months and keep me warm.” She lowered her voice, trembling a little at the risk she was about to take. “For me the sun shines brightest now, and the bleak months are yet to come—if indeed they must.”
To her surprise, a look of intense pain crossed his face. It was gone again in an instant, but she knew she hadn’t imagined it. She prayed she hadn’t just made another mistake.
In that moment, Devlin knew he was the world’s vilest blackguard. He’d been unable to help himself tonight. He’d basked in the light of Mary’s presence, in her trust and affection, soaking it up as if he had a right to do so.

As if I have the right to fall in love with her.

Admitting to himself that he’d fallen in love with her made him feel as if his insides had been rearranged. It had happened so gradually that he’d not realized he was cooked in the kettle until it was too late. Worse, he knew she returned the sentiment. Or at least she thought she loved him.

The truth would break her heart.

Every curse he knew in five languages crowded behind his teeth, all of them directed at himself. He’d thought to do this more slowly for her sake, to stitch up the gaping wound he’d given her and then, over time, withdraw bit by bit so it wouldn’t hurt her so much when the time finally came for them to part ways. He’d wanted to leave her free of bitterness and pain, but instead of easing away, he’d mired himself only more deeply.

He should have known better than to attempt such a foolhardy endeavor. Such was his remorse that he could hardly bear it. The truth was that he’d sought her out again not just for her sake, but his own. He’d felt the sting of her absence, and he’d selfishly come back in order to assuage it. And now things were much, much worse.

Though he knew it would end only in misery, Devlin knew what had to be done. He looked at her, at the hope and love shining in her beautiful eyes, and quailed. He couldn’t break her heart tonight, not here with her family looking on. Not here, in front of her friend.

Coward. He didn’t bother refuting his conscience’s excruciatingly accurate conviction.

Forcing a smile, he nodded as if he agreed with her. “Would that we could prevent the seasons’ turn so that it might always remain warm and bright.” A lump formed in his throat, and he swallowed to ease it. “If I could, I would.”

And in that moment, he truly meant it. If he could somehow permanently exchange lives with his twin, he would. He’d become the vicar of Harper’s Grove. He’d give up his riches, his notoriety, all of it, just to stay here with her.

Her responding smile shook a little at the corners, and her eyes were bright with unshed tears. Saying nothing, she stood and walked over to the window. Taking up his cane, he followed, and as he approached saw her surreptitiously swipe at her cheeks.

Damn me for a devil. Anger and self-loathing threatened to choke him with his own bile. He couldn’t do it now, but it needed to be done soon. Sunday. I’ll do it Sunday.

Throughout the remainder of the evening, he tried to maintain the appearance of good cheer. With all his heart, he wished there was a way to tell her the truth—that he was Daniel’s twin, and that he’d fallen in love with her while perpetrating a terrible ruse—without causing a scandal that would end in her hating him and his brother being defrocked.

If only Daniel had chosen to become anything but a priest!

He had no choice but to perpetuate the lie. She must continue to believe he was Daniel, and in his brother’s guise he must reject her utterly. She’d be upset for a time. He’d be completely miserable. But his family would be safe.

Smiling and holding polite conversation when all he wanted was to rage and hit inanimate objects...
grew increasingly difficult. Every time he looked at Mary, his chest felt like it was going to crack open and spill his beating heart out onto the floor.

I wish I had no heart. For the longest time, he’d thought himself incapable of loving any female besides his mother and sister. But Mary Tomblin had found his heart and had somehow gotten inside it, and now he couldn’t displace her.

For the rest of his life, he would love her. And for the rest of his life, he would live with regret.

It’s what I deserve. This time, there was no escaping justice. He deserved to be alone and wretched, to feel the painful absence of the one he loved.

She didn’t.

He prayed, and for the first time in nearly a decade, he actually meant it. Silently, he prayed that she took his betrayal with as little pain as possible. Gritting his teeth, he prayed she found someone worthy of her heart and that it healed her of all injury. And he asked the Lord’s forgiveness, knowing it was likely to be the only forgiveness he’d receive for what he was going to have to do.

When at last the evening was at a close, he left with fading smiles and false promises to return again.

Saturday, he put a notice on the church door canceling Sunday’s services. That night, he absented himself from the vicarage and rode his brother’s horse to the nearest neighboring village to stay the night at an inn. Sunday he spent in bed staring at the ceiling.

She was warm and safe in the embrace of her family, with no inkling of what was to come. For now, he could imagine her still happy. It wouldn’t sink in until later in the week, until he failed to acknowledge her in passing. Then, she would begin to understand.

By the time he made it back to Harper’s Grove, it was Monday evening, and he was tired, angry, and desolate. He felt like a thief, sneaking into the vicarage under the cover of darkness.

I am a thief. He’d stolen Mary’s heart. And now, he must break it.

Sleep was long in the coming, and took him only after most of the remaining brandy was gone.

Tuesday dawned grim and gray. Shutting the curtains and closing himself off from the world, he went about tidying the vicarage to burn off his anger and scrub away his despair. It didn’t work.

He tried reading. But his mind kept going back to her. Finally, he tossed aside his book and finished off the last of the brandy. A knock at the door just before sunset went unanswered, despite the caller trying to raise him several times. He was afraid to peek through the curtains, afraid he’d see her standing there, afraid he’d have the will to resist temptation. And so he stayed quiet until whoever it was went away.

That night, pure mental exhaustion allowed him to fall asleep quickly, but his slumber was disturbed. Twice he awakened in a cold sweat, his heart racing. There was no brandy left to burn away his thoughts and dreams or grant him even temporary respite from his guilt.

Time’s march was slow and relentless. Wednesday dawned. He stayed abed for several hours, his mind’s eye full of Mary. When he tired of self-torment, he hobbled downstairs. It was just as bad there with nothing to do but stare at the hearth, fiddle with the handle of his cane, and watch the fire convert wood to ash while he turned over memories of her, regretting words both said and unsaid.

The light filtering in from around the drawn curtains waxed and waned.

When the clock struck two, Devlin rose, washed, and dressed himself, eschewing the garb of his brother’s vocation in favor of a comfortable old sweater and trousers. He was done with wearing crow’s black, even if only for the day.

The Harper’s Arms inn—or, more accurately, the pub it boasted—beckoned, and it was high time he stopped denying its siren song. There was no rule that said clergymen couldn’t have an occasional
pint or two at a public house. If the lure of a good dark ale wasn’t enough of an incentive to draw him out of hiding, then he was weary unto death of his own company.

Anything was preferable to being alone with his thoughts without the succor of liquid fortitude. Entering the establishment, he saw only a few men inside. Making his way up to the bar, he took a seat, set aside his cane, and fished a shilling out of his pocket. “A pint of your best bitter, if you please,” he told the barkeep quietly, plunking his money down on the polished wood. “And don’t bother making change. Just keep it coming until that’s finished—or I am.”

At two pence a pint, he’d run out of sobriety long before he ran out of drink.

Mr. Siskin’s brows rose. Devlin knew that for as long as the man had known Daniel, he’d only ever brought him a dish of whatever the inn was serving for dinner when he came in here. But Siskin held his tongue as he poured and then slid over a tall glass of deep amber ale with a nice head of froth on it.

Thirsty, Devlin downed it, earning himself a surprised look from his nearest neighbor. He ignored it and tapped the empty glass for Mr. Siskin to refill.

_George’s piles, but it feels good to be an ordinary man again._ Gone were the trappings of his false identity and along with them all burden of appearing pious. He was just a man, like any other.

“Oh, I have a letter for you from London, Reverend,” said Siskin, eyeing him with open curiosity. After he filled the glass, he disappeared in back for a moment, and when he returned set before Devlin a letter bearing his own seal.

The second pint went down more slowly, his mood improving with every sip he took and every line he read. Danny had done it; St. Peters had signed the contract! Such was his good cheer at this news that he took up the tune when a couple of the pub’s occupants broke into song. They welcomed him with broad grins and hearty slaps on the back, and by the time the third pint began making its way down his throat, he was feeling positively optimistic.

All would work out as it ought.

This time when his glass emptied, he called for a brandy instead of another ale. An hour later, he sent his new friends off to their homes in the best of cheer. He’d made a man-to-man connection with the men of the village today that he felt could only benefit his dear brother when he returned.

_Daniel._ The thought of his twin coming home left Devlin ambivalent. Before he could explore any of those feelings too deeply, he tapped his glass for yet another refill, determined to drown the gnawing, empty sensation in his chest with more brandy. But Mr. Siskin answered with a regretful shake of his head. Devlin dug down into his pockets and found naught but a handkerchief. Then he remembered he’d spent his last coin to buy the previous round for his new friends.

Sighing, he nodded thanks to the barkeep and slid off his stool. For a moment, he found himself bewildered at how unsteady he was—until he remembered his injured leg and found his cane. Then he realized it wasn’t just his leg that was making him unsteady.

_Time to go. Before anyone else comes in and discovers their “vicar” in such a state._ He tried to remember how much he’d had to drink. It couldn’t have been _that_ much, considering he’d had only a half crown and a couple of shillings in his pocket when he’d arrived, and a good deal of that had gone down other men’s throats.

The sun was westering, but nowhere near the horizon, as he hobbled unsteadily out into the light. Cold nipped at his face and hands, helping diminish the effects of the drink, though not nearly enough to recall sobriety. His head ached—almost as much as his heart.

“Self-reflection and drinking is a bad combination, Dev,” he muttered to himself. The longer he stayed in Harper’s Grove, the more mistakes he seemed to make. Getting drunk with a bunch of
farmers was just another in a long line.

His head spun as he stumbled up to the door of his brother’s house. When he opened it, warmth hit him in the face, and he felt his stomach churn.

*Water.* He needed water. Cold water. Fumbling his way around the side of the house, he found the pump and brushed off the thin layer of snow blanketing it.

Mary was just passing the church on her way home from a visit with Augie, when she heard a stream of profanity issuing from around the corner, where lay the vicarage. The voice sounded just like Reverend Wayward’s—but surely *he* would not utter such blasphemy?

Venturing a peek around the side of the building, she saw a man bent over the pump in the courtyard.

“George’s hairy bollocks!” he swore, grunting and straining. “Bloody thing’s frozen—*ugh!*—solid! How I hate living—*ugh!*—in this primitive—*ugh!*—hovel!” He cursed again and then, taking up the cane he’d propped against the offending pump, he smacked it against the metal. It bounced back and hit him in the leg, causing him to curse again.

Her jaw dropped. *It is him! But what is he doing out here in the cold?* People in the village had begun to talk of how he hadn’t been seen for days after he’d neglected to conduct services on Sunday. She’d begun to worry he’d fallen ill, and had, in fact, come this way in the hope of reassuring herself all was well.

Clearly, it wasn’t. She watched, transfixed, as he straightened and, leaning on his cane, took a few unsteady steps back from the pump.

“Damn me,” he gasped, rubbing his arms. “It’s colder than a whore’s heart out here. Where’s my c—where’s my bloody coat?” He cast about for a brief moment, and again swore. “Shite! Left it at the bloody pub, confound it.” A second strike aimed at the pump missed widely, and he reeled, only just managing not to lose his balance before planting the tip of his cane firmly on the ground.

She ought to go before he realized she was there. She knew it but couldn’t seem to make herself move. And then, it was too late.

He turned and stumbled to a halt as he spotted her, his blue eyes narrowing as if he didn’t quite believe she was really there. “Mary?”

Speech deserted her. His dark hair was disheveled, his face shadowed by at least two days’ growth of stubble on his jaw, and he wore trousers and a shapeless sweater instead of his customary cassock and collar. He looked like an entirely different man.

He took a step toward her, stumbled, and put out a hand to steady himself—only there was nothing against which to brace. Overcompensating, he jerked back, lost his grip on his cane, and fell flat on his arse, landing with another curse that made the tips of her ears prickle. He tried to rise, but then slipped and sat back down in the snow…and began laughing.

Unless she was very much mistaken, he was *drunk.* At four o’clock in the afternoon. Shoving aside her shock, she moved forward to help him rise.

He stared first at the hand she extended, and then up at her. “What are you doing out here all alone?” he said slowly, carefully enunciating each word.

“I was on my way home from Augie’s house.”

“*Mmm.*” A wry smirk tilted his mouth. “Thought you’d ‘stop by’ and pay me a visit, is that it? Just a friendly *social* call?”

Despite the cold, her cheeks burned at the suggestive way he’d said it. “I heard someone struggling
as I was passing the church. You look as if you could use some help.” Again, she extended her hand.

Closing his eyes, he hung his head and gave another strangled laugh. “God, I’m sorry. I’m making an ass of myself.” He snorted. “Again.”

“You’ve just had a bit too much drink, I think,” she replied, trying not to sound accusatory. Why had he been drinking at the pub? As far as she knew, he’d never gone to the pub save to post a letter with the innkeeper or take a meal. “Come. Let’s get you inside before you catch your death of cold.”

This time when she put out her hand, he took it. Getting him to his feet was a bit of a challenge, but she managed by putting one shoulder beneath his arm and hauling up until he had his feet under him. Reaching down, she caught up his cane and handed it to him, but it did little to take the weight off her shoulder.

_Sweet Lord, but he’s heavy!_ She no longer felt the cold as they made their haphazard way to the vicarage door. How could she, with him pressed against her? Though he’d complained of the chill, he radiated heat. Was he feverish? She couldn’t tell. He leaned against the wall, staring at her as she opened the door, and she shivered, though not from the cold. The intense look in his eyes nearly liquefied her knees.

“Come,” she said, deliberately brisk. “It’s much better inside than out.”

When he failed to move, she went in ahead of him. His movements were ungainly, his steps as uneven as her heartbeat. But he didn’t move to sit down by the fire as she expected. He simply stood, swaying slightly, staring at her while she divested herself of her coat and gloves.

“Reverend? Are you—”

“Don’t call me that.” His gruff voice rasped. “I don’t deserve to be ‘revered.’ Not by you.” He looked away. “Not by anyone.”

She took a hesitant step toward him. “You are troubled by something. Perhaps I can be of help?” He said nothing, but his throat worked as if he wanted to speak. He refused to look her in the face. “Whatever it is, you can trust me. I want to help you.”

“No one can help me. Least of all you.”

“Why?” Another step closer. “Why me least of all?”

His head rose, his dark eyes full of doubt and other turbulent emotions to which she could not put a name. “Because you’re the reason I’m in this predicament.”

Frowning, she stopped. “Me? It was you who last sought me out. I did as you wished. I stayed away. But then you came to my house—to make amends, I presumed—and you were friendly again. I thought perhaps you’d changed your mind. Now…” She cast up her hands, helpless in the face of his bewildering conduct. “I don’t know what to make of you anymore. Tell me what it is you want from me, and for heaven’s sake, speak plainly.”

He drew a deep, shuddering breath and ran a shaking hand through his already unruly hair, making it even worse. “Mary, _why_ can I not make you understand? I don’t want to hurt you!”

“But you _are_ hurting me,” she told him, tears stinging her eyes. “I hurt to see you like this, to know that _I_ am somehow the cause of your condition, such as it is. I would help you, if I could. But you won’t let me in. You won’t let _anyone_ in. The whole parish confides in you, but you confide in no one.”

“I cannot.” His voice cracked, and his eyes seemed to look through her to someplace far away. “If anyone knew the truth…”

_To hell with propriety._ Mary moved to stand directly in front of him. “We _all_ fall short, is that not what you said?” she asked, forcing him to look at her. “We are all of us imperfect. That is why there is forgiveness. You are a good man!”
He chuckled, a bitter, choked sound. “I’m really not.” Reaching up, he caressed her cheek with an unsteady hand. “I cannot impress upon you the weight of the sin on my soul as I stand here, coveting what I should not. I beg you to leave now and set your sights elsewhere. You deserve better than me.”

Unable to help herself, she leaned into his touch. Blood raced in her veins as her body quickened with almost painful rapidity. “But I want only you,” she whispered boldly.

At these words, lust flared in his eyes and something inside him seemed to break. With a soft groan of surrender, he bent and captured her upturned lips. A thumb gently pressed down on her chin, a silent demand. Answering, she opened, and the heady taste of brandy burst over her tongue as his mouth slid across hers. Dropping the cane, he crushed her in his arms, and she delighted in the firm muscle pressed against her beneath his clothes.

_**More.**_ Instinct demanded there be no such barrier between them. Reaching under his sweater, she pulled up the linen shirt tucked into his trousers and at last made gratifying contact with hot, bare skin. Her palms skimmed across his back, exploring its smooth texture and the underlying contours.

_So different._ Another thrill shot through her. His body was so unlike hers. Where she was soft and pliant, he was hard and unyielding. Pulling back a little, she felt the flesh over his abdomen and found it was the same. Muscle rippled beneath her roving fingertips. Traveling up, her hands searched out the broadness of his chest, learning it. Beneath her feather-light touch, a nipple contracted.

A deep moan rumbled in his throat, further fueling her curiosity. Deliberately, she did it again, smiling against his mouth.

That was all it took.

Before she could draw another breath, he hauled her up against himself and began shuffling her back toward the stairs. Their legs tangled, unbalancing him, and they nearly fell.

“Stop before you hurt yourself,” she murmured, laughing a little. Twisting away, she wriggled out of his arms, picked up his cane and gave it to him, and then turned toward the stairs. A shiver of anticipation ran through her as she mounted the first few steps, ears straining. After a moment’s hesitation, she heard the creak of wood, the tap of a cane, and uneven footfalls behind her.

His bedchamber was Spartan, much as she’d expected, but it contained all that was needed. Trembling at her own audacity, she led him to the bed and then sat on its edge to remove her boots.

Bending, he dropped his cane and made to help—and almost fell down.

She slapped his hands away, smiling at his adorable pout to take away any sting. He’d be all night taking them off in his condition. “Let me.”

Her conscience tried to assert itself as her fingers picked the knots loose. _He’s been drinking._ Enough to free his tongue and make him unsteady on his feet. The other part of her, the part that had been wanting this for so long, fought back. _He’s only a bit tipsy. He’s still in full possession of his faculties and knows what he’s doing._

_But do you?_ Hesitating, she glanced at him and caught him looking back at her with hooded, lust-filled eyes the color of the sky just after nightfall. Her conscience abandoned the battlefield, and desire overtook it. In short order, her boots were off and sliding across the wooden floor, followed by her skirt and woolen petticoats.

He, too, undressed, though much more slowly, leaning against the bed’s footboard for support as he struggled a bit to pull off his sweater and shirt.

Expecting him to continue disrobing, she averted her eyes. But he merely came to sit beside her and watched her continue to work her way through the layers confining her until all that remained were her corset, shift, and stockings.

Shyness at last asserted itself. “I…I need help with the lacings,” she lied. She was fully capable of
reaching behind and pulling them loose enough to wriggle out of the contraption on her own, but asking him to help would allow her to face the other way so he wouldn’t see how nervous she was. Turning, she gave him access to her back.

Every brush of his fingers, every catch in his breath, heightened her awareness. When at last the corset was loose enough, she stood, keeping her back to him, and tugged it down over her hips to let it drop to the floor. Then, bracing herself, she pulled the fine linen shift up over her head and let it join the other clothing on the floor.

The only sounds to be heard were that of their breathing and the fire’s gentle crackle in the grate. She couldn’t turn around. Not now. Not when her breasts were bared to the world and she wore only her stockings. Misgiving once again began to creep in. She almost jumped out of her skin when the bed rustled as he rose. Would he reject her now that she’d proven herself shameless? Would he leave her standing here naked and in disgrace?

A hot, dry palm touched the small of her back, raising goose bumps in its wake. “You are even more beautiful than I imagined.”

The wobble in his voice tugged at her heart. Then she heard the creak of the bed ropes and felt the warm press of his mouth at the nape of her neck, the silken touch of his lips combined with the light rasp of stubble sending goose bumps racing across her skin and a bolt of pure lust rocketing through her. Her fists clenched, and her toes curled into the rug beneath her feet as, kiss after agonizingly gentle kiss, his lips traveled down her back until she felt the feather brushings of his soft, dark hair as he again sat and rested his head against the dip above her buttocks.

“Mary,” he whispered, his warm breath tickling her flesh as he caressed her hips with reverent hands. “Mary. The only one I want. The only one I cannot have.”

Turning, she faced him, fighting a maidenly urge to cover herself as the motion put him at eye level with her navel, among other things. He looked up at her like a supplicant, his deep blue eyes beseeching, desperate. A rush of feminine pride swept through her at the naked desire that kindled in them as his gaze swept lower. Hungry, full of greed, it burned a path across her flesh as it slowly took her in. Such a look threatened to turn her into the vainest creature to ever draw breath.

All shame fled.

“You can,” she whispered. The last of her apprehension faded away. This was the man she was going to marry, and he wanted her as much as she wanted him. “Because I’m giving myself to you.” Reaching down, she threaded her fingers through the dark hair at his temples and bent to kiss him.

All in an instant his gaze turned utterly ravenous, as if he would devour her whole. The sight of it made her shudder as he dragged her down and clasped her naked body hard against his own to plunder her mouth in a searing kiss that branded her as his, body and soul. With shaking limbs, she braced against his shoulders as together they fell back on the bed and he maneuvered until they were fully laid upon it.

Callused fingertips skimmed over her, their surprisingly light touch eliciting pleasurable sensation with every pass until her skin felt feverish and the secret place between her legs began to throb. A swell of emotion and want made her close her eyes against the sting of tears as he pressed close and began to pepper her body with kisses, interrupted only by the occasional worshipful whisper in praise of her perfection.

When his mouth closed over the flushed peak of one breast, a long, low moan filled the air—hers. It was an uncivilized, indecent sound, raw and primal, and she could hardly believe it had come from her throat. Shocked by her own wantonness, she stifled another as he switched sides and began flicking his tongue across the hardened bud. Merciful heaven! It was torment, torment most acute!
And yet she never wanted it to end.

Which was why she couldn’t help letting out another wordless, shameless noise in protest when he abruptly stopped. Embarrassed, she clamped her mouth shut on it, her skin prickling with mortification.

“My sweet Mary,” he said with a distinctly devilish smile. “Don’t silence yourself. I would hear your every utterance and know when I’m bringing you pleasure.”

With a frantic nod of agreement—anything to make him resume!—she pulled his head back down toward her breast. A wicked chuckle rumbled in his chest as sighs and whimpers of sheer delight and mounting frustration escaped her while he relentlessly applied his lips, teeth, and tongue.

She’d heard older women talk of bedchamber play when they thought no one was listening. At the time, she’d thought it odd and perhaps even aberrant for a man to suckle at a woman’s breast. Not so, anymore. Still, though it never ceased being pleasurable, such play was causing her unrest bordering on distress.

Her nether parts pulsed in rhythm with her pounding heart, and she knew it must be close to time for him to commit The Act. But he withheld, much to her increasing agitation. Surely, if she was ready, then so must he be! Deciding to test her theory, she pulled him up and kissed his mouth again. The hardened part of him lay like a stone between their bodies, where it was still trapped inside his trousers.

Reaching down between them, she ran a curious hand along its length. The man in her arms let out a rough groan, and she snatched her fingers back as if burned.

His hand shot out like lightning, trapping hers and gently placing it back where it had been. “Touch me all you like,” he whispered, nipping at her bottom lip. “I’ll tell you when you must stop.”

Mary’s face had to be as red as a beet, but she couldn’t deny him the same pleasure he’d been so generously giving her. So, plucking up her courage, she let her hand wander over his sex, tracing its outline where it strained against the cloth.

Without warning, after only a few minutes, he rolled away onto his back, unbuttoned his trousers, and pulled them down and off. Then he stretched out again, giving her full access to his now entirely naked person. “Touch whatever pleases you,” he murmured, his eyes two dark slits gleaming with lustful amusement. “I forbid you no part of my body.”

Face aflame, she gingerly ran her hands over his lean form, exploring here and there, silently marveling at the differences between them, appreciating them. The feel of his hot, smooth skin under her hands was a pleasure all by itself. Every muscle that flexed under her palms was a discovery.

His hard thighs and calves, with their dusting of coal-black hair, were so alien compared to her softness, which was all she’d ever known. Even his injured leg was corded with muscle beneath the fading yellow bruises. She traced it delicately. “Does it still pain you a great deal?”

“Only when I put too much weight on it.”

Nodding, she proceeded up to arms that were just as well-defined. Her fingers trailed over the ridges of his abdomen where, to her surprise, she saw a long, thin scar. Puzzled, she traced its shape with a fingertip.

“Mary, darling,” he rasped, the endearment eliciting a thrill of joy. “I shall die if you keep this up. Please…”

She knew what he wanted. There, just above the juncture of his thighs and the one place she’d avoided looking until now, lay his manhood. If she’d thought their bodies different before, here was the greatest dissimilarity of them all.

Long and thick, it sprang from a forest of wiry black curls like a tree rooted in the earth. The dark,
The turgid shaft was crowned by a broad, rounded head and bejeweled by a single, shining drop of clear fluid at its very tip. Fascinated, she reached out and grasped it at the base, only to start back in surprise as it jerked in her hand.

Her gaze darted up to his face, praying she wouldn’t see disapproval there. But the look in his eyes was positively smug as he smiled and nodded at her to continue. Flushing yet again, she focused on learning his body. This time when she gripped him, she didn’t let go. The hardened flesh beneath her fingers was like hot silk over stone as she experimented, gently moving her hand up and down, marking the heavy vein that pulsed beneath her fingertips on its underside.

The act elicited a strained groan, and she watched the bead of dew grow larger, until at last it began to slowly slide down to one side. Touching it with her free hand, she found it both slippery and viscous, much like the slickness now gathering between her own legs. With one fingertip, she smoothed it over the head of his shaft in a slow circle and earned another low, almost agonized moan.

The man who’d lain so docile suddenly reached up, breaking her hold to pull her down atop him. “I think that’s all I can take, sweet Mary.” He kissed her again, deeply, his lips and tongue sliding against hers until her bones felt molten, and then whispered, “Now it’s my turn.”

It’s time. Sparks of fear prickled from the base of her spine all the way up to her scalp as he flipped her over onto her back, and she braced herself for the pain she knew was coming. But he didn’t immediately spread her legs and invade as expected. Instead, he briefly tormented her breasts again before dragging his lips lower, lingering in every dip and hollow as he slowly worked his way down her body.

She tensed as he kissed her navel, and bit her lip to keep from laughing as he ran his tongue around it, tickling her awfully. The mischief sparkling in his eyes as he looked up at her from his strange vantage point forced the laugh out anyway. But all laughter died a moment later as he approached the place where her sex lay concealed.

Embarrassed, she began to press her thighs together.

“Now, now. I showed you mine,” he teased, gently nudging her knees back apart. “It’s only fair I get to see yours.”

Every drop of blood that wasn’t currently pulsing between her thighs now rushed to her face, heating it until she was sure it must catch fire. Nevertheless, looking at the ceiling, she did as he bade and opened to him.

“Oh, Mary,” he breathed, staring at her exposed nethers with fevered eyes. “You are perfection all over.”

What he did next came as such a shock that she could only lie there, paralyzed, until pleasure overcame astonishment. It didn’t take long. His hot mouth moved over her secret place in a kiss so intimate that it could not possibly be anything but a sin. When his tongue parted her swollen folds to dip inside her and tease the bud that lay nestled within, she would have come up off the bed but for the hands grasping her hips to hold them down.

So intense was the sensation that with each pass of his tongue she cried aloud, not caring if the whole village heard. Her fingers plunged into his hair and dug at his scalp, gripping the inky strands, urging him on. By all that was holy, she’d never even thought a man might do such a thing to a woman! She’d seen animals mate and had thought it would be for her as it was for them.

She couldn’t have been more wrong.

Her whole body seemed to be tightening, the want of before now becoming a raging need. She felt hollow, incomplete. And yet it was almost too much. Too much sensation to bear all at once. Unable to withstand it the more, she dug her heels into the mattress. But she didn’t really want to escape. She
wanted him inside her. Pain was coming, but she didn’t care. This empty feeling had to end! Her fingers tightened, and she tugged at his hair until his head lifted. Following her silent command, on hands and knees, with eyes aflame, he crawled up and over her body to once more claim her mouth and steal her breath. The taste of herself on his tongue both shocked and aroused her to the point of near madness.

Nothing mattered anymore. Nothing but this. And she wanted more. She wanted it all.

Reaching down between them, she again took his shaft in her hand, smoothed the slickness at its head down over the rigid column of flesh as far as possible, and guided him until she felt its hot, blunt tip kiss her wet opening. Releasing him, she then tilted up her hips and closed her eyes.

“No, my bold, beautiful Mary,” he rasped. “Open your eyes and let me see you.”

She wriggled, hoping to escape such mortification, but he wouldn’t budge. Giving in, she opened her eyes and fixed them on his.

They were so dark, their pupils having all but eclipsed the blue. Her whole being shook at his look as he surged into her, piercing her maidenhead with a sharp pain that tore a yelp from her throat. His girth stretched her passage as he slowly sank deeper, the hard heat of him impaling her fully until there was no space left between them.

Body and soul, she now belonged to Daniel Wayward.

Poised above her, his arms trembling with the effort, he held still—for her sake, she knew. Soon, he would withdraw, and there would be blood.

But he didn’t. “Has the pain gone?” he asked quietly, worry in his eyes.

Biting her lip, she nodded.

“Mary, I need to know before I can move,” he said tensely. “I don’t want to cause you any more pain than I must. The truth. Is it gone?”

There was only one way to find out. She shifted a little, testing her body, feeling every inch of him sheathed inside her, still stretching her. The sharp pain had subsided to a dull ache, however, and a feeling of fullness unlike anything she’d ever experienced. Her body was adjusting. “It is.”

Relief flooded his features. “I’m glad. I’ve never been with a virgin before. I was unsure what to expect other than your pain.” Lowering himself onto his elbows above her, he kissed her softly, almost chastely compared to his prior kisses. “I tried to make it not hurt. I may have overindulged tonight, but at least I remembered to do that much.”

Emotion swelled inside her, too great to be contained. “I took great pleasure in it, all the way up until that part. But I know the pain is past, now, and that it will never hurt like that again. Surely, it will be much more pleasurable the next time.”

A startled look crossed his features briefly before gentling into something both tender and amused. “Oh, we’re not done yet,” he said with a velvet chuckle. “You’re not leaving this bed until we’re both satisfied.”

Confusion made her frown. “Did you not find your pleasure?”

His chuckle turned into a full laugh that she felt deep inside her as he settled himself more firmly in the cradle of her thighs. “Sweet Mary, you have no idea of the pleasures yet to come.” A wicked gleam entered his dark eyes. “Allow me to demonstrate.”

He shifted his hips, withdrawing a little—just enough to cause friction between them—and then slowly sank back into her, until he seemed to touch her very core. A gasp tore from her lips as the tightening sensation of before returned tenfold in a rush. Her thighs involuntarily clasped his hips, settling him back flush against her.

“See?” he said, smiling down at her. “It’s not over yet.”
This time when he moved, she began to move with him, encouraging him with her body. Together they found a rhythm that worked magic, sending melting warm sensations throughout every fiber of her flesh. Again and again, they washed over her like waves on a beach, the warmth increasing with every drag of his heated body against hers, with every push deep inside her, until it lit the blood in her veins afire. Greater and greater, the tension grew, until she thought it must break and she must surely break apart with it.

The sudden, unexpected clenching of her nethers caused her to cry out and arch her back so that her shoulders lifted from the sheets. Like a bow drawn by an archer’s hand, she bent, desperate and gasping, until at long last the arrow released, the bowstring snapping. Pleasure more intense than anything she’d ever experienced ripped through her, forcing a ragged shout from her throat. She clung to him, the only solid thing in the maelstrom, as she rode its aftershocks.

His hoarse yell soon joined hers, and she felt him thicken to granite hardness within her, his hips grinding against her in a jerky, uncontrolled motion an instant before he hastily withdrew, the motion triggering another sharp spasm of pleasure that felt only a little less satisfying than the first, as her body clenched around nothing. He collapsed atop her, heat spurting against her belly where his still-swollen length lay pressed between, twitching with each new burst of warmth.

Sweat-soaked skin melded as they lay together, heart to pounding heart, their ragged, uneven breaths complementing each other.

His weight was surprisingly pleasant rather than crushing. Still, it was a relief when he rolled off and to the side, taking her with him. Laying her head on his shoulder, Mary stroked his chest with gentle fingers as he used the edge of the sheet to wipe away the sticky mess first from her body and then his own. “I love you,” she whispered, closing her eyes, the better to savor the sensations still running riot through her. “I love you, Daniel.”
Chapter Fourteen

The four words drifted through the haze of satisfied exhaustion fogging Devlin’s mind, driving away the sleep he so desperately craved, chasing off the last of the liquor’s haze, bringing him to an instant state of alertness. Reality hit him like a cannonball to the gut.

_I love you, Daniel…_

Her breathing evened out into the pattern of slumber even as his thoughts ran amok, as panic rose up from his chest to strangle him.

_What have I done?_

Breath after breath, heartbeat by heartbeat, it sank in. He’d let himself be overtaken by greed for something he had no right to desire. They’d made love. There was no going back from that. Not for him, and certainly not for her. He’d taken something precious from her that could not be replaced.

There was only one thing to do now: the honorable thing.

_But how? She thinks I’m Daniel!_ A thousand questions rose to the fore concerning how he’d achieve such a miracle. It would have to be done carefully. So very carefully. Otherwise, disaster.

_Tell her the truth and then promise to court her properly after the switch…_ In the meantime she must appear to disengage with Daniel—starting immediately. He’d spend a few months wooing her when she came to London for the Season, and then they’d become husband and wife.

_And once you’ve managed to put your ring on her finger? What then? If, that is, you can even convince her to do so once she discovers the sort of man you really are._

His gut clenched. He’d manage it. Somehow. And then he’d give her what she wanted. He’d bring her back here, to Harper’s Grove. She had friends here. He couldn’t bear to tear her away from them or from the place she’d come to call home. A place he realized he loved.

He knew he could trust her to keep their secret. She’d never tell a soul.

It was settled. A frisson of apprehension tingled down his spine. Permanence was a concept he’d always found unnerving. He’d avoided it his entire life. Could he actually do it? Escape his past? Not just the trappings of it, but that part of himself?

_Am I truly capable of being the man she deserves?_ Seeing the love fade from her eyes would be unbearable. Causing her even more pain would be unforgivable. Fear crept in, paralyzing him.

_I need time. Time to think about this. For her sake, I cannot afford to make any more mistakes._

As if pernicious Fate herself had heard the thought, Mary stirred beside him, and then with surprising stealth, eased toward the edge of the bed with a faint oath that almost made him smile with surprise.

Panic set in as he realized why she was getting up. _She’s going to leave!_ His body reacted before his mind could catch up, and he grabbed her wrist to keep her from standing, drawing out a startled gasp. “Mary, wait…”

Mary felt the smile fade from her lips as she stared down into blue eyes wide with…fear? Regret? Unease crept into her heart. “What is it? What’s the matter? Did I do something wrong?”

“No,” he rasped, his voice suddenly taut and angry, spiking her trepidation. “No,” he repeated more softly, releasing her, but still holding her gaze. “You have done nothing wrong, Mary. I’m the one who
has done wrong—to you.” He swallowed audibly, and she marked how sad he suddenly looked as he appeared to steel himself. “I’m not who you think I am. I’ve been lying to you. To everyone.”

She clamped down on the cold tendril of anxiety worming its way into her chest, willing it away. Of course he would feel guilty for having taken liberties. After all, they were not yet wed. “You hold yourself to far too high a stan—”

“Stop,” he rasped, his manner again harsh, unyielding. “Please. Just…stop.”

As she lapsed into worried silence, he sat up and pulled the blanket off the bed and abruptly extended it toward her, averting his eyes. Hurt, mystified, and not a little afraid of what he might say next, she took it and covered herself.

In a voice full of self-loathing, his words still slightly blurred with drink, the man to whom she’d just given herself told her of a visit home that had ended in a childish prank and a broken leg. He explained how he’d then devised and persuaded his twin brother to go along with a ruse meant to protect them both from his terrible mistake.

Shock threatened to send Mary’s soul right out of her body as she was made to understand that the man speaking to her now was not, in fact, Reverend Wayward, but rather his mirror image, Lord Devlin Wayward.

With growing horror, she recalled the moment when “the reverend’s” look had first shifted from one of warm interest to wariness that day, when he’d fallen and broken his leg.

“He told you,” she blurted, certainty washing over her all at once in a nasty, stinging wave that left her faintly nauseous in its wake. “He told you what I said to him!”

Thoughts piled atop one another, and in an instant everything coalesced into perfect, humiliating clarity. It all made sense now, his initial reaction—and everything that had followed. “That’s how you knew my name,” she accused. “And that’s why you were so awful when we visited your—his—parishioners. You were trying to dissuade me from setting my cap for him!”

“Yes, he told me,” confessed Devlin—Devlin!—shame written all over his too-familiar face. “I thought I was doing him a favor by discouraging you, but I was unprepared for how I would feel when—”

“For how you would feel?” she cut in sharply, incredulous. Anger began to build within her, settling in her chest. She could hardly breathe for the suffocating sensation.

“Yes,” he replied with pleading eyes. “Mary, my brother was wrong. Wrong not to be direct with you. And so was I. I never wanted to hurt you, only to make you see he was not the right man for you. You deserve better. Better than him. And far, far better than me.”

She closed her eyes, not wanting to look at him, at this stranger. Not wanting to hear him. But his voice went on in a relentless barrage of useless self-castigation and regret that she couldn’t shut out.

“This is my fault. All of it,” he said, trailing into a whisper as he bowed his head. “It was I who stole his clothes for a lark, and it was I who persuaded him to trade places. Mary, I—I cannot apologize enough for what I’ve done. But please, I beg you to forgive me. And to forgive him.”

She’d been duped. Not once, but twice. The man she’d thought she loved had run away at the first opportunity, leaving his brother to deal with her. The words he’d said sank in. I thought I was doing him a favor by discouraging you... Bitterness joined anger as she imagined how the reverend must have spoken of her for that to be his twin’s sentiment.

Hurt overwhelmed all other emotions, and her eyes began to smart. “This whole time, I thought you—he—had grown to care for me. And now...” Bowing her head, she hid her face before he could see her tears.

Warm hands cupped her face and reached beneath her chin to tilt it back up. Gentle fingers brushed
away the wetness on her cheeks. Torn between the need for comfort and the rage simmering just under her skin that he’d dared touch her again, she froze.

“I’m not him, Mary,” said Devlin softly. “I’m not the man you wanted, but I am the man who loves you. You must believe me.” His voice broke. “I’ve fallen in love with you.”

How long she’d waited to hear those words. But it was all wrong! They came from the wrong man. “But you don’t even know me,” she choked out, ashamed at how feeble her voice sounded in her own ears.

“I do know you, Mary,” he insisted firmly, fire rekindling in his eyes. “I’ve seen your heart. And you may think me a stranger, but you’ve seen mine. I never thought to meet anyone like you. Certainly not while masquerading as my idiot brother—how can he have been so blind to how wonderful you are?”

Hearing him call his twin a blind idiot brought fleeting satisfaction, but it was quickly chased away as the blanket slipped off one shoulder, exposing it to the chill air. Suddenly she remembered she was all but naked. In front of Devlin Wayward, a man she hardly knew at all, who was now looking at her with desperate hope shining in his blue, blue eyes.

Eyes that darkened with want even now. The reverend Wayward had never looked at her like that. He’d barely even looked at her at all. And the few times he’d deigned to make eye contact, it hadn’t felt like this. Not even close.

*How can two men who look exactly the same be so different? Make me feel so different?* Her thoughts were cut short by another shock as the man she now knew as Devlin slid off the bed and onto his knees before her.

“Mary, I know this is the worst possible time for me to ask, but will you marry me? As myself, I mean,” he rushed, the words tumbling out of him. “This business with my leg is nearly finished—I’m almost healed. My brother and I will soon trade places again. I’ll woo you properly in London when you come. We can make it appear as if we’re meeting for the first time. No one need ever know about tonight.” He took her free hand and pressed a feverish kiss to its icy palm. “Please, Mary? Say you’ll be my wife.”

Part of her wanted to say yes, to bring a rational end to this nightmarish turn of events. She’d been compromised. There really was naught to do but say yes and accept her fate.

But the greater part of her—the part that had no interest in rationality—was hurt, furious…and completely terrified. Everything she’d ever been taught about men by both her mother and unfortunate prior experience rose to the fore of her thoughts. It was true. All of it. And this man was a consummate liar, just like the last one who’d professed undying love only to break his promise.

Words pressed behind her teeth, but her lips refused to let them escape as he stared expectantly. Her mind was all in disorder as one thought contradicted the next. She didn’t know how to answer him, because she didn’t know what she wanted.

She couldn’t deny the attraction she felt for him. Potent and intoxicating, it whispered the promise of passion even now amid her turmoil. But reason told her that character was of far more importance, and his was more than questionable. He was an even worse deceiver than the last handsome face she’d fallen for—at least *that* blackguard hadn’t touched her!

And Devlin Wayward had done far more than just touch her. Shame threatened to overcome her as she recalled her own wantonness. She’d lost her head, and now the price must be paid for her lapse.

“Mary?” His voice was rough-edged and trembling with the uncertainty she saw growing in his eyes.

*He is afraid...*
For all his sweet words and contrition, fear, not love, was the motivation behind his proposal. Love required time spent together—hadn’t she been the one to tell him so? His offer was borne out of fear for his brother’s reputation and his family’s name. He might desire her body. He might even like her a little. But he didn’t love her.

*I’ll be ruined unless I accept his offer. I have no choice.*

Another thought, a rebellious one that shocked her all over again, cut in front of all the others vying for precedence. *Or do I?* It was a dangerous thought—a *mad* thought—but one she couldn’t silence without due consideration. *No one else knows...* And they never would, as long as they both kept their mouths shut.

What was to stop her from proceeding as if this night had never happened? After all, he’d spilled his pleasure outside her body. The memory of it sent another wave of heat screaming into her cheeks, and she had to close her eyes to will it away, to remain calm and think this through.

*It’s nothing a hidden pin and a little feigned discomfort cannot overcome on my wedding night.*

It ought to bother her more, the thought of lying to her future husband, but after having been deceived twice she supposed she’d grown a bit jaded. She’d rather marry a true stranger in a business arrangement than be bound to this man, whose very face would remind her daily of her folly.

The audacity of such a thought! Looking at him now, she wondered. If she refused him—if she agreed to keep silent and let the ruse play out with no one the wiser, and he allowed it—if he let her go, she’d know for certain the sort of man he was.

*My life is my own. I have a choice. I simply have to be brave enough to claim it.*

The tumult between her ears faded into silence. She knew what she had to do.

*Courage, Mary.* Refusing him was the right decision.

“No.” Spoken with surprising firmness, the word fell from her lips like a millstone into deep water.

The look on Devlin’s face instantly transformed into one of almost comic consternation. “What do you mean, *no’?*” he asked slowly, his frown deepening with every passing second.

Of course, he’d expected her to say yes! It was what any other young lady in her situation would do. But she wasn’t any other young lady. “I mean *no.* I will not marry a man who has done nothing but lie to me since the very moment we met. Every word you have spoken has been a deception.”

Some unnamed emotion flickered in his eyes as he swallowed audibly, his Adam’s apple bobbing before he replied, “I just told you the truth, Mary. My intentions are honorab—”

“You have no real wish to marry me,” she cut in, unwilling to hear it. “You seek only to avoid a scandal.” Standing, she crammed her pain into the darkest corner of her heart and looked down at the stunned man with as much contempt as she could muster. “You need not trouble yourself—I hereby release you from any perceived obligation.”

Incredulity wrote itself across his face, but no objection was forthcoming.

*Just as I suspected.* It was time to end this. Taking a deep breath and clamping down on her roiling emotions, she forged ahead. “I’ll keep your secret, and you’ll keep mine, preserving both my reputation and your brother’s good name. We’ll pretend this never happened.”

The budding hope to which Devlin had been clinging became nothing more than cold ashes as her rejection sank in.

*She does not want you. She wanted Daniel. She loved him, not you.*

“I understand,” he said quietly. *I would not wish to wed me, either.* He had no right to expect her to want to be bound to him. “What will you do?”
The ice in her gaze thickened another increment, and her lips pressed together in a grim expression of
resolve before she answered, “I’ll go to London as planned and accept the first man my father
deems worthy. It’s unlikely our paths will cross while I’m there. In fact, I would appreciate it if you
would ensure they don’t.”

Worthy. Though he kept it from his face with all the skill he’d cultivated over many years spent at
the tables, the word quietly shattered his heart. He’d been measured and found lacking, and there
wasn’t a damned thing he could do but accept her judgment. Because she was right. He was unworthy.

That didn’t stop him from wanting. And oh, how he wanted! He wanted to do the honorable thing,
but even more, he wanted the happiness he’d tasted in her arms. He wanted her. Not just her body, but
all of her. Especially her heart.

Briefly, he considered begging, but haven’t I already pleaded my case and been refused? Her
cold eyes and stiff manner told him it would be no use. He’d lost her. Not that she’d ever truly been
within his grasp. Not really. He could force her to the altar, but only by exposing his entire family to
ruination, and they both knew he wouldn’t do that.

What would be the point when she’d only despise me for the rest of her life? No matter what he
did to try and make it up to her, he knew she’d never forgive him. At least this way, she’d be free and
still have some chance at happiness. She deserved to be happy.

Powerless to stop what he’d set in motion, he could only numbly nod acceptance of her decision.
“Of course. Yes. I’ll see to it.”

Without another word, she turned her back, gathered up her clothes, and began dressing. There was
no softness to her quick, efficient movements. There were no shy or questioning glances cast his way.
She did not ask for his help, and he didn’t offer unwanted assistance.

Never again would he touch the woman he loved.

His world darkened with every footfall as she left the room. With every creak of every step as she
descended the staircase, it grew colder, until he felt frozen inside. The sound of the front door
opening and shutting reached him, a sharp report of wood upon wood.

He’d lost her. Forever.

Falling back against the pillows, Devlin closed his eyes and lay there, unable to feel anything but
the howling emptiness of her absence. He knew he’d feel it for the rest of his life.

When he opened his eyes the angle of the light coming into his window was all wrong.
The sun. It’s rising, not setting! Kicking off the covers, he sat up—and was immediately
confronted by a dull throbbing in his skull and the sight of a dark, dried smear on the sheet beside his
hand.

Blood.

Oh, God… Not only had he taken advantage of her, but he’d let her walk out of here, newly opened
and doubtless in great discomfort if not pain, to face the night alone.

What sort of a monster am I?
The kind that any decent, sensible woman rejects.

Pain that had nothing to do with how much he’d imbibed last night assaulted him, and there was
naught he could do to ease it. Nothing would ever assuage it.

Throwing off the blankets, he rose—and immediately sat again as his leg gave out. The jolt seemed
to reset his mind to some semblance of sanity. He found his cane and, rising, drew on a robe and
hobbled downstairs.

Daniel must return as soon as possible, before he had a chance to make any more catastrophic
errors. Fear shot through him as he settled at his brother’s writing desk, making his hand shake so
much that a droplet of ink fell on the blotter. He watched the stain spread, blackening the spot.

*Like the sins I’ve committed have blackened my soul.*

Dwelling on damnation wasn’t going to fix this. Nothing would. All he could do now was try not to cause any more damage. He lifted the quill again and regarded the blank parchment staring back at him. What should he say? He couldn’t tell his twin the truth.

Devlin pressed his lips together. For his own good, Daniel would have to be kept in the dark.

**Dear Brother,**

*My leg has recovered sufficiently to walk with the assistance of a cane. The other matter we discussed has also been resolved. Do not concern yourself further with London affairs, but make plans to return forthwith. I shall meet you in Woodshire on 22 Feb. at the Swan. I look forward to exchanging news in person.*

—D.

It was, of a necessity, a succinct communication. The less detail included, the less he’d have to worry about Daniel drawing conclusions and asking questions. He’d work out what to say to him while the letter was in transit. Saturday the twenty-second was less than a week away, just long enough for his letter to reach his brother in London and for Daniel to get to Woodshire and then back to Harper’s Grove in time to deliver the Sunday sermon.

In the meantime, he must make himself scarce. There was no way he’d be able to appear detached if he saw Mary now. She’d made her choice, and he must respect it. It was best that he absent himself and spare her further pain and awkwardness.

Sealing the missive, he laid it aside to take to the inn later, the enormity of what he’d done weighing heavy on his heart. He’d been a rotten apple for many a long year, doing exactly as he’d pleased and never once feeling even the slightest qualm about it. The women he’d bedded had all approached him with lustful intent.

While it was true Mary had put herself forward, his lack of self-control had been unforgivable. That he’d been a bit tipsy was no excuse. He’d known better. If reason had been overcome by lust, it was because he’d allowed it, because he’d wanted her. There was no foisting off his culpability.

The gnawing emptiness inside threatened to hollow him out and incapacitate him again.

*Keep moving.*

He forced himself to his feet once more and, going about the vicarage, tidied up as quickly as possible. When he made it back to the bedroom, however, he felt himself blanch as his gaze fell on the bed.

Stripping it, he piled everything but the damning bottom sheet in the laundry basket. Then, taking the evidence of his perfidy to the hearth, he tore the stained bed linen apart and fed it to the flames bit by bit until it was entirely gone, hoping Daniel would assume the laundress had lost it when it came up missing. As each strip burned, he felt his emptiness grow.

In spite of his hurry, he couldn’t resist lifting the pillow to his face one more time. But the smell of burnt cloth overpowered any lingering scent of Mary.

*It’s just as well.*

The empty brandy bottle he stashed at the back of the wardrobe. Daniel would be both furious and disappointed on finding it—he’d promised not to indulge—but by the time his brother discovered it, he’d be far away. It was the least of his sins anyway.

Adding the cassock and collar to the sheets and other clothing in the basket, he donned his own clothes. It should’ve felt like stepping back into his old skin again, but the man beneath the fine, expensive fabrics had been much altered since the last time he’d worn them.
All remaining personal items stowed, Devlin opened his purse and “accidentally” dropped enough coin on the floor for Daniel to buy ten new sets of sheets. He still had more than enough left for the inn at Woodshire and the return to London.

Hobbling downstairs, he doused the flames in the vicarage’s main hearth, leaving naught but a ruin of ashes and an encroaching darkness that mirrored the state of his heart. He donned his coat and winter gear and, turning at the door, looked his last on his brother’s house.

Mary had kissed him in that spot, right there by the fire.

No, she’d kissed a man she’d thought was Daniel.

Shutting his eyes, he opened the door and stepped through.

Four days later, Devlin was seated before the evening fire in the Swan’s common room when a familiar voice cut into his melancholy reverie.

“I see I’m not the only one to arrive ahead of schedule.”

It was familiar because it was so close to his own as to be all but indistinguishable to anyone else. Rising, Devlin embraced his brother. “Thank God you’re here. The thought of sitting idle while waiting for you any longer was almost more than I could take,” he said without thinking—and immediately bit his tongue. “Sorry. It’s been a rather trying week.” To say the least.

Daniel peered at him, concern evident in the furrow that appeared between his brows. “Come. You can tell me all about it upstairs. I assume you’ve already procured a room for us?” He paused to address the innkeeper, who had come over and was looking between them with open astonishment. “If you will please be so kind as to send up food and a bottle of wine?”

Wine. Right now Devlin would sell his soul for something stronger, but wine would have to do. And he’d be careful how much he drank, too. The last thing he wanted was to loosen his tongue and confess to what he’d done. Better if Danny never knew the truth.

So eager was his brother to know all the goings-on in Harper’s Grove that the door had hardly shut before the questions started. He answered with as much truth as possible while concealing his most egregious sins concerning Miss Tomblin. After all, Danny didn’t need to know the whole reason behind why she’d be avoiding him now. The lie of his finally rejecting her outright would be enough to cover his tracks—he hoped.

“I must admit I had my doubts exchanging places would work,” said Daniel jovially, shaking his head and taking a sip of wine. “But you were right. No one was the wiser. Now all I have to do is limp a little for the next few weeks and then everything will be back to normal again.” He raised his glass.

Guilt writhed in Devlin’s belly as he did likewise and then took a large swallow of wine.

His brother’s expression grew grave. “I do wish it had been unnecessary to cause Miss Tomblin any upset, though—especially now that I know why she singled me out. A shame she was treated so poorly by that other fellow.”

Another gulp of wine. “Mark my words, had I not done it, her next move would have been entrapment.”

Daniel’s face paled a shade, but he nodded. “Then you did the right thing—what I ought to have done right from the beginning.”

No, I committed a terrible wrong, one I can never make right. But he nodded anyway.

“She’d have been miserable as my wife,” reasoned Danny, his expression turning morose. The question that had been nagging at Devlin from the start now demanded satisfaction. “Aside
from the objections you’ve already expressed, what other faults did you find in her that convinced you she was so ill a match?”

His brother gave a sheepish shrug. “Again, I won’t lie and say she’s not attractive, but I simply don’t think we would have been a good fit. A female as well-traveled as Miss Tomblin would not have been content to remain sequestered away from the world in a tiny village where, to use your words, ‘nothing exciting ever happens.’ My bride must come from another small village and be of more like mind and temperament to myself. I never want to leave Harper’s Grove. I want to live out my life there among people I know and love. I want to raise my children there, and be buried there when I die.”

All the things Mary wanted. He didn’t dare tell his fool of a brother how wrong he’d been about her. “I suppose you’re right,” he lied, swilling more wine to cover his chagrin.

Daniel shot him a tolerant smile. “You would have been a better match for her, yourself. Neither of you understands what it’s like to have roots that bind you to a place.”

But she does! And now, damn it, so did he. “Yes, well, I’m not really the sort of man she’d ever consider marrying.” It was only the truth. “No, I’ll go back to my city of vice.”

A sad look entered his brother’s eyes. “I wish you did not have to go back. I wish you would settle somewhere wholesome instead of living in that cesspool. What an awful place London is! So many people all around, yet it’s so lonely.”

Such words served only to make him feel worse. With forced joviality, he moved the conversation to a new topic. “So, St. Peters signed the contract securing our partnership. Excellent! What of his daughter? Was she any trouble?”

To his surprise, Daniel’s face flushed. “A bit, now that you mention it. Her interest in you was somewhat greater than you led me to believe,” he said with accusing eyes. “Dissuading her from pursuit without earning her father’s enmity was a challenge, but I managed. She understands now that I—or you, rather—are unequivocally uninterested.”

His gut unclenched just a little. At least he wouldn’t have to fend off Miss St. Peters while attempting to put his life back together. If such was even possible. “Out of curiosity, how did you dissuade her?”

“I’d rather not discuss it,” said his brother, the color in his cheeks deepening. “It was not my finest moment. Oh, and I’m afraid you’ll have to hire new staff. I did well to act like you in the beginning; however, circumstances forced me to alter my—your—demeanor in order to discourage Miss St. Peters. I felt it wise to dismiss your household before leaving, as I feared their witnessing another abrupt change in your behavior after yet another absence might raise suspicion. They were paid well, and will be paid again in six months provided they keep quiet concerning their former employer.”

“Good thinking.” Devlin pasted the expected grin on his face. “And nice attempt to change the subject. Got your hands dirty, did you? Come on. Out with it.”

Daniel’s face fairly flamed as he scowled. “The more I tried to show her that I—you—were not the sort of man she wanted, the more determined she seemed to have me—you. It was most vexing.” His irritation melted into a look of abject remorse. “I’m afraid I resorted to deliberately provoking her into a public show of temper. Her father was most displeased with the outburst and sent her to stay with his sister in Leeds. Indefinitely. He blamed his leniency for her conduct and apologized for her behavior.”

Devlin blinked in surprise. It must have been a truly spectacular outburst to warrant being sent from her doting father’s side. He almost felt sorry for her. Almost. “Well, well. I commend you on your fortitude and resourcefulness.” He raised his glass—vowing it would be his last for the evening—and
toasted their mutual success.

His twin’s face remained flushed, and he looked distinctly uncomfortable as he drained his glass in an uncharacteristic gulp.

“Clear your conscience, brother mine,” Devlin told him, wishing he could do so himself. “I knew you were equal to the task. Whereas you’ve the strong morals necessary to resist temptation, I’m far too weak-willed to withstand carnal enticements.”

Why in the seven hells did I say that? Putting down his glass, he vowed not to imbibe another drop until he was safely away from his brother.

Daniel shot him a probing look, but then shook his head and set his own glass down. “So, that’s that, and there’s an end to our respective troubles. I’ll go back to Harper’s Grove with a temporary limp, and you’ll go back to London with what, a sprained ankle?”

“Something like that,” Devlin grumbled just as there was a knock at their door. “It will be good to get back to proper civilization.”

For the first time in days, his stomach rumbled with hunger as his brother admitted two servants bearing trays laden with food. He ignored the flirty-eyed redhead’s inviting smile as she hovered overlong while placing his repast before him. After the table had been set and the servants dismissed, he lifted the cover on the nearest plate and inhaled deeply of the mouthwatering scent released with the rising steam.

The real vicar of Harper’s Grove cleared his throat.

Rolling his eyes, Devlin replaced the cover and bowed his head. As he listened to his brother’s blessing, he felt more normal than he had since this whole disaster had begun. Being with Danny was a soothing, if temporary balm, despite the fact that he couldn’t tell him anything.

The next morning as he made his way to London, Devlin tried to ignore the empty feeling that had returned so quickly after parting ways with his twin.

He missed Mary. Her voice, her smile, her smell. For the rest of his life, the pain of her absence would be his penance. He’d never love another.
Mary lay soaking in her bath, letting the warm water soothe away her secret aches from the night before, wondering if she hadn’t made a terrible mistake in refusing his offer.

Devlin. The man who’d betrayed her before she came to Harper’s Grove had never made her feel anything comparable to what she’d experienced with him. Even now, the memory of it rekindled unwanted fire in her flesh.

A head-cracking yawn made her lean back and close her eyes. She was still tired. The way he’d looked—his body, his strength, his tenderness, all of it—was imprinted on her mind’s eye and carved into her heart. As long as she lived, she’d never forget it, no matter how much she wanted to.

“Miss?” a maid softly called from the doorway. “Your mother wishes to know if you want breakfast sent up. What shall I tell her?”

Opening her eyes, Mary refrained from letting out an irritated sigh. “Tell her I would like tea and toast only. My stomach is still too delicate to take aught else.”

“Yes, Miss.”

She’d cited the sudden onset of a stomach malady last night as the excuse for her late return. Poor Augie’s cook would take the blame, but it was better than the truth: that she’d foolishly given herself to a man before saying her wedding vows.

Is he thinking of me now? Stop it.

Rising from the now-tepid water, she dried herself and padded over to the mirror. Impossibly, her reflection revealed nothing of the change that had been wrought within her. But she knew she’d been forever altered.

At breakfast, she could do no more than nibble at the contents of her plate. This worked in her favor, as it elicited her mother’s continued sympathy. She was allowed to once more return upstairs to rest in peace.

The clock’s hands had never moved more slowly. Never had her doubts been stronger. She was still rightfully wroth over the deception, but had she done the right thing in refusing his offer so quickly? She’d been so hurt, so angry and embarrassed, that she hadn’t wanted to hear anything he had to say. And she’d been afraid.

Neither had been in a calm or rational state of mind when they’d parted, but she’d had time to think now, at least a little. And such thoughts brought no comfort.

He’d accepted the blame for it all, and she wanted to let him shoulder it, but her conscience wouldn’t allow it. She’d knowingly gone with an inebriated man unchaperoned into his residence. And then when she’d thrown herself at him, despite his questionable sobriety he’d still tried to stop her. Yet she’d persisted. He’d only succumbed to a temptation deliberately put forth.

I am just as culpable as he is for what happened.

Confidence in her handling of the situation waned further. He’d truly seemed remorseful for his conduct and sincere in his declaration of sentiment. Had it all been an act? Or had he truly begun to genuinely care for her?

Her stomach clenched. Have I made a grave error?

Lunch came and went. Her appetite gone with worry, she remained in her chamber with a plate of dry toast she didn’t touch.

Night fell but sleep eluded her. She tossed and turned, unable to find a comfortable position.
The only woman I want. And the only one I cannot have...
I've seen your heart.

Her own heart quailed as his words came back to haunt her.

Did I do the right thing?

Dawn.

She took pains dressing, deciding to go by the church and perhaps see if she’d run into him. “Mama, I think I shall go and visit Augie today,” she told her mother at breakfast. Yesterday’s self-imposed famine had put an edge on her hunger and she’d eaten well.

Mama cast her a dubious glance. “I don’t think so, my dear. You gave us quite a bit of concern yesterday.”

“It was just a bit of stomach upset,” Mary protested, keeping her tone light. “I feel perfectly fine now.”

“Hmm. Well…”

Mary held her breath as her mother hesitated. Please! I must find him.

“I’ll agree you look much better today,” said Mama. “Very well—but I don’t want you eating anything there until after I speak to Mrs. Benfield and she has had a word with her cook.”

Determined not to show remorse for her fib and give anything away, Mary concentrated on her bacon. “Yes, of course, Mama,” she agreed meekly.

She was forced to endure almost an hour of fussing and commentary before at last being allowed out the front door. The urge to take off running down the path toward the church was strong, but she managed to withstand it and restrain herself to a brisk walk.

The church was locked. Careful to check first that no one was about, she slipped around the side to the vicarage. The curtains were drawn. No smoke rose from the chimney. All the same, she knocked. No answer. Cheeks burning, she tried peeking through a narrow crack in the curtains and saw nothing but darkness.

A feeling of dread swept over her as she observed the only footprints in the yard were her own. No one else had disturbed the snow since it had fallen yesterday. Either he was not answering, or he wasn’t there. Part of her wanted to pound on the door and shout for him to come.

Don’t be a fool. There is likely a very good reason for this.

The north wind kicked up a dusting of snow, making her shiver. Turning away, she hurried on to Augie’s. Her friend received her with great enthusiasm. Far more than Mary would have expected, considering they’d seen each other the day before yesterday. “You seem to be in very good cheer today,” she remarked, wishing she felt the same.

“Oh, Mary,” said her friend, smiling to rival the sun. “Mr. May returned yesterday—and he proposed.” She held out her hand, upon which now rested a thin gold band bearing a small, but very pretty, sapphire. “We are to be married late this summer!”

It was hard to appear as excited as she knew she was expected to be, but Mary put all her effort into it. She truly wanted to share in her friend’s joy, but her heart just wasn’t in it. All her thoughts were bent on Devlin Wayward.

Where was he? What was he doing?

She so wanted to confide in her friend. But she couldn’t. Not only would it overshadow Augie’s happiness, but it would be terribly imprudent. He will return, and then I’ll speak with him and learn the truth. This time, I’ll listen.

But the niggling worm of doubt that had burrowed into her heart simply wouldn’t leave her be. When she walked past the church on her way home after her visit, she paused at the corner to check
the vicarage one last time and marked that there was still no smoke rising from the chimney. He hadn’t come home. *He must be at Winterbourne.* It was the only logical explanation.

“Good afternoon, Miss Tomblin. Are you looking for Reverend Wayward?”

Starting, Mary turned around to see Mrs. Stone crossing the street to meet her. “Oh, I…I was just going to speak to him about”—*Think, Mary!*—“about the spring charity bazaar. I had some ideas.” *Could you really think of nothing better than that?* It was weak, but it was better than the truth.

Mrs. Stone’s careworn brow furrowed into a sympathetic frown. “He left town, dear—but according to Mr. Siskin he’ll be back for Sunday services.”

A queer sort of numbing sensation spread from the top of Mary’s head to the soles of her feet. “He’s to come back?”

“Mmm. Mr. Siskin said the Reverend left a letter to be delivered to London yesterday morning—as he often does—and then mentioned he’d be away. Some urgent family business, as I understand it. Must have been serious business indeed for him to leave in such a rush.” A smile returned to her lips. “But don’t worry, child. You can tell him your ideas Sunday after the service. After all, the bazaar is still many weeks away.”

He’d left town. A dull pain pulled at her chest from the inside. She could hardly breathe for it. Her eyelids pricked, and she blinked to hold back tears. Pasting on a bright smile, she thanked Mrs. Stone and hastened on her way.

He sent someone a letter. Someone in London. Daniel. It had to be his twin. And then he’d left. Which could only mean one thing: when the “reverend” returned, it would actually be Daniel, not Devlin, at the pulpit. Whether for his own sake or for hers, Devlin had moved immediately to honor her wish that their paths might never cross again.

Tears she could no longer hold back left hot tracks down her frigid cheeks as she trudged homeward. More than ever, she feared she’d made a terrible mistake.

…

*Sunday, four weeks later*

Every time Mary saw Reverend Wayward, it hurt.

She’d done all she could to avoid running into him, of course, but it had occasionally proven unavoidable. Augie had finally inquired about her sudden lack of enthusiasm for his company, and had been full of shock as Mary had lied and told her they’d had an irreconcilable difference of opinion that had resulted in a falling out. She’d said nothing terribly damning, of course, but it was enough to make Augie glare like a basilisk every time she saw him.

Mary could barely stand the sight of the man, herself: Although he hadn’t been the one to actually commit the act, seeing his face about the village felt like being trapped inside a bad dream. And she simply could not find it within herself to forgive him for telling Devlin about her foolish confession.

Entering the apothecary, she tried to put it out of her mind. Mrs. Small had complained of aching joints, and Mary wanted to pick up some liniment for her before today’s visit. As the clerk behind the counter made change and packaged the liniment, her stomach roiled. She didn’t know if it was the conflicting odors of all the herbs and tonics in here or her own upset causing it, but she needed air. Snatching the liniment out of the clerk’s hand, she called out her thanks as she hastened to the door.

She burst out into the cold air and stopped to draw in a deep breath. It was bracing and did much to ease her discomfort. It was, however, the wrong moment to have emerged. Looking up, she saw Reverend Wayward not three paces off, staring at her with wary eyes, poised as if on the verge of
Oh God. There was no hiding now. Slowly, she straightened, pulling the shreds of her dignity about
her like a cloak, and adopted a withering look of contempt. She waited, daring him to address her,
wishing she had something other than a reed basket of yarn and Mrs. Small’s liniment to pitch at his
head as a reward for his part in her downfall.

“Miss Tomblin…how pleasant to see you,” he said hesitantly. “I do hope your day…is, ah…”
Outrage must have written itself on her face in bold strokes, because he stopped, eyes widening, and
very wisely took a step back.

Gritting her teeth, Mary turned on her heel and marched off in the opposite direction, head high.
Tears burned her eyes. Again. She was so tired of crying.

The close encounter had confirmed her assumption that Devlin had failed to tell him anything about
what had transpired between them. His face was guileless, and she knew in her heart that he was truly
unaware of what his ass of a brother had done.

It should’ve made her feel better. But it didn’t. It did, however, somewhat alter her feelings toward
their village’s shepherd. Bitterness took the place of hatred. She’d never forgive his role in the
charade that had broken her heart, but she couldn’t hate him for the rest of it if he didn’t even know.
As she turned the corner and made to go the long way to Mrs. Small’s house, she aimed a vicious kick
at a snowbank. Indeed, the reverend was the same blithe, oblivious fellow she’d met her first Sunday
in Harper’s Grove. He’d not changed at all. Looking back, she was chagrined at how she’d failed to
recognize the difference between the two men.

Instinct had led her astray twice, but it would never do so again.
She refrained from kicking Mrs. Small’s gate as she passed. Pasting a smile on a face that felt
nothing like arranging itself into any sort of pleasant expression, she knocked on the door.

An hour into the visit, she began feeling ill again. The fire had been stoked to a full blaze, and it
was too hot in here. Sweat trickled down between her breasts, and her palms felt clammy. Her
stomach churned, and she took another sip of tea to try to calm it.

Bad idea.
Rising abruptly, Mary gave her startled hostess a failing smile. “Please excuse me, Mrs. Small, but
I’m afraid I must step outside.” Without further ado, she bolted for the door.

She made it out just in time before the offering of tea and biscuits she’d accepted only minutes ago
made a violent reappearance. Sagging with relief, she stayed bent over with her hands on her knees
and her head down, gulping the frigid air. Her stomach slowly calmed, and she straightened, leaning
on the doorframe for support as a wave of dizziness rolled over her.

Running into him this morning had upset her more than she’d imagined possible. After weeks of
wrestling down her pain, anger, and disappointment, she’d thought herself in better control of her
emotions. Bending, she scooped up a palmful of snow and used it to rinse out her mouth. With the
edge of her boot, she scraped fresh snow over the ousted contents of her stomach.

Thank the Lord Mrs. Small did not bear witness to my weakness. Bracing herself, she went back
into the house.

“Are ye unwell, child?” asked Mrs. Small, her seamed face puckered with concern as she hobbled
over and laid a dry, wrinkled hand on Mary’s forehead. “I feel no fever.”

Mary smiled halfheartedly. “I think I must have eaten something off at breakfast. I should probably
go home.” Now that she was back inside where it was so warm, her stomach was threatening to rebel
again, despite the fact that there was nothing in it to eject.

But Mrs. Small didn’t stand aside to let her pass. Her rheumy eyes narrowed as she peered up into
Mary’s flushed face. “Child, when did ye last have a show of blood?”

That this dear, sweet old lady should ask her something so very intimate shocked Mary to the soles of her feet. Indignant, she drew herself up to squawk an appropriate objection, but then the import of the question struck her, preventing any reproach from forming on her lips as she thought back.

_my last menses were in February, of course...no, wait..._ She hadn’t had them since January, when she’d been worried about the new bedsheets and had slept on a folded drying sheet to prevent any stains. She remembered praying they’d pass quickly and not prevent her from her outing with...

The world abruptly shrunk, and she experienced a long, horrible moment of self-awareness so acute it was painful. She couldn’t tell her hostess the truth. Swallowing her terror, she tried to smile reassuringly, even as a queer buzzing began in her ears. “Oh, no, Mrs. Small. I assure you it’s not that. I truly think it’s something I ate.”

“Come,” said Mrs. Small with a brisk nod. She beckoned, moving off toward her tiny kitchen. “I’ve some peppermint tea that ought to help.”

Mary couldn’t move, however. All the blood felt like it had left her head, and her feet seemed to have grown roots. _It cannot be. It simply...cannot._ The buzzing grew louder and louder, and the floor suddenly seemed much farther away than it ought to be.

A firm but gentle hand gripped her upper arm. “Come, child,” said Mrs. Small, breaking the spell. “Come with me, now.”

Mary’s feet shuffled into motion, and she woodenly let her hostess lead her over to a chair by the kitchen table. She sank down onto it just as numbness took over her body. _I’m with child._ Dismay gathered in a lump in her throat. _His child. Oh, God help me!_

“I meant no insult, ye know,” said Mrs. Small with a twinkle in her eye. “I’ll share a secret with ye: me own firstborn came almost three months early—a big, healthy babe.” She followed the statement with a wink.

How she managed to sit there in that kitchen, listening to Mrs. Small reminisce about her youthful folly, without bursting into tears over her own was something she’d never understand. Her parents would be so disappointed in her. And rightfully so.

As for her child’s father, reason told her they _must_ marry so that she wouldn’t be labeled a whore and her child a bastard. He might bear no love for her after her cold rejection, but surely he wouldn’t want his own child branded as such?

Something deep in her chest tore at the thought of having to give up her baby should he deny his obligation. Even if it was his illegitimate get, it was still _her_ child. Though her parents would be angry, they would never cast her out—but they’d also never let her keep it. She’d be sent away before it showed, _far away_, to have the baby in secret. And then they’d insist on her giving it up so she could start over fresh without bringing shame to herself and them.

Another wave of sickness assaulted her, and she swallowed hard to keep the bile from rising. She’d thought to find a convenient groom this spring and somehow feign virginity on her wedding night, but concealing the birth of a child was all but impossible. Bearing a child drastically changed a woman’s body. If the pregnancy left any visible evidence—stretchmarks and the like—she’d never be able to hide it.

In truth, she wasn’t sure she’d even be able to give up the child, should it come down to it. She’d wanted children for so long. The thought of having one and not being able to be a mother to him or her nearly wrenched her heart from its mooring. _I would have to take on work as a governess or teacher, and I’d never be able to marry._ That prospect seemed much more palatable at the moment than the thought of marrying _him_. But he was her child’s father. It was only right that she at least make an
Choices. It all came down to choices.

It had been her choice to chase her desire and ignore all prudence in the pursuit. Her choice to ignore Devlin’s attempt to prevent this disaster, and her choice to reject him. So many times, she’d been offered a choice and had taken the wrong path. Now, another choice lay before her. One she couldn’t avoid. Or afford to get wrong.

By the time she left Mrs. Small’s cottage, she’d decided. She’d go to the vicar, tell him what had happened, and then his family would make Devlin do the honorable thing—whether or not he wanted to. They’d marry, even if only in name, for the sake of her baby.

Our baby.

A memory surfaced of Devlin playing with the village children while disguised as his brother, and a spark of hope rekindled in her breast. He might not love me, but he would certainly love his son or daughter.

First, however, she must confess her error and enlist her parents’ help in persuading the vicar to give up his twin’s address. If he refused, Papa must immediately go to Winterbourne and speak with the duke. He would surely force Devlin to make matters right for the sake of their family name. After all, they had Lady Diana to consider. If word of this got out, the scandal would be incredibly detrimental to her chances of making a good match.

A month ago, she’d have felt sorry for the young woman who’d been so nice to her. It was unlikely she knew what a terrible cad her brother was. But there were innocent casualties in any war, and that’s what this was. A war. And she planned to win it.

For my child’s sake...

Her lips pressed into a line, she marched homeward, determined to feel neither pity nor regret for what she was about to do.
Chapter Sixteen

Devlin had attempted to drown his misery in drink. It hadn’t worked. And yet he still tried. Bleary-eyed, he stared at the glass in his hand and then looked around at his home…and felt nothing.

Home. Harper’s Grove was home, not this place. Everyone he cared about was there.

But the bonds you made there don’t belong to you, mocked his conscience. They belong to Daniel. They don’t know you deceived them. If they ever found out, they’d hate you for making fools of them and despise him for his part in it.

Envoy added its poison to the mix. How he coveted his brother’s life! His own was meaningless. He did nothing to help people or make the world a better place. If anything, he made it worse, encouraging men to indulge in selfishness and vice.

He knocked back another finger of brandy and then in disgust flung the empty glass into the hearth. It shattered, sending shards of leaded crystal spraying out across the floor. He didn’t even flinch. I can afford it.

His gut churned as he threw himself into his favorite armchair. Here he was, surrounded by all the trappings of wealth—a fine house, an army of servants to see to his every comfort and whim, everything a man of the world could want—and all he felt was dissatisfaction. Hundreds of pounds had been squandered on liquor and frivolity since his return, all in an effort to distract himself, yet he was more miserable now than ever.

“What’s the point of being rich if it cannot buy one happiness?” he muttered to the empty room. The only reply was the popping of a log in the grate.

Apparently, with the exception of yon decanter, it couldn’t buy him joy in any form. On coming home, he’d wined and dined his so-called friends to the point of newsworthy extravagance in order to get to know them better. In doing so, however, he’d discovered he didn’t much like the people with whom he’d surrounded himself.

They were all of them vain, shallow, grasping individuals who could be depended on to support him only if they could be sure of profiting from it. The only loyalty owed him in London had been bought and paid for, and it was a damned expensive commodity.

No one he knew here could be trusted unless there was something in it for them. Devlin put his head in his hands and squeezed, trying in vain to silence his thoughts, stifle his self-loathing, and chase away his shame. But his conscience wouldn’t give him any peace.

I’d rather die than live like this. Without her.

The thought crystallized, sharp and clear, and for one terrible instant he actually considered it. But Devlin Wayward was too much of a survivor to let melancholy and cowardice make an end of him. Cowardice is what got you here in the first place.

The only remedy for cowardice was courage.

Slowly, Devlin raised his head. He knew what had to be done. He must return to Harper’s Grove and face her, even though he’d been an ass. He’d beg forgiveness. Beg her to give him another chance.

It was time to go home.

Home. A wave of longing so strong it brought tears to his eyes rolled over him. He longed to see friendly faces, to hear people calling out greetings with no expectation save a smile and a wave in return. But it wasn’t the place he yearned for so much as one specific person.
Mary’s sunlit face surfaced in his mind’s eye, and her gentle laughter echoed in the corridors of his memory. How he missed their long rides down quiet, wooded lanes, the only sounds those of the horse’s hooves crunching in the fresh snow, the occasional burst of birdsong, and their banter.

The tightness in his chest became so intense that he doubled over. But the pain refused to be eased. Only one thing in this world could cure him of the malady from which he now suffered.

*How can she not hate me? I never even said goodbye. I left her no note, nothing.*

A great, tearing sob heaved up and out of his constricted throat as the dam broke, releasing the flood he’d been trying so hard to contain. Instinct would have him run away from it as fast as his feet could carry him. But there was no running from the truth.

*My life has no meaning without her in it. All the lies he’d told himself about how great his life was, about his own importance, and about how other men envied him, were as weak as paper houses in a deluge. Only those who knew nothing of real love envied him, and the only people here who’d miss him if he died this minute were those expecting to be paid tomorrow.*

But when he’d been with her, Mary had given his life purpose. She’d shown him that selfishness didn’t equate to happiness. She’d taught him that relationships were of more worth than money or status. She’d given him her heart without reservation, her only expectation being its return in kind. All she’d wanted was the honest love of a good man.

*Danny is a fool. His brother could’ve had Mary’s complete devotion had he but given her a chance. Any advantage in the union would have been entirely his, too. Her family was wealthy enough to anticipate her marriage to a baronet, at the least, yet she’d been willing to marry a humble vicar. And he’d run away.*

But Devlin had gotten to know her as Daniel never had. In the short time he’d spent with her, he’d talked with her, asked her questions, and probed her heart. He’d come to understand and care for her. Deeply. And she’d done the same with him, such that she’d put her entire future into his unworthy hands.

All at once, it struck him that Mary had never loved Daniel, because she never really knew him. He’d never allowed her to get close enough.

*But she knows me—better than I know myself.* It had still been *him* under those vicar’s robes. And she’d loved him. He knew she had, even if only a little. It was enough, a place to start.

After several weeks of constant inebriation and dulling of his senses, sobriety reinstated itself with a lightning jolt of energy, calling every nerve to a state of instant, almost painful alertness. Levering up from his chair, Devlin strode to the study door and yanked it open, bellowing for his valet as he made for the stairs.

*I’ll go back. I’ll explain everything and make her understand. And I’ll make it up to her. I’ll—* 

Reason backhanded him as he tried to mount the steps two at a time and his leg, which had fully recovered from his “sprain,” sent him a sharp reminder of just how freshly healed it was.

The switch.

Doubtless, she’d distanced herself from any and all appearance of interest in his brother by now. Since returning, he’d heard nothing about her from Daniel but a passing comment that she seemed awfully put out with him. But still, his twin couldn’t just show up out of nowhere and ask her to marry him without raising a lot of uncomfortable questions.

She would still be angry. It would take a miracle to persuade her to forgive him, but he didn’t care if it took forever. He’d find a way to win her heart. To be worthy of her.

His valet appeared at the top of the stairs in robe and slippers, blinking dazedly.

During his last visit with Mr. Messingham, he’d heard that Rosewood House was soon to be put up for sale by Widow Amberley. Situated on the outskirts of Harper’s Grove, it was a lovely old manor house of middling size with a rambling garden and a spectacular view of the hills.

*Mary will simply love living there! She’ll be able to ride every day if she desires.*

He was brought out of his reverie by his bewildered valet spluttering in protest at being ordered in the middle of the night to pack up his master’s entire household.

Another thought occurred to him. “No, wait! Not everything—the furniture can stay.” He’d have Rosewood decorated with all new furnishings. Nothing from his past would follow him to Harper’s Grove if he could help it.

Looking around at his house, Devlin knew he wouldn’t miss it at all. He’d miss nothing here, because his life wasn’t *in* London. It was in Harper’s Grove. And he intended to go and claim it.

…

Deep satisfaction filled Mary as Reverend Wayward blanched, his face becoming as pale as tallow, while her father delivered their ultimatum. She admired Papa’s restraint and was glad, after all, that he’d insisted on being her voice for this.

“You *will* own the consequence of your actions and help us, sir,” said her father gruffly. “I leave you with the choice of giving me the means by which to contact your twin or having me obtain it from your brother His Grace.”

Deep blue eyes, gratifyingly wide with shock, turned to regard her. “But…it’s impossible. He would have told me if he’d—if—” His mouth opened and closed soundlessly as speech temporarily deserted him.

“How dare you?” she hissed, standing. “How *dare* you accuse me of lying?” Blood whooshed in her ears, but her voice came out strong and clear. “I can describe your bedroom in every detail. I know the paintings hung upon its walls. I know the placement of every stick of furniture. I know what you keep on your bedside table—and, more importantly, I know every mark on his body. The small red crescent on his inner left thigh. The scar that stretches from his ribs to his navel.”

“Oh God,” he whispered. He met her eyes, and she saw they were full of remorse. “I know you speak the truth. The mark you describe on his left leg, I bear on my right. The scar you spoke of he received two years ago in a duel.”

Her mother spoke for the first time since their arrival. “If he was involved in a duel, then he is not a clergyman like you. What, pray, does he do?”

A pained look crossed his face, and he reddened further. “You have every right to know. My brother and I went to the same university and both studied to become clergymen. At the very end, however, he chose not to be ordained. Instead, he took himself to London and opened a…gambling establishment. He now owns several.”

Mary just stared at him, unable to speak, unable to even retrieve the vocabulary to form a response. Gaming hells. The father of her child owned *gaming hells.*

Avoiding her eyes, the reverend hung his head and continued quietly, “When he broke his leg, we agreed he could take my place here without anyone being the wiser until he was healed enough to travel, while I took his place in London to manage his business affairs.”

“Why?” prompted her mother with unconcealed dismay. “Why in heaven’s name would you agree
“I was afraid to let anyone here know they’d been fooled by an impostor, lest my parishioners begin to doubt their priest’s integrity,” he answered, grimacing. “And Devlin had a business negotiation that could not be delayed requiring his presence back in London. And…” He looked up not at his inquisitor, but at Mary. “And, though it was only in small part, because he offered to help me put an end to your pursuit, which I could not seem to achieve on my own.”

Mary’s chest felt like a vise had been clamped around it. She’d known, but hearing it confirmed made it hurt no less.

Reverend Wayward continued, his face now fully beet red. “After our sister unwittingly encouraged you, he told me he would gently drive you away by showing you that the life of a vicar’s wife would be one of toil and self-sacrifice. He—we—thought you’d leave off after the first outing.”

He closed his eyes and tears seeped from their corners. “I made the terrible mistake of trusting him with my God-given flock, including you, and he betrayed that trust. For that I shall never forgive him…or myself.”

That queer feeling of disconnection she’d felt the day she’d discovered she was with child seemed to have returned. “And where is he now?”

“I don’t—I don’t know,” he stammered. “Please believe me when I say I knew nothing of his having…” Pausing, he swallowed and drew a shaky breath. “Of his having taken advantage of you. I knew something was not quite right when we met to trade places again, but in my eagerness to return home I did not press him. I cannot think what possessed him to do this,” he quietly raged. “Not only was it a heinous crime against you, but it puts our entire family at risk.”

Again, Papa spoke, his voice rough with anger. “It certainly does. Devlin Wayward must take Mary to wife. If we can achieve it without a scandal, I would prefer it—for Mary’s sake. I care nothing for you or the rest of your misbegotten family. In fact, I will expect the duke to see to it you are removed from your position here. You obviously cannot be trusted with the responsibility of upholding your sacred vows. As for your swine of a brother, he must be brought here forthwith.”

The vicar’s bent head slowly nodded. “I understand your anger,” he croaked. “And I fully deserve it, as does Devlin.” At last, he raised his head, and Mary saw his eyes were swimming with tears. “But bringing him here may not be a simple matter.”

“What do you mean?” growled Papa with a thunderous frown.

“I’ve written to him several times since we parted,” answered the vicar. “It has long been our custom to correspond regularly, but though my letters were received, I have not heard back from him. And then yesterday my latest letter, which I sent by special courier out of concern over his silence, was returned unopened. I was informed that Devlin is no longer living at that address. My messenger inquired of his neighbors, but none knew his whereabouts. Then I learned that his business has reportedly been sold to his partner. I know not where he has gone or if he will ever return. He has never disappeared like this before. I cannot help wondering if he has fled England.”

Mary felt all the blood leave her head, and the room went dim.

The next thing she knew, hands grasped her arms and were easing her into a chair. “What am I to do?” she gasped, her upset threatening to make her violently ill.

Her father’s hand, warm and solid, came to rest on her shoulder. “We’ll hire people to search for him. We’ll find him, Mary. Never you fear.”

A bark of soggy laughter burst from her mouth. “I’m nearly two months gone with child, Papa. What if he cannot be found? My baby will be born a bastard.” She buried her face in her hands and tried to muffle her sobs. Everything had gone horribly wrong. *So much for choices...*
“No, Miss Tomblin, it won’t,” said Reverend Wayward. “Because I’ll marry you. If you’ll have me.”

Her head snapped up and she stared at him in disbelief. “But you despise me!”

Again, remorse filled his face. “I truly don’t,” he said, sinking down beside her chair. “I was simply afraid. And now I see how that fear led me to make an appalling mistake. One that has caused you terrible pain. This is my fault. Please, if we cannot find my brother in time, let me make it right.”

She flinched as he took up one of her hands between his own. How strange it was, looking into this agonizingly familiar face and knowing it belonged to a different man than the one who’d made love to her upstairs. They looked so alike! Yet, now that she observed him more closely, she saw there were tiny differences. The few extra lines at the corners of Reverend Wayward’s eyes spoke of laughter his twin hadn’t voiced. Now they held a look of such sorrowful remorse that she could hardly stand it.

Devlin Wayward, wherever he was, was nothing like this man. According to his own flesh and blood, he was an unmitigated rakehell. I was such a fool…

“I can give you the security of a name for you and your child,” the reverend was saying. “I swear no one will ever know I’m not the babe’s true father. And I’ll be a good husband to you. My living, should I be allowed to keep it,” he added, glancing at her father, “is humble, but you will never want for security. And…” He flushed anew and swallowed hard. “Know that if you desire ours to be a marriage in name only, I will of course abide by your wishes. In addition to my own, this house possesses five other bedchambers. I’ll never impose upon you, Miss Tomblin. You have my word as both a gentleman and a priest.”

Her father snorted.

Mary shot him a quelling glance before turning to again regard Reverend Wayward. His expression was earnest, but there was no love in his eyes. Compassion, yes, along with guilt, shame, and grim resolve. But there was nothing of love.

It was certainly not the proposal she’d envisioned all those months ago when she’d thought herself in love with him. And now she recognized the truth: that her feelings for him had indeed been nothing more than an infatuation. He was honorable and kind, but he wasn’t the man she’d come to—though apparently the sentiment had been grossly misplaced—love.

Or desire. Reverend Wayward wore the same face as the fraud she knew to be Devlin, but when she looked at him, she felt nothing. He held her hand between his, but his touch elicited no pleasant tingles or pull of want inside her. When Devlin had touched her, her entire body had come alive.

The memory of it threatened to bring on fresh tears. Anger burned in her gut, and she lowered her gaze so the man kneeling before her wouldn’t see it in her face. Had he not traded places with his misbegotten brother, she’d never have felt such desire and would not now be in this predicament. His cowardice had cost her any chance of happiness.

Her conscience pricked her hard. He fled his home in part because you pressured him. Then you threw yourself at his replacement. That another man took what you freely surrendered is not his fault. It’s yours, for brazenly offering it. Your fault in this is equal to his, if not greater.

Resignation slowly settled in as necessity overrode all other considerations. Should they fail to find Devlin, she would become the vicar’s wife, just as she’d planned when they’d first met, but it was no longer the realization of a dream. It was simply what had to be done. A loveless union seemed a fitting punishment for them both.

“For my child’s sake, I accept your offer.”
Chapter Seventeen

Devlin was out of the coach before it had rolled to a complete stop. Bounding up the steps, he sailed through the door the instant it opened, past the open-mouthed footman, and proceeded directly to David’s study, where he always was this time of day.

But David wasn’t there.

Perplexed by his oldest sibling’s deviation from routine—David never varied his schedule unless something infringed upon it—he made for his stepmother’s favorite salon, eager to have done with the unpleasantness of making his confession. He’d decided the truth, despite the well-deserved censure it would incur, was best.

No more lies. No more omissions. His family, unhappy though they might be with him when all was said and done, could be trusted to keep the secret. Oh, they wouldn’t do it for his sake, but that didn’t matter. They’d do it for themselves—and for Mary. It would take a miracle to convince her of his love, but however long it took, he’d wait. Whatever she demanded of him, he’d do it. He was prepared to sacrifice anything and everything for her.

In fact, he’d already begun. His house in London and everything in it had been sold with all haste. He’d also sold his part of the business to St. Peters and then had cut ties with all his former associates. His old life had been shed and left behind.

He’d stopped at Rosewood House on his way here and was well pleased with his purchase. The decorator had done an excellent job, and the new servants had made the place spotless. It was in a perfect state of preparedness for its new master and, eventually, mistress.

He poked his head in the salon, but his family weren’t in there, either.

“Where is everyone?” He peered through the windows overlooking the gardens and spied his stepmother walking back toward the house with a basketful of cut flowers on her arm.

“Danny?” It was his sister. “What are you doing here?”

Without turning around, he answered, “Why, I’m here to see you, of course. And David, as soon as I can find him.” At last he faced her. “Where has he got to, do you know?”

Her eyes widened. “Devlin?”

“Ah, so you can tell us apart.” Laughing at her incredulous expression, he made to embrace her, but she backed away as if he were diseased. The laughter died on his lips. “Diana? What is the matter?”

Her face had gone as white as the lilies in the basket she carried. “You unspeakable monster!”

Shocked by her outburst, Devlin ducked as a fistful of lilies came sailing at his head, followed by another, and then the basket itself. “Diana! What the—Diana!”

“Don’t you ‘Diana’ me!” she bellowed, picking up a figurine from the nearest table and hurling it at him. It narrowly missed, shattering against the wall beside him. She grabbed another and cocked her arm for another volley. “I cannot believe you’d dare to show your face here!”

Uh-oh.

“What the devil is going on in here?” thundered David, rushing in. He grabbed their sister’s wrist before she could send another missile flying. Then he spied her target, and his face, too, drained of color. “Devlin?”

The sinking feeling in the pit of Devlin’s stomach worsened. “I take it you know.”

His sister spoke first, eyes snapping with fury. “That you’re a heartless cad? Yes, we know.”

Heartless cad?
David gently relieved her of her intended projectile. “Diana, fetch your mother from the garden at once and bring her here.”

Shooting Devlin a black look, she yanked free and stomped out of the room, muttering invectives every step of the way.

“David, I can—”

“Your brother already explained everything.”

Why? Why had Daniel told them about the switch? Had his conscience plagued him that much? “I’m sorry, David. Things got a bit out of hand, is all, but—”

“A bit out of hand?” cut in David, advancing to stand directly in front of him. His hard hazel eyes appeared almost entirely green, a sign of just how angry he was. “You compromised her!”

Shit. Swallowing his trepidation, Devlin chose his words with as much care as possible. “She found me after I’d been to the pub and—I did not mean to let things go so f—”

Pain exploded in his jaw as David’s fist connected in a powerful uppercut that sent him crashing to the floor in an ungainly sprawl. Stunned, he sat up with a grunt, but remained on the floor. “I suppose I deserved that.”

“Be thankful I don’t have a pistol,” said David flatly.

A chill settled in Devlin’s gut at the look in his brother’s eyes. “I hope you were not this hard on Danny. It was my fault, you know. All of it. I persuaded him to do it.”

“Yes, and thereby invited a scandal that would have ruined us all had not fortune been on our side, although I would hardly call what’s happened good fortune.”

Frowning, Devlin peered up at him. “What do you mean?”

Their sister and stepmother entered, and Diana spoke. “Why don’t you tell him the reason Mama and I were out gathering flowers, David?” Her face was a mask of loathing.

The blood in Devlin’s veins froze as his gaze fell on the now partly crushed lilies strewn across the floor. Oh, God…

“Mary—she’s not—?”

“No,” answered David, his eyes narrowing as Devlin let out the breath he’d been holding. His expression softened an increment. “She’s alive and as well as can be under the circumstances.”

Again, dread tied knots in his gut. “What circumstances?”

“Mary and Daniel are to be married,” answered his stepmother. “Tomorrow morning.”

“Married?” Devlin shot to his feet, wincing at the resulting twinge in his leg.

“We tried to find you, but you’d left London with nary a trace!” she snapped. “What were we to think but that you’d fled?”

David stepped in again. “It was the only way to avoid ruining them both and all of us along with them.”

Devlin’s heart wouldn’t stop racing. “Ruining? What do you mean ru—”

“She’s with child.”

The world tilted beneath his feet, and he had to grip the back of a chair to steady himself. I’m going to be a father. But Mary was marrying Daniel tomorrow. The man she wanted all along. “It’s not his,” he managed to croak.

“We know that, you insufferable ass!” snapped David, his voice rising to an enraged bellow. “Daniel would certainly never have compromised her!” Taking a deep breath, he visibly mastered himself. “He informed us you had not written him back and that his latest letter had been returned. I was forced to hire people to look for you—as discreetly as possible—but you were nowhere to be found. Your gaming establishments and house were shut, your accounts were closed, even your solicitor had packed up and left town. It was as if you’d vanished from the face of the earth.”
Through the lingering shock of discovering he’d fathered a child, Devlin numbly answered, “I cut ties. All of them. To come here and start anew. I did not want my past to follow me.”

A snort of humorless laughter broke from his oldest brother’s lips. “Well you did a damned good job of it. Meanwhile, we who knew nothing of your plans could only assume you had used and then abandoned poor Miss Tomblin to her fate.”

Guilt tore at Devlin anew. “You cannot think I would ever be so cruel,” he pleaded. “I told her my true identity after…” He broke off, his face heating as he glanced at the women in the room. Clearing his throat, he decided to censor his tale for the sake of decency. “I offered her my name—I told her I would come back to Harper’s Grove and woo her properly, as myself. She refused me. I could hardly force her to accept. You must believe me.”

David’s disgusted glare softened an increment, and then he let out a frustrated sigh. “I do,” he said at last, grudgingly. “Regardless, there is little that can be done now. Daniel offered to marry her because he feels responsible—he let the wolf in, so to speak—and he’s determined that she not be humiliated or her child suffer for it. Tomorrow morning, they will speak their vows and become husband and wife.”

“No. I will not allow it.” Determination filled him. “We have to stop the wedding.” He’d take her somewhere far away. He’d have to sell Rosewood House and start again somewhere they were neither of them known.

“You cannot,” said his stepmother. “She must marry as soon as possible—the child—”

“Is mine,” he interrupted, indignant. “She cannot marry him while carrying my child, not if I’m prepared to fulfill my obligation as a husband and father.” As he spoke, he reached into his breast pocket and pulled out the special license he’d brought with him from London. “And I assure you, I am.”

“What on earth makes you think she’ll accept you?” spat Diana. “She despises you, and with good reason!”

His temper flared. “You knew what Danny and I were doing almost from the beginning, so don’t you dare to lecture me on morality!”

She had the good grace to blanch as both her mother and David stared at her, astonished. “Yes,” she finally affirmed. “I knew. And I held my tongue to protect Daniel. I never imagined you’d do something so reprehensible—at least not while wearing his collar.” Tears formed in her eyes. “I hate you almost as much as Mary does! If you’ve any human decency at all, you’ll leave England like we thought you’d done and let her marry him. At least he’ll be good to her.”

Her words hit him like a cannonball to the gut. “He does not love her, Diana.”

“And you expect us to believe you do?” his sister scoffed, angrily swiping at her eyes. “After the way you treated her? Like one of your London whores?”

A soft gasp broke from his stepmother. “Diana!”

“Oh, don’t bother being scandalized, Mama. I know what he does for a living and the sort of people with whom he consorts.” She impaled him with her gaze. “I dare him to deny it.”

Shame seared him. “No. I won’t deny it. But I regret my previous conduct. I was wrong to deceive Mary—and everyone else in Harper’s Grove, including you,” he said, looking his brother and stepmother each in the eye before going on. “I can only beg your forgiveness and tell you that I came here to make things right.”

The faces staring back at him remained unmoved.

“I can prove it,” he persisted. “I bought Rosewood House. For Mary. For us.”

No softening whatsoever.
Swallowing his pride—he had no right to any—he rushed on. “I knew I was not good enough for her, but I could not stop thinking about her. It’s why I came back, despite everything. I had to at least try. Had I known she was with child, I’d have come sooner. She cannot marry Daniel,” he reiterated, the pain in his chest returning tenfold at the thought of losing her again. His voice shook as he finally said it aloud: “I love her.”

“God, help us all,” muttered David, passing a hand over his face and letting out an exasperated sigh. “It would have been so much simpler had you disappeared as we’d thought, but you’re here now, and I believe you mean well.” He silenced their sister’s protest with a curt gesture. “Somehow, we must find a way to straighten out this mess. She cannot marry the wrong man if the right one is willing.” Sighing again, he pinched the bridge of his nose and then abruptly straightened. “We must delay the wedding,” he said decisively.

“But what of the announcement?” Devlin asked, stomach still in knots. “Have the banns not already been read?”

David shook his head. “They preferred to marry quietly and ‘surprise’ everyone with the news once it was done. A friend of Daniel’s was to have performed the ceremony, but I’m sure we can get a message to him canceling the affair in time—if we hurry.” He fixed Devlin with hard eyes. “Mary has been...unfriendly toward Daniel since you left, and none but our families know she’s with child.”

Hope rallied. “Then I still have a chance.”

“For whatever it’s worth, yes. And you’d better not waste it,” said David, a dangerous glint in his eye. “You will go to her and her parents this evening—I’ll take you myself—and explain yourself. Then you will propose that you be formally ‘introduced’ to Miss Tomblin tomorrow, upon which you will give every appearance of falling madly in love. In the days following, you will make a public effort to win her affections, and you will, as far as everyone in the village is concerned, succeed.”

Again, his stepmother brought up the issue of time. “It will have to be a very quick courtship. She is already two and a half months gone. It’s nearly May, and the weather is warming, too. You have three, four weeks at most, before fashion can no longer conceal the truth from keen eyes.”

David nodded. “A wedding is out of the question, then. You’ll have to elope,” he told Devlin. “At worst, there’ll be a minor scandal over the haste of it. Especially if you take a long honeymoon trip and come back with the child already born.”

The woman who’d taken the place of his mother some twenty-one years ago took a deep breath and added, “You can always adjust the birthdate. People might suspect, but they won’t know for certain.”

It was a daunting proposition, but it was really the only choice. Devlin nodded.

David looked to Diana, who stood with her arms folded and a mutinous look on her face. “This will work only if we are all in agreement.”

All eyes moved to Diana, whose demeanor remained unyielding as she continued to glare daggers at Devlin. “I still think she’d be better off with Daniel. You left her. For two months.”

“And what of Danny?” Devlin prompted. “Should he be forced into a loveless marriage?”

“They might in time grow to love each other,” she insisted, stubborn to the last.

Such was his worst fear. As sure as the sun rose each day, Daniel would eventually fall in love with the woman he’d married under duress. Once that happened, she’d soon follow suit. Daniel was, after all, the man for whom she’d originally set her cap, and he possessed all the qualities she’d so prized when dreaming up her ideal husband.

“Please, Diana,” he pleaded softly, staring into her angry eyes. “It’s my child she carries, not Daniel’s. I must at least try.”
Mary’s stomach had turned sour on spying him entering through the front gate. Already, without even having yet spoken to her directly, he’d ruined her morning.

_He’s probably brought the marriage license for Papa to look over._ A special dispensation had been granted, owing to her urgent need to wed.

_Damned if I’ll go down before being summoned._ Every moment she was required to spend in her fiancé’s company was another moment of peace forever lost. No, Reverend Wayward wasn’t the man who’d done this to her, but on first glance he looked _exactly_ like the one who had.

Every time she saw him, it was like salt rubbed into an open wound. He’d been kind and patient with her to a fault, but that combined with his self-castigation over what he’d termed his “fatal cowardice” only made it worse. It made her feel guilty for loathing the very sight of him. Add to that the fact that she knew he no more wanted to marry her than she did him, and it made for a miserable state of being.

“Miss Mary?” called her mother’s maid softly from her door. “Your presence is requested in the salon.”

“I’m coming,” she answered dully. Sighing, she descended the staircase, determined to try to maintain a pleasant demeanor despite her bitterness. After all, she’d be spending the rest of her life with the man.

On entering the salon, she found him pacing the room. Her parents were, notably, not present.

“I asked to have a moment in private with you,” he said, answering her unspoken inquiry. “We need to talk, just the two of us.”

Curious as to why he should appear so nervous when they’d already come to an agreement, she nodded acceptance and took a seat. “Go on,” she prompted when he didn’t immediately speak.

He came to a halt and peered at her intently. “Before I say anything else, I must apologize for everything I’ve done to you. I don’t deserve your forgiveness, and I don’t expect it.”

A tingle shot down her spine as he stared at her with shadowed eyes, and all at once she knew this wasn’t Daniel Wayward. It was _him_. Devlin. The breath rushed from her lungs in a great gasp as all the pain, pressure, and constant worry of the weeks prior bore down on her at once. Without thinking, her fingers clawed for the nearest object they could find—which happened to be a brass bookend.

Her aim was terrible, sending the projectile far wide of her mark with a solid _thunk_. “You _bastard_!” she shrieked, casting about for something else to throw. “Where have you been?” A delicate porcelain figurine shattered against the wall to his left. She groped for another object, her questing fingers landing on a small plate piled with tea biscuits. “Do you _know_ how long I’ve been searching for you? How long _we’ve_ been searching for you?” The plate’s contents flew across the room in a shower of shortbread, followed by the dish itself, which landed on a chair and bounced to the floor unsatisfyingly whole. When she grabbed a silver candlestick, she was inordinately pleased to see his eyes at last widen with alarm. “You vanished into thin air without a word to anyone. We thought you left the bloody _country_!”

“Mary,” he said, coming—surprisingly—toward her. “Please, let me explain.”

“Oh, do _try_, I beg you,” she spat, backing away, still brandishing the candlestick. Turning her head, she bellowed over her shoulder for her parents.

“They won’t come. David has asked them to step aside with him to give us a moment alone. And
they’ve sent the servants away so that no one will disturb us. Mary, I—"

Lifting her hand, she cocked her arm, ready to send the candlestick flying toward his head. But even as she tightened her grip in preparation to launch it, a sob tore free of her throat. Mortified, she dropped her missile and turned away so he wouldn’t see her cry. The last thing she wanted was for him to think her weak.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” he whispered. “I ought not to have left things between us as they were—”
“You only did what I asked of you,” she choked out between gulps of air.
“Nevertheless, I should have stayed. I should have at least tried to talk to you.”

The gentle, regret-filled words were razors slicing into her already tattered heart. Coherent speech grew beyond her faculties as her sobs became more violent. And then he touched her. It was only the lightest hand laid on the curve of her neck, but she felt it all the way down in her bones. Warmth bloomed beneath his hot, dry palm as he drew her close, and a shiver ran throughout her entire body as she leaned into him, too distressed to care for anything except the comfort of having someone support her.

All the emotions she’d striven so hard to suppress for weeks on end melded and rose to the surface in a jumble, pushing and pulling her into a state of utter confusion. It was all simply too much.

“Mary, I know you don’t want to hear it,” he murmured against her hair, “and I doubt you’ll believe me, but—I do love you.”

She didn’t. Words finally wrung themselves free from her tear-clogged throat. “Then why did you not come back sooner?”

“I was afraid.” Gently, he turned her around to face him. His voice shook as he spoke. “I ran from my guilt like a stupid, selfish coward. I feared that once you knew me—the real me—you would despise me even more. After I left, I thought that you would surely choose to forget me. Find someone better. Someone more deserving.”

A shudder wracked him, and she looked up to see blue eyes brimming with tears. “Daniel’s last letter to you was returned unopened,” she said thickly. “If you did not know about the babe, then… what brought you back here?”

“You.” He cupped her cheek with one hand. “You did, Mary. I tried to forget you, to leave you alone as you’d said you wanted, but nothing worked. You were all I could think about.” He took a deep, uneven breath. “I missed you so much. More than I could withstand. So, even knowing I was nowhere near good enough for you, I decided to come to Harper’s Grove to somehow try to win your heart—as myself.”

His tear-filled eyes were so full of tender emotion she couldn’t bear to look at him. It hurt too much.

“Please, Mary,” he breathed. “Say you’ll give me a chance? I’ll never be worthy of you, but I’ll gladly spend the rest of my life trying.”

It would be so tempting to give in, to answer the call of desire she felt building inside her even now, but… “How can I possibly trust you?” she quavered, ashamed at how unsteady her voice was. “You were right; I don’t even know the real you. I have no idea who you are.”

“I know,” he whispered. “And that is something I intend to rectify, if you’ll allow it. It’s my intent to court you. Properly.”

“How?” she said, pulling back to peer up at him in disbelief. “What time do you think we have for courtship? The babe I carry won’t delay its arrival to suit either of us.” It had come out sharp, laden with sarcasm, but she wouldn’t apologize for it. It was only the truth.

“You will have your courtship, Mary. I promise you that. Unfortunately, we can afford to delay only
a month at best, so most of it will have to come after we’re married. But if it’s any comfort to you, and I hope it is, I believe you already know me better than anyone, other than perhaps Daniel. After all, we did spend a good deal of time talking while I was trying to make you dislike me—or, rather, dislike him.”

She thought about it for a moment. “But how do I know any of that was real? You were pretending to be someone else.”

A sheepish look crossed his face. “In all honesty, I often forgot what I was supposed to be doing when I was with you. You have a way of getting under a person’s skin,” he added with a little lopsided smile—the one that turned her knees to water.

In a moment of clarity, she realized his brother’s smiles were quite different. Only this man’s smile looked like that and had the power to reach down inside her and cause her middle to tighten. His touch affected her differently, too. Daniel had always—and still—avoided contact with her as much as possible. The few times he had actually touched her, it had felt nothing like this. In all honesty, Devlin didn’t even need to touch her to make her blush and cause her heart to flutter wildly—a look alone was enough to fire her senses.

The sound of her mother saying her name jolted her back to the present. “Mary? Is all well?” Her parents had returned and were standing in the doorway, concern for her written on their faces—and no small amount of bewilderment at the sight of them so close.

“Yes,” she replied, wiping her eyes. “I’m as well as can be, all things considered. Please come in.” Her stomach clenched. How in heaven’s name am I going to explain that the man standing before them is not Reverend Wayward?

It seemed, however, this particular issue had already been taken care of. His Grace, the Duke of Winterbourne, appeared behind her father. “Mr. and Mrs. Tomblin, allow me to introduce my brother, Lord Devlin Wayward—although you already, to some extent, know one another.”

Devlin stepped back to bow respectfully. “Mr. and Mrs. Tomblin, I’m again honored.”

Every nerve was stretched to the breaking point as Devlin addressed Mary’s family. “I humbly beseech you to accept my deepest apologies for my many transgressions against your family. I’ve come to make amends and to beg for your daughter’s hand in marriage.” Before her father could release the doubtless impressive head of temper he saw building in the man’s thunderous countenance, he turned to Mary and sank to one knee before her. “If you’ll have me?”

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the ring he’d bought for her in London, an impressive emerald set in gold and surrounded by brilliant diamonds. It was a masterpiece worthy of a duchess—crafted by the same jeweler David had commissioned to design his wife’s ring, in fact.

He held it up to her as a supplicant making an offering. “Mary, I’m asking you to be my wife not because I must, but because it’s what I desire more than anything in this world. Before I found you, my life had no meaning, because there was no love in it. You showed me this truth, and then you gifted me with purpose. I swear to you, with God and your family as my witnesses, that I will love you with everything I am until the day I die—and that I will never lie to you again. Will you do me the great honor of becoming my wife?”

Mary stared at him, her face a perfect study in uncertainty. He could almost hear her internal debate: She was carrying his child, so what other choice did she have? But could he be trusted?

“Now wait just one bloody minute,” her father said, advancing into the room, the white-knuckled fists at his sides belying his calm tone. “His Grace explained your plan, but the choice is Mary’s.” He
looked to his daughter. “You can choose to take your chances and wed this man, or marry the vicar, as
we know you’ve wanted to do since coming here. According to His Grace, the Reverend will still
marry you, if that is what you desire.

_in a pig’s eye, he will._ Devlin glanced daggers at David, hoping the look conveyed his murderous
sentiments over the betrayal.

“Everyone here will believe him the father,” continued Mr. Tomblin to Mary. “The marriage
license has already been procured. No one ever needs to know the truth. We will support you
whichever path you decide to take.” He punctuated the statement with a hard, unfriendly stare at
Devlin.

Reining in his ire, Devlin kept his voice as level as if he were bluffing an opponent at a high-stakes
table. “You would see her marry Daniel when the babe she carries is _my_ child? _My_ son or daughter?”

The other man pinned Devlin with cold eyes. “You should have considered the possibility of
getting her with child _before_ taking advantage of her affection for the man whose face you share,” he
snapped. “At least I know him to be a decent man, despite his egregious mistakes—the greatest of
which was trusting _you_. I know nothing of you save that you are a liar and a thief.” He jabbed a shaky,
accusing finger at him. “It was _you_ who stole his clothes and pretended to be him! Had you not done it, _none_ of this would have happened.”

Devlin faced his accuser with all solemnity. “Yes. But that changes not the fact that I love Mary and
that this child is mine, not my brother’s. I am its father, and I _want_ that responsibility.”

Mr. Tomblin shifted, every muscle tense, as if he wanted nothing more than to pound his fists into
Devlin’s face. “As well you should. But I will not force my daughter to marry the man who wounded
her. Not when she has an acceptable alternative. The choice is Mary’s.”

Helpless, Devlin turned to Mary and again held out the ring. Never in all his life had he felt more
nervous. “I know we’ve had a terrible start, but—”

“I need time to think,” she interrupted, taking a shuddering breath. Her gaze seemed fixed on a point
somewhere beyond his left shoulder. “About all of this.”

“What is there to consider, but that the father of your child is in love with you and wishes to marry
you?” he whispered, panic setting in. “Mary, I cannot let you marry Daniel—he does not love you!”

“Perhaps not,” she conceded. “But he is willing, and I would never have to worry that he might hurt
me.” Her voice broke.

“You’re right,” he said quietly, feeling each and every one of her words cut into him, flaying him
open and leaving him raw. “And I want so much to erase my errors, but I cannot. All I can do is
attempt to repair the damage I’ve done and do better from now on.”

“I’m not entirely certain I’m willing to take such a risk,” she said in a choked voice.

Despair crawled into his heart to coil there like a serpent ready to strike. _I’m losing her. Again._

“Am I to simply give up on you and leave? Let my child be raised by my brother?” He shook his head,
fighting to retain what little hold he yet had on his composure. “I cannot. I simply cannot.”

Now her eyes finally met his, their gaze piercing him like twin blades as she rested a hand on her
middle. “If you truly have any love in your heart, you’ll agree to do what is best for me and this child,
even if it means agreeing to leave and never return, and to never again contact us. Harper’s Grove is a
fine place to raise a babe. He or she will be loved by everyone, including your brother. I know what
sort of husband and father _he’ll_ make. But you? What guarantee do I have of your sincerity?” She
glanced at David. “His Grace seemed unsurprised by your conduct when he was informed of it. I can
only imagine he had good reason for such a reaction.”

_Oh God._ His reputation clung to him like an evil shadow. “My life in London is over. I cut ties and
sold it all to come here, to be with you. I know Harper’s Grove is dearer to you than any other place in the world, which is why I bought Rosewood House—I purchased it almost a month ago. From there, I had intended to court you properly—as I suggested on the night we parted.” Reaching into his other pocket, he withdrew the marriage license and unfolded it so she could see their names written upon it. “See? I came prepared—even before I knew about the babe. I came back for love of you.”

Tears welled in her eyes, but there was still fear in them.

Everything in him wanted to see that fear vanish. But that would take time. And time, it seemed, was not on his side. Folding the paper under his arm, he took up her hand and pressed the ring into her palm. “Look at it, Mary,” he urged, hardly able to speak past the knot in his throat. “You’ll see that I—”

“I’m sorry.” Her eyes closed, and tears slid down her face. “I’m sorry, but I cannot give you an immediate answer. I need time to think!” Dropping the ring, she turned and dashed from the room.

He made to go after her, but her father’s firm grip on his arm stopped him.

“Leave her be. It’s her decision to make.”

Devlin heard the fading clatter of her footfalls as she ran down the hall. He turned to her father. “I love her, and I love the child she carries—my child. You cannot think that I would actually allow her to marry Daniel—or anyone else, for that matter.”

The other man’s face darkened again. “His Grace has already given his blessing, and he will support—”

“I’ve already spoken with His Grace,” Devlin interrupted, doing his best to hold his temper in check and not look at David. “It was he who told me to come here and throw myself upon Mary’s mercy—and yours. But do not imagine he holds any sort of leverage capable of restraining me.” Now he looked to David, and saw his brother was gratifyingly red-faced. “Ask him, if you don’t believe me.”

“Oh, I’m well aware you’re the black sheep of your family,” replied Tomblin with a sneer. “I know all about your life in London and your ill-gotten riches. You may have more gold than Croesus, but gold won’t buy my daughter’s heart—or my trust. Daniel, for all that he looks like you, is a very different sort of man—the sort to sacrifice himself to cover his brother’s sins. She loved him before you came. She could love him again. In time, I believe he would return her affection. Would you rob her of that happiness?”

Devlin’s heart clenched painfully as the words again formed unwanted images in his mind. “I’d rather be the one to make her happy, myself.” Bending, he picked up the ring she’d cast down. Had she looked inside it, she’d have seen both their names engraved. “I’ll be at the vicarage.” Damned if he were going back to Winterbourne tonight. He didn’t want to do anything else he might come to regret—like putting his fist through David’s face. “Send for me and my brother when she’s ready to talk.”

“You’ll abide by her decision?” her mother asked timidly as he passed.

“I trust Mary to make the right choice,” he said, sounding far more confident than he felt. Striding to the door, he didn’t wait for it to be opened for him, but let himself out.
Chapter Nineteen

Mary pressed deep into the shadow beneath the staircase and held her skirts close so they wouldn’t give away her presence as he left the salon and strode out of her home. Hastening from her hiding place, she scurried up the staircase before her parents could come out and catch her lurking and try to influence her.

Entering her bedchamber, she closed the door behind her and then lay on her bed. Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes. *I trust Mary to make the right choice...* She pulled a grimace and dried her face. It seemed like all she did these days was cry.

*Choice. Ha!* He wouldn’t let her marry his brother. Of that much she was certain. The strength of his resolve was frightening.

*It’s his child I carry. He has a valid claim.*

*It’s also my child!*

The war within her raged on until her head ached. Ideas popped up like mushrooms after a rain and were as quickly squashed. She could beg Daniel to take her to Gretna Green. They already had a license.

*Don’t be a fool, Mary. He does not love you.* For all that her parents thought he’d honor his offer despite his brother’s return, she knew in her heart he wouldn’t. Blood was thicker than water, and they were *twins*. Daniel might feel responsible for what had happened, but he wasn’t the one who’d gotten her with child. Devlin’s claim of fatherhood superseded all others.

He’d surprised her, coming here to bend knee and offer himself up. She recalled his earnest expression as he’d produced a ring which had, for all that she’d barely glanced at it, appeared quite impressive. But, as she knew, appearances could be deceiving. For weeks, she’d been fooled by a charlatan. In retrospect, she ought to have kept hold of the jewel, if only to get a closer look and make certain it wasn’t paste.

A hysterical laugh burbled up from her chest at the thought of a paste ring. She swallowed the sounds, fearful that her parents would hear and think she’d gone mad. The man was a duke’s son. It wouldn’t be paste. Whether it was or not, regardless of whether he actually harbored tender feelings for her and had come of his own volition or his brother’s hired hounds had caught him and dragged him back home, she knew she’d have to put it on. The only question that remained was what would happen afterward.

*He bought Rosewood House. He intends for us—for me and our child, at least—to stay here.* She’d get to keep Augie and all the other friends she’d made, provided there was no scandal. Her stomach tightened. Even with a “whirlwind courtship,” there would likely be some gossip due to her babe’s “early” arrival. She pictured her female acquaintances counting on their fingers and sliding knowing glances at each other behind their fans.

*Babies arrive early all the time. It will be nothing, especially after a few months pass. Regardless, my child will be legitimate.* Massaging her temples, she tried to wrap her mind around the idea of motherhood. Though she wasn’t yet showing, she would be soon.

Rising from her bed, she went to the window. Her face felt hot and swollen from all the crying she’d done. Some cool air would do her good and help her think more clearly about how to silence at least some of the inevitable whispers about her hasty marriage and an early delivery.

She didn’t know what instinct made her do it, but before opening the curtains, she peeked through a
crack between them—and spied a dark shape huddled by the gate outside.

He’s still here!

Bright though it was outside, she still shrank back, fearful that he’d somehow seen her. She ventured another peek, and this time remained. His face was upraised, and he was staring at her house with an expression of such regret she felt it like a physical blow.

You were all I could think about.
I came back for love of you.
I’d rather be the one to make her happy, myself.

She stared at him through the crack, his words repeating in her memory as more tears slid down her cheeks. It would be lovely indeed if he’d meant those words, and a tiny part of her still hoped, foolishly, that he had. But it wouldn’t do to allow sentiment to influence her anymore. Necessity had to take precedence.

She would marry Devlin Wayward, but it would be on her terms. Turning away, she again lay on her bed, eyes dry at last, to plan her and her child’s futures.

The following day, Mary sat in the salon once more, determined to maintain her composure as the two men who’d ruined her life were brought to stand before her. One was in priestly garb, the other in a tailored silk jacket and breeches. Looking at them side by side, she no longer wondered that she’d been fooled. They were indeed identical, right down to the way their hair curled over their foreheads. Their faces both held an equal mix of tension and resignation as they awaited her leisure.

“I’ve come to a decision,” she said softly, avoiding her parents’ eyes. They’d argued vociferously against it, but as they themselves had said, this was not their choice to make. “I will marry the father of my child.”

The way both sets of shoulders sagged with relief spoke volumes. One told her its owner hadn’t really wanted to follow through on the promise he’d made. The other kindled a spark of hope inside her.

Don’t be so quick to grasp at straws, warned her heart. She didn’t know for certain why Devlin Wayward seemed so glad she’d chosen him. It might be that, despite his claim to the contrary, his family had found some means to bring him to heel, and that he’d just avoided a more painful alternative to marriage.

Regardless of his motive, it must be done. “I’ll marry you, but—” She held up a silencing hand as Devlin opened his mouth to speak. “I have conditions that must be agreed to—in writing and witnessed—before any vows are spoken.”

“Name them,” he said at once.

“I want the means for independence should I find living with you intolerable. A comfortable home and ample provision for both myself and our child, who will remain with me, regardless of my relationship with you.”

His face paled a shade, but he nodded. “Done. Rosewood House is yours, furnishings and all. I’ll sign over the deed to you prior to the ceremony and revoke any and all claim to it through marriage. I’ll also have my solicitor draw up a contract providing you with an annual stipend of a thousand pounds, to be paid to you in perpetuity regardless of whether or not we live together.”

It took everything for her not to gape at the figure. Good heavens, just how rich is he? It was a fortune! More than enough to cover the cost of maintaining a house—her house—servants, and provisioning.

But he wasn’t finished. “The money will be yours and yours alone, to do with as you please. Spend it, save it—once it’s in your name, it will no longer be any business of mine. Prior to the ceremony I
will, however, want your word, also in writing and witnessed, that you’ll give me ample time to attempt to mend things between us—and that if at the end of that period you should choose to evict me, I shall continue to have unrestricted access to our child until he or she is an adult. Even if you decide you don’t want me for a husband in the true sense, I will be the only father our child ever knows.”

She blinked in surprise at his vehemence. “How much time?”

“A full year after our baby’s arrival—and no separate bedrooms for us. I give you my solemn oath that I won’t touch you unless you invite me to do so, but we will live as man and wife in every other respect for the duration of that year.”

She concealed her dismay with a wry twist of her lips. “You intend to live as a monk while sharing a bedchamber with me, then?”

His lopsided little smile was all Devlin. “No, I intend to live as a husband—a celibate husband for a while, owing to your delicate condition after our child arrives, but a husband nevertheless.”

Heat roared into her cheeks. “It may be a very long while,” she warned frostily. “Possibly more than a year.”

One coal-black brow lifted. “I’m willing to take that chance.”

Blue eyes twinkled merrily back at her from another face, and she looked with shock at Reverend Wayward’s faint smile, guessing that he’d wager his brother would win her heart long before the probationary period was over.

I hope he does not wager much! For one, she’d soon be too swollen to garner any man’s desire. Already, her belly was beginning to round just a little—nothing noticeable yet to anyone but her, but give it another month or two… Once the baby was born, she’d be in no condition to be engaging in conjugal activities for at least another three months. Longer, if she could manage to convince him she was still fragile.

She looked back to Devlin, whose expression was far more sober. “Agreed.”

Nodding, he went on. “So there is no chance of confusion, I would like to clarify to all present that should you invite physical intimacy between us, there can be no subsequent reneging. Once that happens, we will thereafter conduct ourselves as husband and wife in every sense.”

Swallowing her nerves, she nodded. “Agreed.”

An infuriatingly satisfied look entered his eyes, and she bristled—even as a disturbingly familiar melting sensation unfurled deep within her. Alarmed by the unexpected and unwelcome reaction, she tried to pass it off as nothing.

I don’t want him to touch me. Not in the least. And that won’t change. Not in a year. Not in ten years! Not unless he can prove he truly loves me.

Which brought up another concern she felt compelled to address. “And I’ll want your word—in writing and witnessed—that there will be no one else,” she added. “I demand absolute fidelity for as long as we reside together.” She’d give him no easy way to wait her out. “If I ever learn you’ve violated my trust in this regard, you will immediately and permanently depart the premises—with the exception of those times you come to visit your son or daughter, of course.”

“Agreed, and with no hardship on my part.” He swallowed, and a look of such longing crossed his countenance that it made her ache inside. “I don’t want anyone but you, Mary.”

Damn the infernal warmth and foolish pride his words evoked! That she should feel anything but utter contempt for the man seemed the worst betrayal yet—a betrayal of self. “Let us be perfectly clear,” she snapped, acutely aware of those witnessing their exchange. “I’m marrying you for my child’s sake and to free your brother. That is all. The last time you came here, you told me you did not
expect forgiveness. I hope that’s still true, because you’ll get none from me.”

“I deserve none,” he said solemnly, eyes growing suspiciously bright. “And I’m grateful beyond words that you’ve agreed to give me this chance. In doing so, you’ve been more than generous to one who injured you most grievously.” He looked down and cleared his throat before adding softly, “Do you have any further conditions?”

“No.” None that she could think of at the moment, anyway, with her emotions running riot. “But I do have a request. A month is too short a time to convince people ours is a love match. I propose that all of us, if asked, tell people we were introduced when you visited Winterbourne over the holiday. I would prefer everyone to believe we at least met before now, thus mitigating—as much as possible—the scandal of an overly hasty courtship.”

“I have no objection, especially since it’s the truth,” he answered drily. “And I’ll add another truth to the tale: that my choice to resettle at Rosewood House so soon after our introduction was in part because I could not forget you and hoped very much to see you again.”

Damn her traitorous eyes for smarting over his pretty words! She covered it with sarcasm. “Your silver tongue will doubtless have them believing you fell in love with me at first sight.” The impact of her verbal whip-snap was visible, and quite satisfying. “Tell them whatever you bloody well like, as long as it prevents them learning of your deception and my gullibility,” she added bitterly, ignoring her mother’s soft gasp over her language.

With a grim nod of acceptance, he again held aloft the ring he’d tried to give her on his previous visit. “If that is all, then let us consider ourselves officially engaged.”

Afraid lest she lose her nerve, she plucked it from his hand without touching his fingers for more than a split second. It was still warm. She jammed it onto her finger without sparing it even a glance. “We will be married in a month’s time. Until then, you may call here daily for the sake of appearances.” Without further ado, she turned on her heel and fled back to her room, happy to put a door between them.

The ring on her finger felt as heavy as a millstone. Taking it off, she went to the window to examine it in the light. A tiny, shocked exhalation of approval escaped her lips as she gazed into the enormous jewel’s rich green depths. It was definitely not paste. Turning it, she marked an inscription on the inner surface of the golden circle.

*Devlin & Mary Wayward*

For the fifteenth day in a row, Mary broke down and cried.

Everything went according to plan. The morning after she accepted Devlin’s proposal, she encountered the reverend and his twin in a “surprise reunion” in the village’s crowded patisserie. Shy smiles on her part and blatant admiration on the part of her soon-to-be groom as they “reminisced” over their first meeting formally sealed their acquaintance in the minds of several witnesses. Lord Devlin Wayward subsequently called on her at home every day and together they made a point of being seen about the village, sometimes in his brother’s company but more often alone.

Conversation between them remained stilted in private—she had nothing to say to him that would improve her circumstance, and despite his rueful gazes, he didn’t press her. Desperation made her a fine actress in public, however, where she did her best to give every appearance of becoming utterly smitten.

Little more than a week into the ruse, Augie confronted her about her obvious and alarmingly hasty
transfer of affection. “But you were so in love with the vicar!” she insisted. “And—” Her face colored. “Well, to be quite honest, I find it highly…remarkable that you should now be so enamored of someone who looks exactly like him. Are you certain you’re not making a mistake?”

Mary repressed the urge to laugh aloud at the well-intentioned warning. “I learned at great cost to my pride that the good reverend’s heart is reserved solely for his Lord and his holy commission,” she replied, feeling guilty. “I’ve forgiven him for rejecting me, of course. He cannot help who he is. In truth, I think I shall like him far better as a brother-in-law than I would have as a husband. As for Lord Wayward, that gentleman is…quite a different sort of man.”

The rest of their conversation forced her to enumerate those differences at length to convince her friend of all the reasons why she was allowing Lord Wayward to make a complete cake of himself over her. As she did so, she realized that those differences were indeed what had attracted her to him. It gave her much to think about.

The only one apparently not fooled by their charade was Mrs. Small. The old lady, who’d ventured into the village on a warm, May Sunday to take communion at church, took one look between Devlin and Daniel, and then her canny gaze settled on Mary with a most knowing and amused expression.

Mary, panicking, had no choice but to visit her the next day and share her secret. Mrs. Small listened to her entire tale in silence before swearing to carry the secret to her grave. Her greatest concern was for Mary’s happiness.

“I knew them when they were boys,” she revealed. “Full o’ mischief, that pair, but both had good hearts. So, ye fell for the prodigal, did ye?” Her eyes lit with amusement, and she chuckled. “Me own husband, God rest him, was a bit o’ a rogue, himself, and we had many happy years together. He kept me young.” She laid a dry, wrinkled hand atop Mary’s. “Trust your heart, me girl. It knows what’s right.”

Again, Mary was forced to reconsider her own feelings about the man. The people of Harper’s Grove had readily accepted his return, with broad smiles and many fond reminiscences of him and his twin. And while it was true his father had disowned him over his refusal to join the clergy, his remaining family had welcomed him back to the fold, all but erasing that black mark in the villagers’ eyes. Everything indicated his siblings were well on their way to forgiving his more recent transgressions, too—even his fierce sister, who’d all but threatened to geld him if he put so much as a toe out of line.

They love him. Even after all he’s done, all his many errors, they love him still.

In spite of herself, over the next three weeks, now that he wasn’t pretending to be someone else, she began to understand why. Beyond the smooth, charming exterior, there was a gentleness similar to that which she’d seen and admired in his twin. There were still some sharp edges, doubtless due to having rubbed shoulders with some of London’s most jaded for many years, but he’d relaxed, and that gentleness had begun to show itself.

As she walked past Mrs. Stone’s house and admired the new roof, she was reminded that he’d done that. Thinking back, she realized he’d actually committed a great many kindnesses during his short time masquerading as his twin. Considering his injury, no one would’ve faulted him for asking someone else to deliver food and comfort in their shepherd’s stead, but Devlin had done it himself. Where the bare minimum would have sufficed, he’d gone above and beyond.

Again, she wondered if she had not indeed misjudged his character. Even so, she resisted the impulse to trust the instinct—or, as Mrs. Small had put it, her heart—to relent. Better to steel herself against the worst possibility and be pleasantly surprised than to again suffer the pain of disappointment.
The day of the wedding dawned clear and bright. The pale pink gown she’d chosen—her favorite of the ones Papa had commissioned for a Season that would now never be—had been hung last night and the moiré silk steamed free of every wrinkle. It still fit her, though it was a bit snug about the breasts, but it brought her no pleasure to put it on. A young lady’s wedding was supposed to be a dream fulfilled, a fairy tale ending full of hope and possibility. Her wedding was simply to be a ritual marking her acceptance of fate and the reality to follow.

Augie showed up after breakfast in response to her urgent summons, looking perplexed. Her brows rose on seeing Mary’s elaborate gown and carefully coiffed hair. “You said to wear my best, but seeing you, I suddenly feel underdressed. Are we going to a brunch picnic?”

Mary sat her down and explained that her affections for Lord Wayward had increased such that three days ago their mutual attraction had overridden all sense and restraint. “I know you cannot approve, but I could not help myself,” she said stiffly, determined not to cry as she lied to her best friend. “He is as passionate as the reverend is not, and I simply lost my head. He asked me to marry him at once, of course, and I accepted. I hope you can forgive me for not confiding in you until now—I feared you would think me fickle-hearted.”

Augie’s eyes, which had grown round with incredulity, softened at once. “Oh, my dear friend! You are anything but fickle. And there is naught to forgive,” she said, embracing her. “Cupid’s arrow sometimes flies in an unanticipated direction and strikes with unexpected swiftness. Though our courtship has been much longer, it took only a week for Mr. May to win my heart.”

She didn’t bother trying to hide her surprise. “You knew you loved him after so short a time?”

A sage nod preceded her friend’s answer. “Oh, yes. I would have married him that instant, but he is quite traditional and insisted on a long, proper courtship,” she said somewhat drily.

Mary gave her a rueful chuckle. “I’m afraid our impulsiveness has robbed us of the time to observe such proprieties. Which is why I asked you to come dressed in your best. I’m getting married today. In fact, they should be coming to collect me at any moment. Devlin returned only a few hours ago with the special license,” she said, justifying the fib to herself.

“You’re being married today?” squeaked Augie, hands flying to cover her cheeks. “Good heavens, I don’t know how you are so calm. I would be completely mad with nerves!”

It was almost enough to make Mary genuinely laugh. “I’ve done plenty of panicking over the last few days, I assure you,” she replied shakily. “And I’m really quite nervous. Will you walk down with me and bear witness?”

Augie’s eyes filled as she nodded. “Of course! Oh, I had hoped to be at your wedding and you at mine. It seems my wish is being granted—though not quite as I anticipated.” A mischievous smile tugged at one corner of her mouth. “Mama will be beside herself when I tell her the news.” Her face brightened further. “Am I right in assuming you intend to stay in Harper’s Grove, as your soon-to-be husband has purchased Rosewood House?”

Mary smiled softly, warmed by the hope in her friend’s eyes. “Yes, and you and I shall have tea together every day, if we desire it!”

After making the final touches to her appearance, Mary embraced her friend, and together they descended the stairs. Before they reached the bottom, she stopped and twisted off the ring Devlin had given her. “Will you hold it for me until the appropriate time?”

Her friend’s eyes widened again as she received the jewel. “Good heavens,” she murmured. “He must be as rich as Midas.”

Mary merely gave her an enigmatic smile, hoping she wouldn’t ask from whence his apparent wealth had originated. They’d have to come up with some suitable story later.
Her mother met them at the bottom of the stairs. “He sent these for you,” she said quietly, holding out a beautiful bouquet of flowers. “There is a letter with them,” she added, handing it to her. Giving the flowers to Augie to hold, Mary opened the letter.

*My dearest Mary,*

*I know we are to be married in a short while, but I want you to know before we speak our vows before God and witnesses that I meant every word I’ve said over the past month. I love you, and I would have none but you for my wife. My deepest regret in all of this is the manner of our meeting. Had I known what was to come, that I would fall in love with you so completely as to forget all sense, I would have ensured our first encounter was quite different.*

*Having said it, I must also concede that it would likely not have been an auspicious meeting, as I was not then the man I am now. Knowing you has forever altered me, much for the better, according to my family. But you will be the judge of that in the years to come. Thus, the moment I regret most deeply—the instant I stepped into my brother’s shoes—is also my most prized, for it brought us together. In knowing and loving you, my life has gained meaning. Before meeting you, my compass had no true north. Now, however, I have found in you my guiding star and my purpose for being.*

*I will be faithful to you, Mary. I will strive to always be gentle and patient. I will never speak falsely to you no matter how trivial the issue called into question may be. If it takes the rest of my life to prove my love for you is true, then so be it. I will gladly devote to your happiness every minute of my every waking hour until my heart stops beating and my voice is forever silenced.*

*When I see you next, it will be to reaffirm these oaths and speak those that will make us husband and wife. Though the moment arrives through great pain, I hope one day you will remember it with joy. Until then, and ever after, I remain yours.—Devlin*

Tears ran down her cheeks, and she blotted them hastily, lest they spot her gown. “What is it?” asked her mother, her face tense. The overabundance of emotion swelling within her breast wouldn’t allow for speech. Augie gripped her arm, fear written on her face. “He is still coming?” she whispered anxiously. “Yes, he’s coming,” she said, attempting to compose herself, her heart full despite the jaded voice of reason whispering that such pretty words had little meaning until proven by actions. 

*Have faith,* said another voice from within the place where stubborn, inextinguishable hope had rekindled. The bell rang, sending them scrambling to the salon. A moment later, in walked Reverend Wayward. “I hope you don’t mind, but Devlin asked me to perform the ceremony, and I told him I would gladly officiate.” Smiling at Mary, he lowered his voice. “As lovely a bride as you make, I will admit to being delighted to call you ‘sister’ when it is done.”

Unexpected mirth welled within Mary as she regarded her soon-to-be brother-in-law’s relieved countenance, and in that moment she truly *did* forgive him. “For months I tried to get you to the altar,” she whispered, smiling. “This is certainly *not* how I imagined it happening, but I’m happy you’re here now in your official capacity rather than as my groom. It seems fitting somehow, that you should speak the words that will make us truly family.”

He smiled back, and the genuine warmth of it gladdened her. “Though you may not believe it, Dev
does love you,” he quietly told her in earnest. “He may have been a black sheep before, but I can assure you he is no longer.”

She shot him a wry look and said with good humor, “Mama would drag out old adages concerning tigers and their stripes, I’m sure.”

“His wool was not always black, if it’s any comfort to you,” replied the vicar. “He may not have been ordained, but the principles we learned are as deeply ingrained in him as they are in me. He’s a good man who strayed from the path, but you’ve brought him back around. I don’t expect he’ll wander.”

The tightness inside her eased a bit more. He would know better than anyone else. “Thank you for saying so. I pray it’s true.”

And then there was no more time for talk, for the groom and the rest of his family arrived.

On seeing the anxious look in Devlin’s eyes, a strange peace settled over her. She no longer doubted his sincerity, and she believed he meant what he’d said in his letter. She also knew that, in spite of his past errors, he truly was the good man his twin had described.

Knowing you has forever altered me, much for the better...

Mary couldn’t deny it was the same for her. Before meeting him—not his brother, but him—she’d thought herself a humble, charitable person. But that had been the self-image of a girl who’d never truly witnessed or indeed understood hardship, and most of her charitable acts had been committed to fulfill a societal expectation and not because she’d been moved by compassion. In this manner, she’d gained a false sense of pride and had become pious and haughty in her heart, thinking herself above others when she was in truth no better than anyone. Though she’d volunteered at every fundraiser and bazaar benefiting the poor, none of those events had ever put her in actual contact with them. There had always been a buffer between.

Until she’d accompanied Devlin in fulfilling his brother’s duties.

Though he’d been in his brother’s guise, it was Devlin who’d shown her the meaning of charity and humility. His reproach for her initial, untoward reaction to Mrs. Small’s living conditions hadn’t been contrived. His kind and gentle demeanor, the respect he’d shown the poorest in their community—all of it had been genuine.

He’d had a profound influence on her. She’d been inspired to go out of her way to help people, even to donating her own slipper money to help provide adequate shelter for a family in dire straits. How many times had she walked past Mrs. Stone’s dilapidated house without seeing her need?

Devlin—not his brother—had opened her eyes.

The darkness that had overshadowed her heart lifted as Devlin repeated the sacred words that would unite them in marriage. It was right that they were doing this. He was the father of her child, a child conceived of passion—and, now that she could see it, of love. He might have been pretending to be someone else when they’d started down this road, but the man looking out of those larkspur eyes was no stranger to her.

I love him. I love Devlin Wayward. She did. Truly. Deeply. It was a startling realization to make as she was becoming his wife, but no less happy for its lateness.

Coming forward, Devlin held out his hand. When she laid hers in it, the feel of his hot, dry skin sliding against her palm sent a tremor though her body. It was all she could do to concentrate as they spoke their vows before God and witnesses. When he gently eased the ring onto her finger, the tremor turned into a shiver of anticipation.

“Mary, I give you this ring as a sign of our marriage,” he said, staring intently into her eyes. “With my body I honor you, all that I am I give to you, and all that I have I share with you…”
Certainty settled into her bones, a lingering warmth that promised safety and contentment as she then spoke her part. “I receive this ring as a sign of our marriage...”

Moments later, the smiling vicar of Harper’s Grove took their hands and joined them together, joyfully proclaiming, “Devlin and Mary have declared their marriage by the joining of hands and by the giving and receiving of rings. I therefore proclaim that they are husband and wife. Those whom God has joined together let no one put asunder.”

Joy and contentment filled her as she and Devlin knelt for the blessing, until at last they stood again and faced each other. She answered the question in her husband’s eyes by coming closer and tilting her face up. As his lips met hers in a kiss that was infinitely tender, yet full of passion’s promise, Mary Wayward knew there would be no distance between her and this man ever again.

And that was perfectly fine with her.
Epilogue

Devlin lounged on the bench beside his brother, smiling as Mary and Diana exclaimed over the red booties Mrs. Small had crocheted for the newest member of the Wayward family, Daphne Wayward.

*My daughter...* Even after two months, the fact that he was now a father still stunned him.

His little girl had made her debut right on time—not that anyone but their family and the maker of the booties would ever know it, thanks to a long honeymoon spent in Greece. They’d returned early, out of concern for Mary’s delicate condition and, much to everyone’s surprise, Daphne had decided to come “a bit sooner than expected.”

His heart flipped as he watched Mary tenderly trace the delicate shell of Daphne’s tiny ear.

“I never thought I would see *you* so sentimental,” chuckled Daniel. “Or so content.”

“If I’m sentimental, it’s because I’m far happier than I deserve. And my contentment largely arises from the fact that my wife is so tolerant of my many faults,” Devlin replied with good humor. Gone was the sardonic, brooding man of his misspent youth. The halls of Rosewood House—*home*—rang with laughter. Mary’s was infectious, and he’d quickly learned to join in it. “You ought to find someone to tolerate yours, you know.”

His twin’s mouth hitched up at one corner. “I’ve yet to meet the saint able to tolerate me well enough to spend a lifetime together.”

“That’s the problem,” Devlin said at once. “You don’t *need* a saint. Two saints in the same household would make for unending boredom. You need a different sort of woman. One you can reform the way Mary reformed me,” he teased, laughing. “Trust me when I say England is *full* of women who are as bad as you are good. In fact, I’m sure I know several.”

“You mean ‘knew’,” corrected Daniel archly.

“Indeed,” he agreed, lifting his glass of lemonade in a salute. Other than a cup of strong tea every now and again, it was the stoutest thing he drank these days. And that was his own choice. He might claim that Mary had reformed him, but he’d wanted to change. Love had wrought in him the desire to be a better man. “In any case, I’m fairly certain none of them would recognize me as I am these days. Poor Miss St. Peters would think me a very dull sort now, I’m sure.”

There was a long pause before his brother replied, “Speaking of Miss St. Peters, did you happen to hear any news of her while you were in London last week?”

Devlin peered closely at him, not bothering to conceal his curiosity. “I thought you said you cared nothing for that lady’s affairs?”

His brother’s ears turned a most interesting shade of pink, and a distinctly uncomfortable expression stole over his features. “I don’t. I’m simply curious to know.”

Something about his evasive manner set off all Devlin’s internal alarms. Sitting up, he leveled a hard, penetrating stare at his twin. “Daniel, is there something you wish to tell me?”

Read about Rev. Daniel Wayward and Miss Olivia St. Peters in the exciting sequel: *One Night of Sin*
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About the Author

Liana LeFey delights in crafting incendiary tales that capture the heart and the imagination, taking the reader out of the now and into another world. Liana lives in Central Texas with her dashing husband/hero, their beautiful daughter, and one spoiled-rotten feline overlord.

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